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Gender Relations in African-Language Literature: Interpretative Politics and Possibilities

Abstract

African novels can provide insights into history and society, but the risk, particularly when using them as learning materials in classroom, is that novels become mere illustrations of themes and conclusions already established by other means. The post-authoritarian era in some African countries, for example, appears to impose its own truths on interpreting literature. This article examines gender relations in Willie Zingani's Chinyanja novels and in Francis Moto's recent criticism of these novels. An alternative reading, pointing out the novels' potential for complex interpretations, suggests that Moto's dismissal of their gender relations as stereotypes must itself be understood as a literary product of a particular period. It is a period when the rhetoric of gender equality has emerged to support a form of state feminism in Malawi. Against its dichotomous view of gender the article shows how the complexity conveyed in Zingani's novels can be used to highlight class and generational contradictions obscured by the current rhetoric. The article concludes by recommending attention to narrative details as a measure against interpretations becoming mere reflections of teachers' and critics' own political preferences. The problems highlighted in the article are particularly germane to teaching and interpreting African-language literature. It often enters classrooms through literary criticism in metropolitan languages. When students and teachers cannot access the novel itself, it is important that they base their discussions on those interpretations that take into account as many narrative details as possible.

1. Introduction

African novels carry considerable potential as resources for teaching various disciplines within African Studies. A recent volume amply demonstrates how African novels can contribute to making a whole range of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences more relevant and more humane from the student's point of view (see Hay 2000). Here the promise is not only for apt illustrations of major historical moments. The promise of African novels is for a deeper, impassioned understanding of Africa's past and present, inevitably

complemented by more conventional studies in such fields as history, anthropology and sociology. From anti-colonial struggles for independence (Gagliano 2000) to post-colonial contests over freedom and democracy (Zezeza 1997; Mwaria et al. 2000), African novels tackle questions of subjectivity and experience in ways that are still largely unexplored in academic disciplines.

Much as one welcomes the appearance of African novels in the classroom, unchecked enthusiasm can also do great injustice to literary works. When a novel is introduced into a syllabus with the sole aim of discussing particular political and cultural processes, how can the teacher avoid imposing on the novel ideas that have already been established by other means during the course? How can a novel, as a work of fiction, not only affirm but also challenge and expand students' emerging understanding? In South African literature, for example, certain writers have been commended for 'arriving at the political through the personal' (see Head 1994: 163). Yet in other readings the same writers have been shown to demonstrate the impossibility of an easy reconciliation between the personal and the political, cross-cutting and contradictory identities contesting the clarity of political rhetoric (Medalie 1999). The South African example also serves to remind us of the intrinsically political act of choosing particular novels from the multifarious corpus of fiction. Why, and with what consequences, are novels written by white South Africans in English time and again selected for the most extensive scrutiny in that country's literary debate (see e.g. Attridge and Jolly 1998)?

I approach these general problems through the specific issue of how the post-authoritarian era in some African countries appears to impose its own truths on interpreting literature. Following Mama, who states that African gender relations are currently 'one of the most dramatic sites of struggle and change' (1997: 69), I examine gender relations in both novels and their criticism in the context of post-authoritarian Malawi. I show that a criticism written in English carries the risk of becoming a gatekeeper when its subjects are novels written in an African language. As Barber (1995) has demonstrated, if the vibrant popular culture of African-language literature is appreciated in its own terms, new interpretative possibilities open out, challenging academic and political trends. It is, therefore, important to make available alternative readings of African-language literature, especially when the criticism I want to address rather dismissively blames its subjects for maintaining gender stereotypes. I offer a very different reading of the same novels and ask why the available criticism should be so dismissive at this point in Malawi's history.

The relationship between the novels and their criticism is complicated by the fact that both the author and the critic are Malawians. An easy refutation of the critic's point of view as something foreign to the culture in question is not, therefore, possible. Francis Moto, moreover, is no ordinary critic in the Malawian context. As Principal of Chancellor College, the largest constituent college of the University of Malawi, he is in a gatekeeping position when an

opinion of Malawian literature is formed both inside and outside the country. His recent book, *Trends in Malawian Literature*, is explicit about its ambition to 'act as an essential tool for secondary school, teacher training college and university teaching' (Moto 2001: 11). The book analyses literature written in Chinyanja, Malawi's national language,¹ and declares gender stereotypes as its major fault. By juxtaposing Moto's criticism and Willie Zingani's novels, I discuss Moto's criticism as a literary artefact in its own right. The political context of Moto's own writing must become a part of the literary debate before his opinion can inform others' readings of Malawian literature.

