

An Analysis of Jack Mapanje's Poetry with Particular Reference to his use of Obscuring Devices

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ABSTRACT

Jack Mapanje's poetry is a true reflection of his society through the use of obscuring devices. These obscuring devices are necessary to ensure that the literary work reaches its intended audience in a totalitarian society. Overall, Jack Mapanje's poetry exploits creatures from the world of nature—mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles and insects—for close association with life experiences in various contexts and situations and with people he viewed with contempt and disgust and those he regarded with tenderness and compassion. He utilises them to conceptualize and construct a wide range of ideas that respond to questions of justice, identity and belonging. It all thus becomes part of ecocriticism which is defined by various authors as 'the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment'. This eco-critical reading, the use of animal imagery in his poetry makes it stand apart and ahead of other resistance poetry and makes new statements about the relationships between animals, poetry and political resistance in African literature. Mapanje's poetry is a direct response and a stance of resistance to social injustice, especially the debasement of culture, abuse of power, despotism, oppression and exploitation of the masses by the hegemonic regime of Dr. Hastings in Malawi that leads to his incarceration and final forced flight from his motherland. This paper attempts to showcase the nature of poetic expressions produced in a repressive society.

Key words: Metaphors, Representation, Dictatorship, Harmlessness, Victimization, Despotism, Ecocriticism

'Professor Jack Mapanje was declared a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International'

The best way of understanding Jack Mapanje's poetry is to delve first into his background, and his social and political circumstances. Mapanje lives and writes in Hasting Kamuzu Banda's Malawi. After Banda leads Malawi to independence and after the collapse of the federation he then imposes a one-party state and installs himself as life President of Malawi. Like all dictators, he can only ensure that he remains in power by ruling with an iron hand. Fear, intimidation and intolerance of any dissenting voice then becomes the order of the day. In this Malawi, opposition to Banda's rule, in whatever form, is brutally crushed.

It is in this Malawian environment that Jack Mapanje finds a voice. As a poet, he cannot risk full and free expression in a country whose government is extremely sensitive to the slightest criticism. James Gibbs (1986:17), in an article titled "Singing in the Rain" observes the poet's dilemma in Malawi thus "The position of the poet in Malawi is particularly complex. The poet in the oral tradition is not entirely free to express himself since the Malawi Congress Party has ears in every corner of the countryExperience of five

Malawian poets who use English for, at least, a significant portion of their verse illustrate in an accessible manner the interaction of repression and creativity."

Banda created the notorious Censorship Board whose function was to scrutinize every publication before it could be made available for public consumption. The Board was modeled on those provided by the British colonial government and the Republic of South Africa. Macaskill (1976), in his analysis of Jeremy Cronin's poetry, articulates the poet's forced literary expression as that which of necessity must be constructed such that it eludes the Censorship Board's attention. So it is difficult for poets like Mapanje to express themselves openly for fear of retribution from the Malawian government. Because of this repression of creativity Mapanje then develops a personal method of poetic expression whose trademark is its elusiveness. In an article about his first collection of poems (1986:36), *Of Chameleons and Gods*, he explains his elusive style thus: 'Each poet sucks a distinct voice of his own and a style peculiar to himself, puts on record what are and have always been man's dramatic moments, man's curiosities, each endeavoring not to surrender his consciousness and individuality in the process..... (the points represented in this anthology) have no ancestral

spirits and no patrons to boast about. They have no chance to fight anybody or sing anybody's hallelujah. There are pieces in the anthology which evoke a strange, if awkward world. There are verses with powerful lines vivid images and nuances that never fail to surprise. The timing of their experiences and sharp observations often smack of virtuoso in the making. The language of the verse is by large that of an enigma, a riddle or ritualistic system of codes for the sympathetic listener to decode.' (Roscoe, 1992:16)

