

Sociological Engagement of Selected Poems from Malawi

Sikiru Adeyemi OGUNDOKUN (PhD)

Dept. of Foreign Language Studies -Faculty of Humanities, Ikire Campus

Osun State University, Osogbo, Nigeria

sikiru.ogundokun@uniosun.edu.ng

Received Date: 16/7/2025,

Accepted Date: 17/8/2025,

Published Date: 1/9/2025

Abstract:

It seems less attention is paid to literary writers from Malawi. However, this study engages selected poems from the country. The purpose of this study is to sensitize readers with human conditions in that part of the world as reflected in the selected poems of Jack Mapanje, Edison Mpina and David Rubadiri. The poets are purposively selected because of their inclination towards social advancement. Content analysis is employed as methodology and sociological literary perspective serves as the conceptual framework. Findings reveal that the selected poems are sociopolitical satires of the post-colonial period in Malawi. The poets advocate for good governance.

Keywords: human condition, post-colonial, advancement, society, identity

الانخراط السوسيولوجي في مختارات من القصائد المالاوية

سيكيرو أديمي أوغوندوكون

نيجيريا- أوشوبو- جامعة ولاية أوسون - حرم إيكيري- كلية العلوم الإنسانية - قسم دراسات اللغات الأجنبية

تاريخ النشر: ٢٠٢٥/٩/١

تاريخ القبول: ٢٠٢٥/٨/١٧

تاريخ الاستلام: ٢٠٢٥/٧/١٦

الملخص:

يبدو أن الاهتمام بالأدباء المالاويين أقل. ومع ذلك، تتناول هذه الدراسة قصائد مختارة من البلاد. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى توعية القراء بالظروف الإنسانية في ذلك الجزء من العالم، كما تتجلى في قصائد مختارة لجاك مابانجي، وإديسون مينا، وديفيد روباديري. وقد تم اختيار الشعراء عمدًا نظرًا لميلهم نحو التقدم الاجتماعي. واستخدم تحليل المحتوى كمنهجية، بينما شكل المنظور الأدبي الاجتماعي إطارًا مفاهيميًا. وتُظهر النتائج أن القصائد المختارة هي هجاءات اجتماعية وسياسية من فترة ما بعد الاستعمار في ملاوي. ويدعو الشعراء إلى الحكم الرشيد.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الظروف الإنسانية، ما بعد الاستعمار، التقدم، المجتمع، الهوية

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36317/kja/2025/v1.i65.20485>

Kufa Journal of Arts by University of Kufa is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

مجلة آداب الكوفة - جامعة الكوفة مرخصة بموجب ترخيص المشاع الإبداعي ٤.٠ الدولي.



I. Introduction

... the direct provocators of African literature placed great emphasis on the affirmation of the personality/identity... (Onyemelukwe, 2004, p. 140)

Our own idea of African literature is the totality of that body of knowledge which expresses history, culture, traditional norms and values as well as experiences, imaginations and feelings that are pertaining to Africa and Africans whether in a written or an oral form. Such texts, verbal or non-verbal could be in any language – mother tongues, official/colonial or foreign languages. And, the authors of such literary works – poems, plays or novels must be of African origin.

In line with the foregoing, therefore, the first known African text is *Force-Bonté*, a novel written by Bakary Diallo and published in 1926. Diallo is a Senegalese. The preoccupation of writers then was the fight against racial oppression, cultural alienation and other forms of dehumanization of the Blacks in the hands of the imperialists.

There are generally two major categorizations of African literature; namely, the Anglophone African and the francophone African literature. Any literary text in English by an Anglophone African, or anyone who has lived long in Anglophone Africa and who expresses African history, culture, traditions, beliefs and experiences among other variables is described as Anglophone African literature. Examples of such texts are Ngugi wa Thiongo's *Weep Not, Child*, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*.

By extension, literary works written in native languages or foreign languages like French, German, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish and so on and so forth, by English speaking writers are also Anglophone African Literature. Meanwhile, francophone African Literature, according to Onyemelukwe (2004, p. 154) are:

pieces of creative writing (poems, plays, novels and short stories etc) in French by francophone

Africans and others with francophone African descent, on francophone Africans' life and experiences, primarily for francophone Africans and by extension for non-francophone Africans and people in other parts of the world.