Moto's case demonstrates how using novels as illustrations of particular attitudes can actually do a disservice to African literature. The available literature in languages like Chinyanja is not extensive enough to warrant dismissals of its popular works. The effect of Moto's critique can be to send novels such as Zingani's into oblivion or to severely impoverish the debates where they can be situated. Both prospects end up undermining what should be the distinct contribution of African novels in the classroom: the multiplicity of perspectives and interpretations that they, as works of fiction, can afford in the context of studying African history and societies. After my own interpretation of Zingani's two novels, I return, therefore, to the question of interpretative possibilities in the necessary task of extending democratisation to gender relations. I conclude with specific suggestions as to how readers of African novels can avoid interpretations that are determined by their own political context.

2. The Politics of Interpretation in the New Malawi

Malawi's post-colonial and literary histories are remarkably entwined, with several prominent writers playing a pivotal role in ending the thirty years of Kamuzu Banda's autocratic regime in 1994. Much has been written about how such poets and novelists as Jack Mapanje, Felix Mnthali, Frank Chipasula, David Rubadiri, Lupenga Mphande and others provided a unique outlet for interrogating and criticising a regime that had hijacked the promise of independence (see e.g. Vail and White 1991: 278-318; Mapanje 1995; Nazombe 1995; Zeleza 1996; Mphande 1996). In most cases, the price of such reflections was either detention without trial or exile outside Malawi. The Writers' Group, established at Chancellor College in the 1970s, persisted under difficult conditions, perfecting an ingenious literary style whose cryptic codes frequently outwitted the ever-present censor. Moreover, the group succeeded in instilling an appreciation of literature into Malawi's educated elite, with writing, whether in English or a Malawian language, an acceptable pastime among university students.

While many injustices of the previous era still await their proper historical and literary exploration (Mapanje 2002; Kerr and Mapanje 2002), Malawi's literary elite has embraced the new era of political pluralism with enthusiasm, keen to assess the extent to which both writers and politicians have been able to

transform themselves. Bakili Muluzi, who with the United Democratic Front won both the 1994 and 1999 elections, introduced a new vocabulary into the political rhetoric (Chimombo and Chimombo 1996; Lwanda 1996; Phiri and Ross 1998; Englund 2002a). Concepts such as 'poverty alleviation', 'empowerment', 'human rights', 'gender equality' and 'freedoms' had never before been so publicly and so frequently uttered in post-colonial Malawi. The official rhetoric about changing gender relations is a particularly clear instance of the new vocabulary entering even the most intimate realm of relationships. The new government seeks to transform economic relations between men and women by earmarking credit opportunities for women, while it joins non-governmental organisations in demanding an end to cultural practices that appear to exploit girls and women. Free primary school education was one of the first promises implemented by Muluzi, designed to facilitate especially girls' access to schooling. A gender policy, signposting the path to gender equality, is another accomplishment after the political transition, while the First Lady has assumed a public role as the country's leading feminist.

The pressure to achieve new gender relations is, in other words, enormous, made all the more urgent by women's role as pawns and entertainers in Banda's conservative regime (see Mkamanga 2000). How are Malawi's literary circles to respond to this challenge without losing the capacity for critique that enabled them to undermine the rhetoric of the previous regime? As I discuss below, and as studies from other African countries undergoing democratisation have indicated, the danger is that the official concern with gender relations is little else than a new rhetoric, bringing about 'state feminism' rather than a genuine transformation at all levels of society (Mama 1995; Okeke-Ihejirika and Franceschet 2002). In state feminism, a token minister of women's affairs is left to parrot the rhetoric, while few others than elite women can count on enhanced opportunities to improve their lives. Writers' and critics' mandate to think unconventionally would be tragically compromised, if they became unduly persuaded by the new rhetoric.

Ross (1998) has provided an excellent review of the challenges that Malawian writers, who are predominantly male, face in imagining the implications of democratisation for gender relations. She is rightly scornful of some prominent Malawian writers' and critics' notion of 'first things first' in which struggles against national oppression must take precedence over the liberation demanded by feminists (Ross 1998: 173-174). Ross's example of a successful attempt to show how various kinds of struggles against oppression are not only compatible but also necessary as simultaneous struggles is Paul Tiyambe Zeleza's novel *Smouldering Charcoal* (1992). The other writings discussed by Ross do not fare as well in her assessment of the extent to which Malawian writers have, in their depiction of gender relations, dismantled the conservative and oppressive structures inherited from Banda's era.