Although this is somehow acceptable as a literary position of an artist to the Censorship Board, those who know Mapanje well are aware that he is simply pulling the wool over the eyes of the Board by 'adopting' such, for the Board's convenience, a purely literary position as expected of any poet. Privately, however, Mapanje admits to his friends that his stated position is a deliberately chosen one. Mapanje (1986:18) in an article titled "*The Chameleon in Love, Life and Literacy – The Poetry of Jack Mapanje*", which he then later titled *Of Chameleons and Gods* he confesses he is being advisedly 'cryptic' in his poetry since he is writing about situations which force him to adopt such a style. The choice of title and style are significant in that Mapanje's poetry can be claimed to be as illusive as the animal that is their trademark. He takes precautions by being obscure in his poetry, obscure not to make meaning inaccessible, but meaning is hidden so it can be decoded. His intended readership would be able to decode his poetry and get to the real meaning the poet tries to convey. A selection of Mapanje's poems will now be analyzed in an attempt to "decode" them.

The poem of particular interest to this discussion because of its social and political commentary is "We Wondered About the Mellow Peaches". It reads thus:

So, behind the wary backyard orchard
And your generous invitations Alberto
To guava tart today and mango pudding tomorrow
Behind the spate of those Chilobwe township
Lambs brutally chopped in their dark hints
When even undertakers dare not tread,
There
Were whiskers, Alberto, to map the moves
And pay the bill? Why, why did I waste my melodies
song excoriating parochial squirrels
And hammerheads for readily writing messages
Up and down bowing peach tree and bringing
Flashy girls with mellow peaches and vermillion
Strawberries into lascivious range rovers?
I should have erected them an edifice instead
I should have set up votive slabs from Mpungu Hills,
chalked the rude walls with gentle
Gazelles and the love about sweet foundlings-
To while away my temper. And yet, how could
The Chameleon have lost grip of his own colors?
And did we need the restive decade to uncover the plot?
And this fuss about conspiracies and goats,
Did not we all wonder about the mellow peaches

This poem is characteristic of Mapanje poetic style of being deliberately evasive. James Gibbs (1986:17) appropriately noted the "Mellow Peaches" is the work of a poet

steeped in riddles modes". The poem is about a "turbulent" 10 year period wherein the sole underground opposition in Malawi, The Movement wreaked havoc in the country. The Movement was led by a one time Secretary General of the Malawi Congress Party, Albert Muvelo Ngumayo. Ngumayo is reputed to have committed many ritual murders in Malawi. He was only apprehended after the revelation of the plot to kill Banda which he was convicted of having orchestrated.

In "Mellow Peaches" Mapanje refers to Ngumayo as "Alberto" and "Whiskers". In the second line of the poem, "And your generous invitations Alberto," Mapanje mocks Ngumayo for his cleverness on his fellow conspirators with promises of investing them with power once he succeeds in ascending to power. What makes the line mocking is the use of the word "generous" in its ironic context. "The lambs brutally chopped" are the victims of Ngumayo in Chilobwe Township who are killed for Ngumayo's ritualistic purposes as part of his plan to sweep power from under Banda's feet. Gibbs (1986:24) sums the riddles in the poem thus, "The question mark after "bills" is a "twist" a riddler's device for the lines are more statement than question. "Moves" were certainly mapped, or, at least, plans were made by Ngumayo and his cronies, "bills" are paid in pain. The "Melodious song" is a reference, a self-mocking, tongue-in-cheek reference, to the poet's own achievements as a commentator in verse on social and political events. The "parochial squirrels" here, are elsewhere in Mapanje's verse, are tiresome, small-minded, self-interested party functionaries, and "hammerheads", literally a kind of bird, are, in this context, to be regarded as a species of yes-men. The poet regrets having wasted his efforts on such "rodents" while a vicious predator, Ngumayo, stalks the land. The "squirrels and hammerheads" act as go-betweens, panders; they buy "Flashy girls" in Range Rovers, which are not in themselves "lascivious" but which are well-upholstered and contained lascivious occupants.

