



Ecological Catastrophe as a Weapon of Satire, Ridicule, and Scorn in Jack Mapanje's Poetry

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Abstract

This is an era shaped in part by the realisation that the mechanistic worldview and irresponsible behaviour towards, and use of, nonhuman nature have pushed the world into an environmental crisis that threatens human survival. This realisation has prompted scholars in disciplines such as history, anthropology, philosophy, and others to open environmental dimensions within their respective fields as a way of contributing to environmental restoration. It is within these emerging bodies of ecocriticism and zoocriticism that this study is located. Animals are part of the physical environment and of nature, and the fact that many species have become extinct while others are on the brink of extinction makes it imperative to undertake studies that help us understand the attitudes to animals that emerge through forms of cultural production, in this case literature. This article analyses and critiques the various ways in which animals are represented in Mapanje's poetry. It intends to explore the place that the poet accords animals in his poetry in relation to social, psychological, political, and cultural issues, and to examine how, as symbols in and subjects of the poems, animals in particular and nature in general are used for the poet's conceptualisation and construction of a wide range of ideas, among them questions of justice, identity, heritage, and belonging to the cosmos.

Keywords: *Environmental restoration, ecocriticism, zoocriticism, culture, human, animal and nature relationship.*

Introduction:

According to A. Lytton Sells, people in ancient times generally saw little distinction between a human soul and that of an animal. He further states that a belief in metempsychosis was prevalent not only among the Chinese, Hindus, Persians, Arabs, and Egyptians, but also among certain Greek philosophers, "whose speculative mind and mathematical genius nevertheless favoured an objective approach to the problems of animal psychology" (Sells xiv). Anaxagoras, one of the ancient Greek philosophers, held the view that no essential difference existed between the animal soul and the human soul, while Pythagoras of Samos believed that a human soul might inhabit any of the various animals, including a human being, and birds in successive reincarnations, a doctrine that led to vegetarianism. Other Greek philosophers such as Empedocles, Socrates, and Plato, along with later thinkers, also advanced the doctrine of the transmigration of souls.

The modern environmental or 'green' stance, which recognises an important link between animals and human beings and seeks to re-establish a balance, has intensified debate on the relationship between humans and nature in general, and animals in particular. While some scholars examine the environmentally friendly relationship that ancient humans, or the earliest hunter-gatherer societies, had with animals, others turn to biblical exegesis for its role in promoting or curbing abuse of the environment, while still others seek to incorporate animals into the realms of ethics and rights. Yet others attempt to preserve or conserve animals in national parks and game reserves.

This article critically analyses the representation of animals in John Alfred Clement (Jack) Mapanje's poetry from ecocritical and zoocritical perspectives. The study does not "merely pontificate about the intricacies of animal representations and forget entirely about the animal presences that had helped give rise to them," but seeks to show "how representations affect the animals, or the ethical issues involved in representation." In this article, I discuss the ways in which Mapanje uses animals as metaphors for human characters whom he holds in contempt or seeks to criticise, satirise, scorn, and lampoon. In most cases, these figures are Malawian politicians, especially those of the First Republic (1964–1994).

Discussion:

Mapanje believes that a poet, like the griots or izibongi of old, should offer "constructive criticism of either the leadership or the society" (Mapanje, "The Use" 32–33). As a writer, Mapanje sees his role as the examination of all aspects of life in his society, for he believes that criticism of a society's institutions and structures is healthy because it helps the people in that society move forward (waThiong'o, "Open Criticism" 82). This constructive criticism was all but lost in Malawian oral poetry (songs) during Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda's reign (1964–1994), as such poetry became a form of "watered down propaganda to praise the new leaders with very little poetic insight" (Mapanje, "The Use" 29–30). In his poetry, Mapanje, the intellectual, identifies himself with the poor and oppressed in Malawian society and aligns himself with the continued struggle of the masses for a better society, one in which good governance and respect for human rights and dignity are recognised and upheld. Mapanje, like Ayi Kwei Armah writing in the context of Nkrumah's Ghana, is disillusioned with Banda's Malawi and sees independence simply as "a change of embezzlers and a change of the hunters and the hunted."

Unsurprisingly, therefore, in his poetry he deconstructs the view that Kamuzu Banda was a wise and courageous leader, as his supporters would have us believe, by portraying him negatively as an animal. In human culture, at least some animals are seen as violent, cruel, and irrational. By portraying Banda and his cohorts as animals, Mapanje shows that through their cruelty and ruthlessness they had exchanged their humanity and rationality for lowly beastliness and irrationality. Through these animal metaphors, Mapanje also shows that Banda, the leader of the anti-colonial struggle who loved to remind the people during his many mass rallies that he had come to break "their" injudicious federation and give his people freedom, had become a traitor.