Moto's (2001) recent book has appeared in this transformed political and literary climate. Its focus on literature in Chinyanja is particularly welcome, because Ross's review is confined to Malawian fiction published in English. Moto examines Chinyanja novels from their early representatives in the 1930s to more recent ones. Although he outlines Malawi's political context in the introductory chapter, his primary interest is not to compare literary practices in the 'old' and 'new' Malawi.² Instead, he weaves his narrative around 'Christian propaganda' (Moto 2001: 178) in early novels, and the 'fall' of more recent writers into Malawi male writers' trap' which makes them portray 'women characters in a socially and culturally predetermined stereotyped way' (Moto 2001: 14). Hence although Moto does not explicitly relate his analysis to political changes in Malawi, his choice of gender stereotypes as a central theme clearly resonates with publicly voiced concerns in the new Malawi. His capacity to act as a prime arbiter of Chinyanja literature, already suggested by his position as Principal of Chancellor College, is also revealed by the facility with which Ross (1998: 173) appears to endorse this sweeping statement: 'We still have to come across a story that treats the woman character as a whole person in her own right and not only as a tangential individual who cannot lead a free independent life' (Moto 2001: 58).³

In this article, I challenge Moto's sweeping statement by focusing on the author to whom Moto devotes Chapter Four in his book. The author is Willie Zingani, who published a number of popular short novels in the 1980s, of which the two I discuss here were both originally published in 1984. Both novels – *Madzi Akatayika* (When Water is Spilt) and *Njala Bwana* (Hungry, Sir) – have been reprinted several times, and they are still widely available in Malawi. Zingani was trained as a journalist and worked for various media outlets before becoming President Muluzi's Press Officer in the new Malawi. He is not, therefore, a marginal figure who is put into an immediate danger of ostracism by Moto's criticism of the novels he wrote as a young man. Moreover, it appears that Moto and Zingani share similar party political leanings. Since I have no evidence of personal grudges between them, I concentrate on the novels and the arguments in Moto's critique in their own right.

I agree with Moto's misgivings about 'didactic inclinations' (2001: 182) in Zingani's novels. The author's eagerness to deliver moral lessons frequently impairs the development of his narratives. On the other hand, it is likely that Zingani never intended these novels as high literature, and their perspectives on adolescents and young adults, colloquial language and inexpensive prices have ensured them a prominent place in Malawi's popular culture market, with students and other youths as their primary readers. Moto, however, feels able to end his chapter on Zingani with the words, 'the plots are so simple and so straightforward that they fail to engage seriously the minds of more serious readers' (2001: 94). Moto, presumably one of the 'more serious readers', thus carves out a niche for himself as an authoritative arbiter, but my analysis below

shows that his interpretations must be understood within their own political context. A certain political expediency informs the exposure of gender stereotypes. This is especially evident when, as I show, the exposure actually omits crucial details in a narrative. Far from stimulating debate on gender relations, the critic precludes the potential for imaginative readings of literary works.

3. Gender Relations in Two Chinyanja Novels

3.1. *Madzi Akatayika: Responsibility, Respect and Gender*

Moto's synopsis of *Madzi Akatayika* reads in full as follows:

The main characters of *Madzi Akatayika* are Mayamiko Tionenso, Esnati Mbewe and Alufeyo. Mayamiko Tionenso and Esnati Mbewe fall in love after an initial encounter on a night bus as they travel to their respective secondary schools. The two never marry. Josaline, a fashionable city girl, spoils the proceedings and Mayamiko Tionenso abandons Esnati Mbewe who in a twist of luck marries Alufeyo, Mayamiko's house servant. Consequently Mayamiko Tionenso gets deranged whereas Josaline disappears without trace into the abyss of a nameless city life. The story is told in the first person singular by Mayamiko Tionenso from the confines of a prison where Mayamiko is serving a twelve year term for attempted suicide. (Moto 2001: 90.)

This overly compressed account of the story begs several questions, such as how Mayamiko and Esnati fall in love, how Mayamiko starts seeing Josaline and how she subsequently expresses her reason for rejecting him, how Esnati and Alufeyo organise their domestic relations, and how success in formal education may not guarantee happiness. As my analysis below indicates, such questions are crucial to a proper understanding of the author's objectives in writing this novel and can pave the way for a challenging debate on gender relations. Moto's criticism, on the other hand, is unlikely to inspire debate in which the complexities of the novel, and thereby the complexities of the gender relations it depicts, leave readers with the feeling that they have learnt something new. By giving short shrift to detail, Moto is able to claim that 'Zingani has a scheme to accomplish' (2001: 92) and that '*Madzi Akatayika* through its female characters documents Malawi's well entrenched male cultural subjectivity' (2001: 91).

Moto's understanding of the ways in which 'the gender subjectivity of the male writer' (2001: 91) is asserted in the novel becomes clear when his interpretations of two issues are considered. On the one hand, Zingani's novel depicts differences in educational and occupational trajectories among men and women. On the other hand, it provides accounts of how intimate relationships between men and women are initiated and abandoned. In addressing the first issue, Moto correctly reports that the protagonists' educational and professional aspirations are clearly gendered. While preparing for their final secondary-school exams, Mayamiko and Esnati discuss their ambitions (see Zingani 1984a: 10). Mayamiko announces his plan to enter the university, whereas Esnati settles for a teachers' training college. Mayamiko's question *bwanji*

osakachita za unamwino kapena za usekelitare? (why not to pursue a nursing or secretarial course?; Zingani 1984a: 10) is a further indication of the expected career paths among female students. Esnati explains that she wants to acquire the same profession as her late mother. Moreover, as an additional sign of modest aspirations, Esnati swears that she will teach in a rural primary school. Mayamiko, who anticipates an urban career as a personnel manager, tries to persuade her to consider employment in a city, but to no avail.