From one's understanding, Mongo Beti's *Ville cruelle*, Aminata Sow Fall's *La grève des battù*, Jean Pliya's *La secrétaire particulière*, and Aimé Césaire *La Tragédie du roi Christophe* are typical examples of francophone African literary works. With this explanation, the poems of Jack Mapanje, Edison Mpina and David Rubadiri belong to Anglophone African Literature, which also qualify them for African Literature. In human societies, there is the need for the arts. Through the arts, practitioners express their inner minds, feelings, opinions and predictions on issues which can develop their community. In the words of Awodiya (2016, p. 5) "the purpose of all the arts is to communicate the artists' thoughts or emotions, to give aesthetic pleasure and to clarify or help us understand life." Also, justifying the importance of arts, and in addition, the social role of literary writers, Onyijen (2015, p. 109) puts it thus:

The African writer in his contemporary society has always been saddled with the responsibility of voicing the happenings around him. He does not hit the headlines like the historian or journalist, but painfully and artistically bears the burden of exhuming, schematically and consciously, socio-political happenings around him, even when they are deeply entrenched and sometimes escape the eye of the average man. But the writer's critical antenna is such that it is sensitive and picks up every issue for information, education and entertainment. Sometimes he lampoons and satirizes the society as he skillfully presents his facts. This artistic effort has produced many

works of literature as demonstrated in the novel,
poetry and dramatic genres.

2. Theoretical Framework

Marxism is the theoretical framework on which this study is premised. Marxism rejects the binary division between the rich and the poor occasioned by oppressive and exploitative forces in the name of capitalism in the control of the means of production. The poets in the study are guided by the principles of Marxist literary theory which is believed to be sociological. The sociology aspect of Marxist criticism is rooted in the materialist understanding of cultural consciousness. Marxist literature being sociological exposes contradictions in society. Benjamin (2013, p. 181) explains that:

Marxism is tied to the sociological theory in that the former is an aspect of the latter. Sociological criticism is based on the idea that social contexts serves as the material with which literary works are constructed. It studies the relationship between a literary work and the social institutions that it reflects. And it is this social institutions and realities that Marxism examines.

The three selected poets for this study criticize the social and political relationship between the poor and elites who control the affairs of the nation. Marxism as both economic and political concept can be applied to literature since literature is perceived to be a mirror of happenings in a particular society at a time in history.

In this study, we embrace the sociological perspective, which theorizes that literature should be seen in the light of the structure and historical stage of the society that gives birth to its creation and production. Creative arts as well as other forms of arts, even though formed by an individual, are notwithstanding, a reflection of the collective life; beliefs and practices of a society and need be interpreted on the premises of the social existence of the society that informs their creation. Wellek and

Warren (1973, p. 9) come up with the social approach. In their book, *Theory of Literature*, they highlight three aspects which ought to be of interest to a social critic. Such aspects are: The writer's background; that is, the author's biographic and environmental factors, which can assist readers to understand and explain not only the social behaviours of the characters in a given text but also those opinions which are expressed in a particular literary work. The world that is imitated or formed and presented in the work itself is another aspect. This aspect investigates the culture and the society, which are depicted in the text. It also considers how the fictional or poetic world represents its outer world. The third aspect is the target audience. This last facet interrogates the kind of impact the literary work has on its readers. In other words, this aspect attempts to establish the nature of reception of such given texts. This aspect attracts attention from critics called the *receptionists* (see Ann B. Dobie, 2012, pp. 15 - 16).

3. Brief Information about Malawi

Malawi is one of the countries in the Southern part of Africa with a population figure of about 19,127,178 in 2018 according to Worldometers.info. Her capital city is Lilongwe. It is an agricultural economy country and 90% of its citizens live in rural areas. On the literary scene, much has not been heard of creative writers from Malawi. The reason for this is likely as a result of the country's too much connection with South Africa. Hence, the activities in the latter over-dominated and still dominate events in Malawi. When South Africa sneezes, the rest of the Southern African countries: such as Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe catch cold. However, this study has engaged three creative writers from Malawi to create awareness about the human conditions in that part of Africa, since literature is believed to be a mirror which reflects a given society that paves the way for its existence.

4.0 Analysis of the selected poems

4.1 Jack Mapanje's poem, "*When This Carnival Finally Closes*"

This poem can be best described as a political satire. The poet's preoccupation is centred on the sycophancy in governance and the leadership in the post-colonial political history of Malawi as a nation and Africa in general. The poem warns a bad leader of the hypocrisy of his so-called 'right men' and supporters, who will definitely desert him when trouble comes; for instance, upon the demise of the bad leader. The poet writes:

When this frothful carnival finally closes, brother
/ when your drumming veins dry; / These very
officers / Will burn the scripts of the praises we
say to you / And shatter the calabashes you drank
from.