In the lines which follow this reference, the poet considers the alternative means of self-expression needed by creative Malawians over the centuries. He refers to the rock paintings, perhaps connected with hunting rituals, and the "Ngau cult", which can be seen on rock shelters on the Mphunzi Hills, and he alludes to the body of literature about "sweet foundlings", among who Mbona night are counted.

The concluding lines represent a switch and as riddling sessions and conversations often take in them; Mapanje considers Ngumayo as a Chameleon. Both politicians and chameleons are masters of disguise who lie in wait ready to strike with deadly accuracy, and with such speed that the victim is caught and gone before one can shout "Hastings Banda!" The master plotter has, however, been caught, he has, "lost grip of his own colours".

Describing the "conspiracies and goats" as "fuss", as Mapanje does in the penultimate line, is not really to dismiss them. The understatement is deliberate and challenging, it is there to mislead those who are not cracking the code or solving the riddles by suggesting frivolity and lack of substance. The last line leads the unsympathetic reader even further away "Didn't we all wonder about the mellow peaches?" "We" may

have wondered, but more important “we” should have wondered. In this instant “we” should be considered as “the mellow peaches” also referred to the breasts of the “flashy girls”

I have quoted James Gibbs’ interpretation of the poem extensively because of my agreement with his way of decoding the poem. However I do not think that he fully acknowledges Mapanje’s genius in terms of the full meaning and effect of the poem. What Gibbs does not mention or fully comprehend is the fact that at the time of the poem’s publication, Malawi was still gripped by Banda’s oppressive rule and therefore the poem would not have been published if it were in any way regarded as being critical of the Banda regime. Mapanje genius lies in the fact that on just a simple reading of it, it appears to be a condemnation of Ngumayo and his cronies whereas its deeper meaning is its condemnation and criticism of the corruption that prevails in Malawi which had produced “Chameleons” like Ngumayo. Another poem of Mapanje that is rich in its elusiveness is “On being asked to write a poem for 1979”. It reads:

Without Kings and Warriors occasional verse fails
Skeletal Kampuchea children staring, cold
Stubborn Orish children throwing Grenades
These are objects for serious verse,
Crushed Soweto children clutching their entrails
Then in verse bruised, mocks

Today no poet sufficiently asks why dying childre
Stare or throw bombs. And why should we
Compute painful doubts that will forever occupy us?
Talking oil-crises in our eight-cylinder cars
Is enough travesty

The year of the child must make no difference then
Where tadpoles are never allowed to grow into frogs

At face value and giving it a universal reading, this poem would seem to be a protest against the cruelty and apparent ignorance of the adult world on children. But having been forewarned by Mapanje himself about the type of poetry he writes, we must look beyond the ordinary apparent meaning.

He opens the poem with a line which is a reference to oral praise poetry. “Without kings and warriors occasional verse fails”. This line can also be read as a declaration of defeat before the battle begins; a report on a state of purposelessness. The hopelessness and frustrations of the children is compared to suppressed or destroyed poetry, “verse bruised”. In the second stanza greed and selfishness dominate as the prominent features of a corruption infested society in which a few prosper at the expense of the many. Mapanje uses a riddle more in the second line of the second stanza: “And why should we compute painful doubts that will forever occupy us? Talking oil-crises in our eight-cylinder cars”. The use of plural form “we” is natural in riddles as it suggest by its use in the sentence both a question and answer. The answer is evident in the inclusion of the speaker in a mocking tone. These lines are a coded reference to Malawi’s ruling elite who would rather occupy themselves with global politics, “Oil-crisis” and luxury life style “eight-cylinder cars” than be bothered with the state of abject penury they ruled and “dying children”. The last part is a declaration uttered

from frustration. “The year of the child must make no difference then, where tadpoles are never allowed to grow into frogs”. Here Mapanje vents his anger at the destruction or suppression of a people’s initiatives and aspirations by those who govern them. He is probably referring to the people of Malawi by “child” and “tadpoles” because they are kept in a state where growth and intellectual development are essentials regarded as dangerous to Banda’s rule. Hence the creation of no-go intellectual areas in Malawi.