In order for such exchanges between the protagonists to become indices of 'the gender subjectivity of the male writer' (Moto 2001: 91), the critic has to omit mentioning the specific destinies that the author devises for his protagonists as the novel progresses. Not only is it, as Moto does mention, Mayamiko who ends up serving a prison sentence after a suicide attempt; the story also involves his visit to Esnati's house several years after their separation (Zingani 1984a: 27-31). It becomes an occasion for Mayamiko to witness the domestic harmony that Esnati has been able to achieve with Alufeyo, Mayamiko's former servant. Despite teaching in a remote rural school, Esnati has found some measure of prosperity, with Alufeyo regularly travelling to a lake in order to buy fish that he sells in a nearby town. As an indication of their relative prosperity, Alufeyo travels in a car that the couple have bought themselves. It begins to dawn upon Mayamiko that Esnati has provided the capital for Alufeyo's fish business, probably by using the money that a court ordered Mayamiko to send to her to assist in maintaining the child they had conceived before separating. Mayamiko, who intended to propose again to Esnati, escapes at night without meeting Alufeyo, only to hang himself on a tree in a failed suicide attempt.

After these crucial details, 'the gender subjectivity of the male writer' (Moto 2001: 91) appears rather more complicated than what Moto's criticism allows. Esnati, a woman, is the one who provides Alufeyo, a man, with enough capital to start a business. The result is that Alufeyo, Mayamiko's one-time servant, finds himself in a better position sexually, socially and economically than Mayamiko, who has gone much further in formal education. Moreover, it is in contrast to Mayamiko's demise that Esnati's choice of career must be analysed. Moto claims that 'in precluding university education for Esnati, Zingani is condemning her to an inferior social and economic position' (2001: 92). Yet it is the way a person plays his or her cards, Zingani appears to convey, that matters. Indeed, the very fact that Esnati chooses to become a rural teacher rather than some more fashionable professional in a city can be read as an index of her moral integrity. Malawi is a predominantly rural country where the vast majority enter formal education through primary schools in rural areas. Esnati's choice goes against the grain of class differences that educational success seems to foster. It gains particular relevance in present-day Malawi, where the introduction of free primary education has created a glaring shortage of qualified teachers.

Another issue that Moto uses to illustrate Zingani's fall into 'the Malawi male writers' trap' (2001: 14) is the way in which intimate relationships are initiated and abandoned. Zingani has Mayamiko, who is the main protagonist, to fall in love with two women. Moto does not describe the process leading up to the first love affair at all, whereas the second comes to represent Zingani's desire to portray the woman as a 'cannibal and destroyer of societal equilibrium' (Moto 2001: 93). Attention to detail, however, furnishes again a very different interpretation. While the story's female characters are certainly invested with their own interests, Zingani does not assign to them the responsibility for Mayamiko's downfall. The male protagonist is in charge of his destiny and faces his sad fate as a result of his own actions. The author provides enough detail to conclude that the female characters, while not always entirely pleasant personalities, have morally defensible reasons for acting as they do.

Mayamiko's first love affair is with Esnati whom he first meets on a bus as they are returning to their respective secondary schools after a holiday. After an increasingly friendly conversation, Mayamiko decides to ask her to be his girlfriend. Esnati's response is sharp: *Kunena zoonna ife ndife ana asukulu chomwecho sibwino kumayamba kusokonezana maphunziro* (the truth is that we are schoolchildren, so it is no good to start confusing each other's studies; Zingani 1984a: 5). Mayamiko makes an effort to persuade her to accept him, but Esnati replies in no uncertain terms: *Ndisiye nditsirize sukulu, nthawi yatha kale apa, udzangoyamba kundilepheretsa mayeso akubwerawa* (leave me alone, I must finish the school, the time is short, you'll only make me fail the coming exams; Zingani 1984a: 5). It is clear that Esnati is the more responsible one between the two adolescents, mindful of the importance of schooling and what a love affair can do to damage her future. After the initial encounter, Mayamiko persists and writes her two letters, the first of which she replies by refusing him again and asking him to stop sending letters, while to the second letter she writes no response at all, although, as Mayamiko discovers later, it also reaches her.