4.1.1 The Use of Metaphor

Metaphor is a literary device in which one thing is called another as a result of the tenor of similarity that exist between the two things that are directly compared without the use of word such as "like" or any other adverb of comparison.

The speaker, as we can see, describes the carnival as a useless and empty thing with the phrase "this frothful carnival". It implies that the glorification or celebration of the leader is hypocritical and it lacks substance. Upon the demise of the leader, when his drumming veins dry", those who seemed to be loyalists will be the first to condemn and destroy all that can be credited to the unsuspecting leader: "these very officers will burn the scripts of the praises we sang to you." This is a serious warning to any leader that s/he should rule wisely because death will surely come one day. The poet is of the view that leaders should devoid themselves of illicit enrichment. Ill-gotten wealth is painted as "lie achieved world". In the words of the persona of the poem, the leader is warned thus:

Your Charms, these drums, and effigies blazing
will / Become the accomplices to your lie world.

The carnival which shall be organized is deceitful. It is only a spectacle which mocks the exits of a bad leader: His “bamboo hut on the beach, they’ll make a bonfire under the cover of giving their hero a true traditional burial, though in truth to rid themselves of another”. This shows that all these activities are to erase any memory of the leader and completely forgotten him. After the death of a bad leader, his “Yes men” will look the other way and pick tent with whoever appears as a new leader:

And at the wake new mask dancers will quickly
leap / Into the arena dancing to tighter skins,
boasting / Other clans of calabashes as the
undertaker’s jest: / what did he think he would
become, a God? The devil!

The so-called supporters of the bad leader are now mocking the departed leaders who they eulogized when he was alive. This is a very common practice in almost all African countries, whether Anglophone or francophone, without any need to mention names.

By and large, Jack Mapanje has squarely criticized the issue of political power. It appears he is sending a warning to the President of his country, Malawi.

4.1.2 The use of African traditional elements

In an attempt to given the event in the poem a local colour, some traditional materials are mentioned. In the poem, references are made to traditional items such as “charms”, “drums”, “bamboo hut”, “dancers”, and “clans of calabashes”. These objects give the poem an African setting and clear images.

4.1.3. The use of rhetorical question

As a figure of speech and literary device, a question that is posted but which does not require an answer is described as a rhetorical question. Poets often employ this literary device to propel readers or listeners to reflect deeply on a subject-matter under consideration. Rhetorical question is a call for a serious brainstorming on a discourse. In line 14, the poet expresses the sharp contrast between God and the devil: “What

did he think he would become, a God? The devil!” The speaker does not expect an answer from the listener or the reader rather he expect an in-depth reflection on the issue raised.

4.1.4. The theme of vanity as the poet’s main thematic preoccupation

In the poem, “*When This Carnival Finally Closes*”, Jack Mapanje explores the theme of vanity. In other words, the poet is of the opinion that there is nothing in this life. This theme of emptiness in the land of the living is strategically used in the poem to warn leaders to govern wisely so that their memories can be kept alive for generations to come. Looting of public treasury and surrounding oneself with flatterers when one is in power or as a public office-holder must be avoided by all means possible. The mood of the poem is that of mocking a bad ruler.

It is evident in the poem that the poet is a Marxist writer as he agitates for a good governance on behalf of the defenceless poor masses that are under the shackles of exploitative and oppressive forces. The poet is calling for a balance in the distribution of the nation’s resources between the “have”(the rich/elites) and the “have not” the poor/ downtrodden).

4.2 David Rubadiri’s “*Death at Mulago*”

“*Death at Mulago*” is a social satire. It condemns the ineffectiveness of the medical sector in Malawi. The poet uses the activities in a hospital as a representation of incompetency and inhumanity in the hospital management. As a committed poet who believes in the ideals of Marxism condemns the sordid situation of hospitals. There is a semiotic representation of the government of Malawi indirectly in the poem. The picture in the poem reveals unfair treatment of the poor masses whose life heavily depend on the hospital for their health challenges. We do know that most African leaders are not concerned with the way hospitals in their countries are. Many of them often embark on medical tourism to foreign countries at the expense of their underdeveloped countries. The poem begins with a sharp contrast between the hospital and its staff members. The coldness and indifference of the health management is painted thus:

Tower of strength / granite / hard concrete /
enduring / like life itself. / Up they rise tall and
slender / and around them / white coats flit like
the magic they spell.