It is clear in this poem, as it is in all the poems in his collection *Of Chameleons and Gods* that Mapanje is true to his word, that is, that of being illusive and therefore succeeds in not drawing the attention of the Censorship Board and the consequences of its recommendations to himself. Little wonder that the same watchful Board actually cleared this collection of poems for publication. Steve Chimombo put it more aptly: “He (Mapanje) has perfected the art of verbal invincibility, as he professes in the preface to his volume. After “ten turbulent years” in which he has been attempting to find a voice or voices” to preserve his sanity, he is tempted like the chameleon to “retreat, in a situation, where personal voices are too easily muffled.to bask in one’s brilliant camouflage”

However, Banda’s “security apparatus”, was not an institution to be fooled for long, it finally caught up with Mapanje and the book was banned in Malawi on 25 September 1987 when he was detained.

Another poem that indirectly takes a dig at the corruption of Malawi and Banda’s ludicrous ideas of how society should be forced to become is called “The Cheerful Girls at Smiler’s Bar 1971”. It is a poem that reveals that forced patterns of societal behaviour that favor only the few usually precipitate dangerously distorted perceptions in society. In this poem the decadence of society is ironically presented as normal. The poem reads:

The prostitutes at Smiller’s Bar beside the dusty road
Were only girls once in tremulous mini-skirts and oriental
Beads, cheerfully swigging Carlsbergs and bouncing to
Rusty simanje-manje and rumba booming in the jukebox
They were striking girls bored by our Presbyterian
Prudes until a true Presbyterian came one night. And like
Like to us all the girls offered him a seat on cheat plants
In the dark backyard room choked with diesel-oil clouds
From a tin-can lamp. Touched the official rolled his eye
To one in style. She said no. Most girls only wanted
A husband to hook or the fruits of independence to taste
But since then mini-skirts were banned and the girls
Of Smiller’s Bar became “ugly prostitutes to boot”.

Today the girls still giggle about what came through
The megaphones: the traditional of our et cetera

This poem is about the abuse of the nation (the prostitutes) and the subsequent satisfaction derived by the user. Although the nation is treated like “prostitutes”, to be used for as long as the need arises and then discarded, it still maintains a semblance of dignity and can still say “no” like the girl who refuses the Presbyterian’s advances. The state of the Malawian society as coded in the poem is described by James Gibbs (1988) in *Index on Censorship* wherein he

observes: "There have been many good reason for concern about the direction in which Malawi has moved since Banda began to gather the reins of authority into his hands during the early sixties. These include his handling of the cabinet crisis over the pace of Africanisation in 1964, the construction-and-use of detention camps, the creation of a one-party-state, the imposition of Chichewa as the national language, the encouragement of a climate of fear and secrecy in which evil can work, and the imposition, in a thousand ways, of an autocratic and repressive rule by an ageing dictator"

In "The cheerful girls of Smiller's Bar", Mapanje humorously portrays the Malawi described above but in code form, of course. In the first quatrain Mapanje depicts Malawi in colonial times. The irony in this quatrain is the supposed happiness to the time of the true Presbyterian (Banda). He is referred to here as a true Presbyterian because he came to Malawi as a Messiah, a liberator. The "Presbyterian prudes" referred to in the poem are the colonialists. But since the true Presbyterian (meaning –true-oppressor) came to "Smiller's Bar" (Malawi) things have changed for the worse. The twelfth line, 'But since then mini-skirts were banned and girls of Smiller's Bar became "ugly prostitutes to boot!" refers to the loss of individual and collective freedoms in Malawi. "The prostitutes" (Malawians) have served their purpose and they are no longer significant to the "user" (Banda). They have become disposable "ugly prostitutes to boot!" The ending complete is an attack on Banda and his regime. The lifestyle they have imposed on Malawi is ludicrous and therefore deserves contempt because of its monotony. The monotony is suggested by the word "et cetera..." which also implies a patterned life without room for creativity.