It is only after several months when Esnati finally begins to show interest in Mayamiko. She comes by chance to watch a football match where Mayamiko impresses her with his skills as a goalkeeper. The two chat after the match, and her heart begins to melt when she realises that Mayamiko is an orphan like herself. Esnati clearly carries a loving memory of her mother, as her choice of career also demonstrates. This encounter marks a turning point in the lives of the two adolescents, and they gradually become lovers. Because Esnati's training as a teacher takes a shorter time than Mayamiko's university education, she actually supports him and his younger brother financially before Mayamiko finds employment. Esnati's responsible character gets thereby further accentuated, underscoring Mayamiko's own role in unleashing the subsequent tragedy. The title of the novel alludes to the Chinyanja proverb

madzi akatayika saoleka (spilt water cannot be gathered again). It is Mayamiko who spills the waters of good fortune.

Moto introduces the other love affair in Mayamiko's life with almost equally scant attention to detail. He does not, for example, find it necessary to mention that Zingani describes how Mayamiko dates several young women before asking Josaline to come with him to a cinema: *Lero kupita ndi uyu, mawanso wina* (today going with this one, tomorrow with another; Zingani 1984a: 15). While Mayamiko works in town and secretly dates other women, Esnati teaches in a rural school and contributes money to their wedding preparations. By omitting Mayamiko's indulgence, Moto is able to accuse Zingani of representing Josaline as 'the embodiment of shameless greed' (Moto 2001: 93). Yet in the actual story Josaline only reluctantly accepts the date with Mayamiko, pointing out that his reputation as a womaniser frightens her: *Kodi iwe sudziwa kuti asungwana m'tauni muno mumaopsa chifukwa cha zibwenzi zanu. Kupanda kuchenjera munthu utha kungozindikira wamenyedwa* (don't you know that you scare girls in this town because of your love affairs. If one is not careful one just gets beaten up; Zingani 1984a: 15).⁴

While of a clearly different social class than Mayamiko and Esnati, Josaline is a far more complex character than what is suggested by Moto's description of her as 'the embodiment of greed' who 'places material welfare over other human concerns such as care, love, peaceful coexistence and understanding' (2001: 93). True, Josaline manipulates the class differences between her and Esnati once she has become interested in Mayamiko: *Nanga munthu wa digiri ngati iweyo nkumatenga mkazi wophunzitsa ku pulayimale sukulu, masekilitarefe sukutiona?* (a person with a degree like you taking a primary school teacher, don't you notice secretaries like us?; Zingani 1984a: 17). Yet Josaline is also the daughter of Phiri, a rich man who appears in her discourse as her beloved and respected father. When Mayamiko explains to her that they have to discard their plans of a white wedding because the court case with Esnati has depleted his savings, Josaline's response does not reflect mere greed. The honour of her family is at stake, and she declares to Mayamiko that *ine mwana wa a Phiri sindingachite chikwati chapansi chomwecho* (I the child of Phiri cannot have a poor wedding like that), adding that *makolo anga sangakondwere ndi chikwati chotero* (my parents will not be happy with a marriage like that; Zingani 1984a: 20). She even suggests that Mayamiko returns to Esnati, because he has 'already spoiled her' by making her pregnant (*wamuononga kale*; Zingani 1984a: 20).

The fact that Moto finds in Josaline an embodiment of greed reveals his own criticism as a literary product of a particular period. His criticism is not so much attuned to exploring the possibilities of interpretation as to illustrating currently influential ways of criticising 'the gender subjectivity of the male writer'. My alternative interpretation shows how much detail is lost when a critic follows such a politically expedient path. The characters of Zingani's

novel may not be fully developed, but the students of African literature need not be engrossed only in its faults. As I have indicated, the more they draw upon the novel's details in their interpretation, the more they are likely to appreciate the complexities that the author wants to convey. And the more they appreciate complexities, the more nuanced will their debate on real-life gender relations be.

3.2. *Njala Bwana: Appearances Deceive*

Moto's misgivings about Zingani's narrative skills are more pertinent in the case of *Njala Bwana*. The novel is ostensibly about the need to combat prejudices against mentally ill persons. The story is told in the first person singular by Mose Msungwi, a young journalist who on his way to a holiday in the village encounters a mother with a deranged adult son. After establishing that his parents and the woman were once neighbours, Mose decides to escort them to their village. Zingani's description of Mose's visit is not well-integrated into the rest of the story. The visit involves a conflict with a man called Kapitao who steals Mose's shirt when they share the same room. It is not clear how this incident contributes to the central theme of Mose's discovering the madman's true identity. Yusufu Nyondo, the madman, turns out to be an intelligent person who obtained university education abroad and taught English in a university at home before becoming insane. Yusufu's mother professes ignorance about the cause of his illness, but Mose is later told by Yusufu's former fiancée that a healer urged Yusufu to kill his mother through sorcery in order to become rich. Yusufu became deranged when this evil plan failed.⁵ Long after Mose's visit a madman begins to frequent his neighbourhood in town. The madman saves Mose's child from being bitten by a dangerous snake. Before Mose manages to properly thank him, the news arrives that the madman himself has died. The final twist of events is that Yusufu's former fiancée tells Mose that the madman was actually Yusufu. He had become a destitute after his mother's death.