4.2.1 The use of Irony to create mental pictures

Irony is a figure of contradiction where the speaker ordinarily means the opposite of what he or she says. From this contrastive image created through irony, readers are made to see fantastic building but incompetent and indolent medical staff. In Africa, it is unfortunate that most of the doctors and nurses, especially in government-owned hospitals, are as cold and unmovable as the hospital buildings whenever their attention is needed. They have traded away the professionalism in their very important calling. They are inhuman and less concerned about the patients who die on a daily basis. Hear what the speaker says: “As the full stop was entered/ on a white sheet of paper/ a white coat gave a nod.” It signifies the passing away of a patient. This probably accounts for why many African politicians and those rich business tycoons go abroad for medical treatments and check-ups. But the question is, what about the masses, the paupers, the downtrodden; innocent men and women who cannot afford travelling overseas for their medical needs?

The tragic mood, which accompanies the sad exits of a patient is captured in, “A woman clad in *busuti*.” It is ironic that it is only what the medical staff, especially the nurses wear that reveals their identity. Their actions and attitude towards the key role of preserving human life as directed by the ethics of the medical profession is grossly abused. It is disappointing that they just flit around like magicians and are indifferent to the suffering and pains they cause when they pronounce a patient dead.

4.2.2 The theme of accountability

The lesson from this poem, David Rubadiri’s “*Death at Mulago*” is that African leaders should take the health of their people very seriously. The health sector needs a restructuring or a declaration of a state of emergency so that the dignity of human can be restored. The popular

saying is that “health is wealth.” Hence, health matter must be handled with all sense of commitment.

4.3. Edison Mpina’s “*Reborn*”

4.3.1 The theme of liberation

This is a poem of celebration. The victim of the poem narrates his happiness for regaining his freedom from incarceration. It seems to be a freedom from captivity as a political prisoner. It can also mean, in the life of a country, freedom from oppressive rule. The sad experience takes so much a time that the persona has lost his sense of freedom. Lyay (1996, pp. 162 - 163) is of the view that:

African literature is this literary manifestation of Blacks, in European or other languages, which fought colonialism violently, expressed its anger over the dislocation of the African society and which painfully strives to rebuild the equilibrium of African personality on new foundations, through dialogue between the elements of African culture and the contribution of the world of technology.

The experience captured in this poem is a typical description of the unfriendly situation which Africans are subjected to before the decolonization. In Edison Mpina’s “*Reborn*”, the victim laments thus:

Now I am like a sea weed / That’s been washed to
land / I’ve cashed my last drop of salt / Walking
from Mount Soche Hotel / Down to the Blantyre
City Hall.

The persona was in a confused state upon his release from the prison. He is like a sea weed that can be blown to any direction. There was no welfare package for the released inmates. They would have to walk miles back to their different destinations. This is another form of oppression and suffering, which Africans who were tagged prisoners of war experienced during the colonial era. In lines 10 – 14, the persona recounts the unpleasant colonial experience thus:

Before this civilization / I lived both hands on my
life wheel; / I slept in trees, falling like a tipsy
monkey / I strolled in graveyards like a witch / To
avoid police paths.

Everybody knows that Africans are unfairly abused during the colonial rule. They are often subjected to all forms of maltreatment by the police, the law enforcement agency, who is fond of setting traps for innocent Africans. As pointed out by the persona of this poem, to avoid being arrested he abandons his house to sleep on trees as well as keeping vigil at cemetery. The experience shared here reminds us of the similar experienced shared in the poems of South African writers like Dennis Brutus, Oswald Mtshali and Arthur Norje.

The persona captures the unfortunate experience, he witnessed in captivity, in lines 15 – 22. He explains that prison is not like home: “Its uniform crackling like a dry mango leaf”. Also, lack of good food is a major feature of prison life: “Its monthly stew, like stale bread in a child’s pants / was the most palatable food I ate.” In lines 23 – 28, the persona demonstrates his joy. He is now a free man “without belts of chains”, who breaths “newly born air / With female lovers.” We also see a new social order where there is equally and fundamental human rights. The poet writes that:

And touching shoulders with patrol policemen /
You can all watch the free match / On the saltless
field where I’m reborn.

One good thing about Marxism is the consciousness, self assertion and liberation that come after agitations; protests or revolution against irresponsible system. It is a beautiful thing to have freedom. Freedom is the panacea to self-determination and self-actualization as well as self-fulfillment and uncommon satisfaction.

4.3.2 The use of contemporary allusion

Allusion as a literary device is making a reference or an analogy to people, places, history, events or time with a view to using such reference for the purpose of resemblance and as a basis for explanation. Contemporary allusion is when a reference is made to conventional existing realities such as people, places, events or happenings.