The focus of this article is Mapanje's poems in the collections *Of Chameleons and Gods* (1981), *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison* (1993), *Skippping Without Ropes* (1998), *The Last of the Sweet Bananas* (2004), and *Beasts of Nalunga* (2007). These collections correspond to stages in the poet's development as a writer, and each collection is divided into two or more sections that reflect the particular experiences or events that informed and inspired the poems. Structurally, this analysis does not discuss Mapanje's poetry chronologically or section by section because some of the ideas under discussion, and the animal images and metaphors used for them, overlap across sections and collections. Before turning to the poems, however, this chapter provides a brief background to the context of Jack Mapanje's poetry and considers the place of animals in Malawian society, literature, and criticism.

To engage in creative writing critical of Banda's style of leadership was generally considered foolhardy. Not surprisingly, other well-known Malawian writers such as Frank Chipasula, Lupenga Mphande, Felix Mnthali, and Legson Kayira, among others, went into exile. Those authors who remained within Malawi had to resort to a private, cryptic, obscure, and metaphor-ridden mode of expression in their writing in order to elude the country's harsh censorship laws and the real possibility of political persecution (Nazombe, "Malawian Poetry of the Transition" 138–39).

Nevertheless, as one such author, Steve Chimombo comments, there were times when even myth offered no route of escape. Jack Mapanje leaves no doubt that it was this kind of censorship that sent him to the notorious Mikuyu Maximum Security Prison for three years, seven months, and sixteen days without charge or trial for what he suspects was "my peeping into the dictator's drawer," in other words, exposing the evils of the Banda regime in his poetry (Mapanje, "The Changing Fortunes" 219). Jack Mapanje was arrested at the Gymkhana Club in Zomba on 25 September 1987 and kept in the notorious Mikuyu Maximum Security Prison until his release on 10 May 1991, thereby joining the long list of African writers detained without trial, tortured, and imprisoned on false charges by dictatorial leaders since the departure of the colonialists.

Mapanje writes of his own poetry in *Of Chameleons and Gods* that the verse in this volume spans "some ten turbulent years in which it has been attempting to find a voice or voices as a way of preserving some sanity. But the exercise has been, if nothing else, therapeutic; and that's no mean word in our circumstances!" (ix). The National Censorship Board was established in 1972 following the introduction of the Censorship and Control of Entertainments Act in 1968. The Board was mandated to declare publications undesirable (Moto, Trends 5). As mentioned in the introductory article, this Board, in Tiyambe Zeleza's words, "discharged its calling with impeccable thoroughness, regularly issuing 'permits' and 'certificates of approval' and declaring numerous publications, pictures, statues and records 'undesirable'" (Zeleza 11).

Apart from books, periodicals, films, and records, Banda's omniscient regime, like Tsarist Russia and other postcolonial states in Africa, for example Ngugi's Kenya and Soyinka's Nigeria, also "censored memories, stories, and words that contested and mocked its singular authority, banishing and imprisoning numerous opponents, real and imaginary, hunting and murdering exiled 'rebels'" (Zezeza 10). Moreover, censorship, which became "an iron veil to hide the lies, deformities and fantasies of a ruthless, unproductive power," begot self-censorship, "a numbing collective fear of meaningful social conversation, of public discourse, of openly questioning the way things are and imagining what they ought to be."

As a result of the uncompromising censorship laws and the ruthlessness of the Banda regime in dealing with its critics, many Malawians wrote escapist literature, the kind of literature that failed to address the crucial issues of misrule and corruption by taking refuge in safer themes such as love and promiscuity in order to avoid a frontal assault on the leadership, while others wrote cryptic and obscure poetry or chose silence. In the case of Jack Mapanje, one of the toughest critics of the excesses of the Banda regime, poetic obscurity is evident in *Of Chameleons and Gods*, a collection that appeared before his arrest. This is not to say that the meanings of the poems were lost, however. A perceptive reader could still see the threads of protest, irony, grim humour, and mockery of the leaders and the system embedded in the carefully chosen words, metaphors, and rhetorical questions.

In fact, some poems in this volume show fierce sparks of daring, as Banda is attacked explicitly, at least by readers familiar with Malawi's history and culture. Good examples are Jack Mapanje's "On His Royal Blindness Paramount Chief Kwangala" and "When This Carnival Finally Closes" (*Of Chameleons and Gods* 57, 61), which clearly reveal the target of the poet's scathing lines, namely the former president of Malawi, Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda. *Of Chameleons and Gods*, later treated as a "banned" book, set the stage for the politically charged poetry of Jack Mapanje. I use the word "banned" cautiously here because the volume was neither officially proscribed nor cleared for sale. Bookshops were therefore not allowed to display it, but no one could be prosecuted for possessing a copy. In 1985, the Ministry of Education and Culture issued a circular banning its use in schools and colleges (Africa Watch 76).