Moto's main criticism of *Njala Bwana* concerns its portrayal of women. He discerns three contexts where women are portrayed and, as with *Madzi Akatayika*, finds them all biased towards male perspectives. The first context is the widowhood of Yusuf's mother. Moto (2001: 85-86) stresses suffering as the essence of her experience, misfortune caused not simply by the death of her husband and the illness of her only child. 'Her suffering is caused by a crime she did not commit, namely being a woman', Moto (2001: 86) announces, conveying her weakness, as seen from a male perspective, as the main obstacle to surviving the loss of male support. Yet although her husband's death and her son's illness must have been great tragedies, Zingani also furnishes details that indicate her resilience and resourcefulness as a single mother. During his visit to her village, Mose is impressed by its cleanness and by her own house (Zingani 1984b: 32-33). He learns that she had built the beautiful house with the money she had inherited from her late husband. She also serves tea to Mose,

joking that he must not think that only townspeople can afford tea. Such narrative details hardly warrant the conclusion that the author wants to portray the widow as a pitiful soul facing untold suffering. Coupled with the fact that her efforts actually contributed to Yusufu's success in education, these details can more plausibly be interpreted as a celebration of what a single mother can achieve. Society may well favour males, but strong women like Yusufu's mother, Zingani appears to say, can be achievers against the odds.

It is also highly significant that Yusufu's madness derives from the suggestion that he should kill his mother. Time and again, ethnographic research in sub-Saharan Africa has discovered that suspicions and accusations of witchcraft and sorcery thrive amongst intimate relationships (Geschiere 1997; Moore and Sanders 2001). Witchcraft is the obverse of the moral order in which persons prosper because of their mutual care and trust. The fact that a healer asked Yusufu to kill his mother rather than some other relative indicates the special esteem in which mothers are held among Chinyanja-speaking peoples, most of whom trace their descent matrilineally. Their oral traditions have included mythical female ancestors, and the saying *mayi wako ndi Mulungu wachiwiri* (your mother is the second God) is still common (cf. Linden with Linden 1974: 5-6; Schoffeleers 1992: 33-34). Although this cultural background in no way precludes male dominance in contemporary political and economic contexts, it is necessary for understanding the true horror of Yusufu's apparent intent. The price of even contemplating to kill the mother is madness, a personal catastrophe that ruins everything that his illustrious education and career have been able to give him. Far from being inherently disadvantaged by the 'crime' of being a woman (cf. Moto 2001: 86), Yusufu's mother appears as a formidable figure of both moral virtue and mystical force.

The second context where Moto criticises Zingani's portrayal of women is when Mose discusses expectations of marriage with Kapitao, his room-mate during the visit. The two young unmarried men express, according to Moto, 'the stereotyped expectations the males have of the woman' (2001: 86). Kapitao's comments on women's skills in cooking and other domestic chores seemingly represent gender stereotypes (see Zingani 1984b: 23). Yet the reader can gain new insights into gender relations if he or she examines the specific context in which the author carries on this conversation. Mose and Kapitao argue as much about the differences between town and country life as about women. When Mose claims that a woman who does not know how to cook can find a partner to marry, Kapitao comments: *Nanga kugona kwa anthu am'tauni sikumeneko, mukamafuna mkazi woti mumukwatire mumayang'ana kavalidwe kake. M'midzitu chinthu choyamba ndi ntchito zake, zina zonse pambuyo* (that's the stupidity of townspeople; when you look for a woman to marry, you look at how she dresses. The first thing in villages is her work, everything else comes after; Zingani 1984b: 24).

Such an exchange, far from resting on one uniform 'male subjectivity', is an argument about a wide range of issues: appearances and actual conduct; whether aptitude for domestic chores should define a woman's marriageability; and whether village life is superior to town life. Such issues are bound to resonate with many Malawians' concerns, at present no less than when *Njala Bwana* was first published. Malawi is a predominantly rural country, but various political and economic factors have made the rural-urban connection both increasingly salient and increasingly contested since the late 1980s (Englund 2002b). To dismiss this passage in the novel as 'the stereotyped expectations the males have of the woman' is not only to confuse negative attitudes in society with the author's own intentions. It also erases the possibility of a complex interpretation that addresses some of the contradictions that contemporary Malawians grapple with on a daily basis.