“Mount Soche Hotel”, and “Blantyre City Hall” which are existing known places in Malawi as well as the first-person narrative technique (I-narrator) make the poem to appear real and appealing to readers.

4.3.3 The use of simile

Simile is a figure of speech that compare two things that share something in common. In the construction of a simile, the adverb “like” or any suitable adverb of comparison is always used to strike the similarity. Simile is the dominant figure of speech which creates vivid imagery of events in the poem. For example, “I am like a sea weed”, “My eyes, like the skin beyond the blister wall”, “Like darkness in moonlight”, “falling like a tipsy monkey”, “I strolled in graveyards like a witch”, “Its uniform crackling like a dry mango leaf”, “...like stale bread,” these expressions dramatically draw-up certain images in the readers’ minds. The expression “And the hairless mountain peak / Peering over the messy prison walls / Was the only sightseeing I did” denotes that there is no much the prisoners can see from the prison.

4.3.4 The use of personification

Personification is a literary device in which the traits or attributes of human being is transferred to non-human being. There is personification in the expression “And the hairless mountain peak / Peering over the messy prison walls.” The mountain is personified as if it were a human being that has no hair on his/her head (**the hairless mountain**). The poet’s use of personification in the expression adds to his descriptive

power of imagination. It has also contributed to the aesthetic value of beauty which a good poem is known for.

Conclusion

In this study, we have demonstrated how Jack Mapanje lampoons indigenous African leaders, who surround themselves with hypocritical cabinet members and supporters because of personal gains. The poet warns such rulers of consequences of ill-gotten wealth and the emptiness of this world. David Rubadiri, in his poem, entitled “*Dealth at Mulago*”, advises the post-colonial African administrators to provide functional hospitals with hardworking and ready to serve medical officers who have human feeling. In “*Reborn*”, Edison Mpina compares the sad experience of the colonial rule with the freedom at the time of independence by manipulating images from nature. It is a critical examination of Malawi’s political history. The three selected poets from Malawi belong to the school of thought that believes literature has certain contributions to make in the development of human societies. From this study, it is evident that they have used their literary works to warn and suggest solutions to socio-political problems as well as celebrating the much-awaited freedom from the colonial rule.

From our discussion so far, we have shown that the poems of Jack Mapanje, David Rubadiri and Edison Mpina are indeed a representation of African literature. In all, the need for sound leadership with political will to restructure major sectors is the panacea for sustainable development in Malawi and the rest of Africa.

- 1- **Data Availability Statement:** (The manuscript includes all the data used in the study.)
- 2- **Conflict of Interest Statement:** (The authors confirm that there are no conflicts of interest that could affect the content of this research.)
- 3- **Funding Statement:** This research was fully funded by the authors without any financial support from other entities.



References

- Abdou, L.B. (2015). L'extorsion de l'administration coloniale dans le roman africain. *Revue internationale d'anglais et de littérature*, 6 (10), pp. 168-173.
- Awodiya, M. P. (2016). *Managing our culture and securing our future*. 169th Inaugural Lecture, University of Benin, Benin City.
- Benjamin, Orji-Mba Onwukah. (2013). "Towards a Marxist Sociological Criticism of African Feminist Writings: An Analysis of Sembène Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood*." Sophia Obiajulu Ogwude (Ed.). *Writing the Female Image in African Fiction*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, pp. 179 - 189.
- Dobie, A. B. (2012). *Theory into Practice: An Introduction to Literary Criticism* (3rd Edition). Australia: WADSWORTH CENGAGE Learning.
- Johnson et al. (1996). *New Poetry from Africa*. Ibadan: University Press.
- Lyay Kimini. (1975). "Destin de la littérature". *Nègro- Africaine ou Problématique d'une culture*. Zaire: Kinshasa Presses Universitaires du Zaire, pp. 162 – 163.
- Onyemelukwe, I. (2004). *Colonial, Feminist and Postcolonial Discourses: Decolonisation and Globalisation of African Literature*. Zaria: Labelle Educational Publishers.
- Onyijen, K. O. (2015). "The Writer and Society: A Study of Jude Dibia's Walking with Shadows" in *Okike: An African Journal of New Writing*, 54, pp. 109 – 125.
- Wellek, R. and Warren A. (1973). *Theory of Literature*. 3rd [revised] ed. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin.
- Worldometers.info. www.worldometers.info/world-population/malawi-population/ Retrieved, June 6, 2020.
- *Note: The excerpts of the poems are from Johnson et al. *New Poetry from Africa*. Ibadan: University Press, 1996.