Mapanje's poetry in *Of Chameleons and Gods*, as in his subsequent collections, is resistance poetry. Resistance here should not be understood strictly as poetry that emerges within organised political and guerrilla movements whose aim is the liberation of land and people through armed struggle from outside oppression and from political, military, and cultural hegemony exercised by imperialist and colonial powers (Harlow 46). Rather, it should be understood as poetry that emerges within a postcolonial tyrannical regime where the elites who wrested power from the colonialists oppress and exploit the people they claimed to liberate during the anti-colonial struggle.

Unlike other countries in Africa and beyond such as Nicaragua, Agostinho Neto's Angola, Mozambique, Amílcar Cabral's Guinea-Bissau, and Pablo Neruda's Chile, to mention only a few, Malawi's path to independence did not involve warfare, although the country, like many other postcolonial states, did not escape the suffocating grip of a despotic leader. Mapanje's resistance is directed against social injustice: the debasement of culture, the abuse of power, despotism, and the oppression and exploitation of the masses by the hegemonic leadership of Hastings Kamuzu Banda. He protests against "the politics of evil, of force and violence, deceit, of corruption and greed, of banditry masking as patriotism" that led to the suffering of many Malawians.

A reading of his poetry shows that Mapanje seeks an oppression-free Malawi and world, a world in which no human oppresses another, and a world in which human rights, democratic governance, and cultural values are promoted rather than destroyed. Like other radical writers of postcolonial Africa such as Armah, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and Wole Soyinka, among others, Mapanje exposes the Malawian elites in all their "ruthlessness and vulgarity": their conspicuous consumption, corruption, greed, crass materialism, and cruelty (Lazarus 20). Unlike in *Of Chameleons and Gods*, Mapanje makes no attempt to obscure the target of his sardonic humour, satire, and lampoon in his subsequent poems. This can be attributed to the fact that all his poetry collections after *Of Chameleons and Gods* appeared while he was in exile in the United Kingdom.

In the subsequent collections, he dispenses with cryptic language but retains his use of metaphors, especially animal metaphors. It is also in these later collections, especially in *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison* and *Skipping Without Ropes*, that the "animalism orientation" and animal metaphors are most prevalent. One may suspect that his anger and bitterness toward the people and the regime that imprisoned him inspired him to criticise and satirise them more explicitly. The fact that Mapanje maintains the use of animal metaphors in his post-Banda poetry also reveals the deep influence of Malawi's oral narratives, in which animals act as mirrors of human society and behaviour: "Master, you talked with bows, / Arrows and catapults once / Your hands steaming with hawk blood / To protect your chicken. / Why do you talk with knives now, / Your hands teaming with eggshells / And hot blood from your own chicken? / Is it to impress your visitors" (*Of Chameleons and Gods* 4).

In Jack Mapanje's poem "Song of Chickens" quoted above, the chickens accuse their master, a human being, of duplicity for protecting them from predators and later killing them for food. This is a typical human-animal relationship, especially between a farmer and domestic animals, in which a human protects livestock from predators only to become the predator later. However, in the context of the poem, as some critics have rightly observed, the poem's extra-poetic referent is the Malawian dictator Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda. The allegorical figure of the chicken collectively represents ordinary Malawians (Nazombe, "Malawian Poetry in English" 176; Chirambo, "Orality and Subversion" 82–83 and "Subverting Banda's Dictatorship" 144–46; Ngara 158). The mention of blood in the poem evokes the "Chilobwe Murders" of the 1960s and 1970s.

Accompanied by various rumours, these were mysterious murders that took place in "several townships in the country's southern and central regions" (Mapanje, BN 63), particularly in Chilobwe township in the commercial city of Blantyre. According to Paul Brietzke, one rumour held that the government was responsible for the murders and was draining the victims' blood and sending it to South Africa to repay a loan, since white men were believed to drink African blood and manufacture money from it" (362).

Conclusion:

Through Jack Mapanje's allegorical representations of animals, he generally explores images of animals rather than flesh-and-blood animal subjects. His portrayal of some animals at times serves to entrench the negative attitudes many Malawians hold toward them. Nevertheless, his poetry acts as a productive entry point for the discussion of animal representation in southern African poetry. It is an ideal site for examining the relationships among animals, poetry, and political resistance. The poetry offers a useful account of the ways in which resistance poets use allegory and ancient satiric techniques, in which animals embody human vice and folly, to address contemporary social and political issues. As the discussion above shows, Mapanje's poetic animals act as mirrors that expose and ridicule the foibles of postcolonial Malawi's ruling elites and their minions. Mapanje's poetry is therefore essential to this study because it sheds light on the manner of animal representation in poetry that critiques or resists political oppression and exploitation.

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