Moto's haste in dismissing Kapitao's view on women as a stereotype is prejudicial to interpretative possibilities. Just as Yusufu's mother can quite plausibly be interpreted as a figure of resourcefulness and hope rather than as a loser in a male-dominated society, so too can Kapitao's comment on women's work be read as an indication of what constitutes respect. The view may be 'traditional', but once enmeshed in ongoing Malawian debates on gender roles, it becomes irrevocably contemporary in a battle of values and interests. Kapitao juxtaposes his appreciation of work with 'the way a woman dresses' that seems to be the priority for men in town. The readers of Zingani's novel would benefit from considering whether Kapitao wishes to portray women as objects at all – or whether objectification is more likely a feature of the 'modern' life-style that he appears to criticise. Once again, such interpretative possibilities resonate with findings in African cultural studies based on the ethnographic method. Conviviality in social relationships continues to build on very mundane work that is often gendered (see Nyamnjoh 2002). It is a characteristic of post-colonial Africa that this gendered work can be seen as both a 'traditional' burden and the very foundation of women's dignity (see Ogden 1996; Ribohn 2002). Arguments and counter-arguments proliferate as identities and the contexts for claiming them are transformed. Novels like *Njala Bwana* offer students of African cultures insights into such realities.

Moto's third context for criticising Zingani's portrayal of women in *Njala Bwana* is Yusufu's former fiancée Lisungu Mwimba. As Moto (2001: 87) notes, she appears rather late in the novel, and Zingani probably misses an important opportunity to develop his narrative for this reason. Lisungu is, however, a fascinating addition to the novel's cast of female characters. In Moto's words, she shows 'that women can achieve and do what is "normally" expected of men in Malawian society' (2001: 87). Lisungu has, as Yusufu's mother explains to Mose, a superb occupation in town,⁶ and she gives Mose a ride from the village in her own beautiful car (Zingani 1984b: 36-37). Moto mentions these details, but gives more weight to what Lisungu says in response

to Mose's question of how long it will take for them to reach the town: *Kuyendetsa kwa amuna ndi tsiku lathunthu, koma ife akazi ayi timayamba kugonera pa Nyambalo. Kuchoka apo mawa chakum'mawa ndiye kuti tidzikafika pakati pa usiku mawalo* (it takes men a day, but we women sleep at Nyambalo. After leaving very early in the morning, we arrive at midnight of the following day; Zingani 1984b: 37). Here, Moto comments, 'Lisungu, a woman, is made to reveal that she agrees that women are weaker than men' (2001: 87).

To end the interpretation of Lisungu's character with such a comment not only pre-empts discussion on whether women's caution in driving, as suggested by Lisungu, is necessarily a sign of weakness. It also fails to build on the very striking features of Lisungu's character that challenge existing gender stereotypes. She is clearly an independent woman, affluent and intelligent, and yet her visit to Yusufu shows that she has not abandoned him despite his madness. The highly intriguing mix of compassion and independence becomes particularly remarkable towards the end of the novel, when Lisungu informs Mose that the madman who saved his child and soon thereafter died was Yusufu. Mose had already buried the madman, but Lisungu insists on giving him a substantial amount of money for preparing a decent grave for Yusufu. The last page of the novel contains Lisungu's solemn promise: *Kutereku ine maganizo okwatiwa ndilibe chifukwa mwamuna yemwe ndidamukonda ndi mtima wonse ndi amene wafayu* (thus I do not have any plans to marry, because the man I loved with all my heart is the one who died; Zingani 1984b: 47).

Who, if not Lisungu, can challenge readers of African literature to rethink their gender stereotypes? Here is a 'modern' woman who does not simply become another stereotype, a cold and manipulative urban *femme fatale*. Lisungu achieves a measure of economic and sexual independence, but she never becomes too proud or greedy to forget her deranged former fiancée in the village. Her closing words at Yusufu's grave, quoted above, assert her own choice in shaping her future – *she* does not have plans to marry, even if suitors will appear in the future. Moto's complaint that in Zingani's novels 'the woman... has no choice of whether to get married or remain single' (Moto 2001: 86) encounters a severe challenge in Lisungu's character. Why does not Moto pursue the interpretative possibilities that such characters open out? Why does he accuse Zingani of having 'a scheme to accomplish' (Moto 2001: 92) instead of exploring the narrative details and contexts in his novels? Since, as mentioned, I have no evidence of personal grudges between the two Malawians, I have to conclude that Moto himself has a scheme to accomplish. It is a scheme to expose gender stereotypes at whatever cost, a scheme dictated less by an appreciation of literature than by the critic's eagerness to align himself with political reforms in the country. The effect is not entirely unlike a witch-hunt; the righteous must find and expose culprits in order to demonstrate the high-mindedness of their cause.