A poem that deserves particular mention here is "Before Chilembwe Tree" because it is the poem that comes closest to mentioning Banda by its very apparent references. The poem reads:

1

Didn't you say we should trace
Your footprints unmindful of
Quagmires, thickets and rivers
Until we reached your nsolo tree?

Now, her I said my gourd of beer
On my little fire throw my mille
Flour and my smoked meat while
I await the second coming.

2

Why does your mind boggle:
Who will offer another gourd
Who will force another step
To hide our shame?
The goat blood on the rocks

The moke that issued
The drums you danced to
And the rains hoped for

You've chanted yourself hoarse
Chilembwe is gone in your dust
Stop lingering then:

Who will start another fire

In decoded form the poem directly asks Banda about having asked, as the first stanza indicates, the Malawian people to follow him to "the promised land" of freedom (your nsolo tree) without minding the hardship (mindful of quagmires, thickets and rivers) and obstacles towards that promised land symbolized by the nsolo tree. The second stanza dramatically shifts from the use of past tense to the present which signifies the present state of Malawi

In the second stanza the persona reveals that at the moment he is still waiting in anticipation for liberation and whilst he waits he will feast, which is a suggestion of his present passivity. The use of a Christian-related phrase, "I await the second coming" is a suggestion that the "first coming" of Banda only brought misery and perhaps the "second coming" (of another liberator) will be different.

The third stanza is a hint at reversing the present situation in Malawi.

The fourth stanza chastises Banda for his promises of "life" and "fulfillment" which he did not deliver. The fourth stanza hints at another rebellion "who will start another fire". Despite Mapanje's poems being deliberately obscure, they definitely communicate and they refer to people and events with hidden directness and immediacy. They only need to be decoded if one wants to unleash a stream of relevant meanings from them.

Mapanje's poetry is thus a form of ecocriticism in which poetry explores political, psychological, cultural and social issues utilizing symbols and elements of nature in general to conceptualize and construct and give voice to a wide range of ideas regarding questions of justice, identity, heritage and belonging. It became his voice of resistance to social injustice, debasement of culture, abuse of power, despotism, oppression and exploitation of the masses by the hegemonic regime of Banda's in Malawi. The fauna and flora sensibility becomes a metaphorical representation in which urban and rural landscapes, innocence and experience, real and imagined merge in the attempt of making sense of a present reality Thus he was a writer of 'cheeky, sassy humorous verse against dictators, vampires, the mean spirited, the chameleons, and the self-appointed self-imposed gods and a man who skips with his hope' (Muganga A Makerere University Public Relations Office 2002)

Oliver Lovesey (2015) argues that it is almost inescapable for creative writers like Mapanje to project their literary art by deliberately using obscuring devices. He contends that this form of poetic expression is a form of self-containment as the poet does not have the freedom of limitless self-expression. Benedict Anderson (1991:163) echoes this sentiment in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*.

In conclusion, this paper does not lay claim to a full exploration of the issues it attempts to state, it simply states the nature of Mapanje's literary projections as largely influenced by the conditions within which it is produced. It is also an attempt to give an example of a poetry produced in an atmosphere of fear and repression and how the poet adapts his style much like the chameleon he so frequently alludes to. Much as the paper dwells extensively on Gibbs' analysis of Mapanje's few poems, this should not detract from its main hoped for purpose; to point out the unmistakable influences

of the environment on works of literature. Poetry, like all forms of literature, is a reflection of society. What is poignant is that this reflection of society is produced in different styles which are largely informed by the nature of the environment within which this poetry is produced.

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