The cost of such a scheme has become evident in the above analysis that attempted to do justice to literary works by giving attention to their narrative details. It may not be high literature, but *Njala Bwana* offers important food for thought to its primary audience: students in secondary and tertiary institutions in Chinyanja-speaking areas. My analysis above shows that, if led by a teacher who is prepared to take into account as many details in the novel as possible, all students, not only the Chinyanja-speaking ones, can have an enlightening debate on a whole range of topical issues, including complex gender relations.

The crux of the novel can be summarised by the saying 'appearances deceive', *maonekedwe amapusitsa* in Chinyanja. Yusufu is no ordinary madman, and he later saves Mose's child when 'normal' persons are too scared to chase the snake away. Before Yusufu's heroic act occurs and his true identity is revealed, Mose has a confrontation with the madman. It is Mose's wife who asks him to be more lenient towards the madman: *Kodi inu mwaiwala kuti tonse tidalengedwa ndi Chauta? Simudziwa kuti amisala nawonso ndi anthu monga ifeyo?* (have you forgotten that all of us were created by God? Don't you know that mad people are human beings like us? Zingani 1984b: 42). These questions, coming from Mose's wife, not only further nuance gender relations in *Njala Bwana*, they also gain special significance in the light of Mose's role as a Sunday school teacher in a local church (Zingani 1984b: 41). Such intricacies, playing with appearances and essences, are irrevocably lost when the novel becomes a target of politically expedient criticism.

4. State Feminism and Interpretative Possibilities

If Moto and I are able to arrive at completely different interpretations of gender relations in the two novels, what can be the source of our differences? There is no reason to doubt the extent to which both of us want to see Malawi's current democratisation played out in the transformation of gender relations. Yet Moto uses literature to illustrate the pervasiveness of negative attitudes in society,⁷ whereas I have identified in Zingani's novels possibilities to imagine gender relations as complex social and cultural facts. I have suggested that Moto's interpretations must be understood as products of a particular political context. My status as an outsider in that context may account for my interest in complexity. Moto, on the other hand, has a considerable stake in the new Malawi. Not only is he the incumbent of an important public office; he is also known to have commercial interests in Malawi as a private entrepreneur. Although its rhetoric has changed, Malawi's political elite has not suddenly become more receptive to critical discussion. It is the task of state-sponsored intellectuals like Moto to support the prevailing rhetoric.⁸

Lest my argument is seen to suggest that my interpretations are unproblematically more 'objective' than Moto's, the difference in our interpretations must be theorised. Even if interpretations can never be unequivocally objective, some are better than others. I submit that the ultimate arbiter must be

the literary work itself, its details and complexities. An interpretation that omits many of those details is necessarily more suspect than the one that builds its thrust on them. Theoretically, the impact of the political context on Moto's interpretations derives from a *closure* that state feminism imposes on the imaginings of gender relations.⁹ Interpretative closure, not interpretative possibilities, informs the literary criticism that serves the rhetoric of state feminism. It approaches literary works with a preconceived idea of what democratic gender relations are. Even more, state feminism as an ideological project *needs* negative examples in order to justify its proponents' positions of power. Hence my reference to a witch-hunt; amidst the shadows of Zingani's dark sexism the purity of Moto's attitudes shines like a candle.

It is beyond the scope of this article to assess the impact of Malawi's state feminism on women's position. Yet Moto's interpretations may be indicative of a particular kind of state feminism. It has been observed that state feminism has the greatest positive impact on women's citizenship when it is responsive to demands from society-based movements (Okeke-Ihejirika and Franceschet 2002). In Malawi, where Banda's regime effectively curtailed politically consequential associational life, women's movements and organisations have a very short history, hardly preceding the interest of the state in women's affairs. As such, it was less the pressure from society than from external donors that made Malawi's political elite adopt aspects of feminist rhetoric. As Mama has remarked, 'African governments have found it expedient to exploit the gender question so as to receive economic aid in an international climate that has become increasingly sympathetic towards women's demands for equality' (1995: 38). State feminism in Malawi, in other words, is a response more to the changing conditions of development aid than to the specific challenges in Malawian social and cultural context. Moto's interpretations are an example of its impact on understanding gender relations in Malawian literature.

Whereas contemporary feminist theory has come to embrace considerable diversity through the contributions of non-Western women (Imam 1997: 16), the state feminism represented by Moto turns a blind eye to the specific historical setting in which it claims a position of authority. It builds on imported orthodoxies that rebuke difference while failing to recognise how its approach to gender equality does little to address structural disadvantages. The major cleavage is thought to be between women and men, and men's evident domination in public life needs to be qualified by women's equal opportunities. While this type of state feminism may lead to positive initiatives in education and recruitment policies, its fundamental error is to view women as a unified category (cf. Sow 1997: 47). Class and generational differences are thereby erased, and literary criticism becomes a matter of establishing whether authors allow women to have the same opportunities as men. Hence Moto is disappointed when Zingani makes Esnati in *Madzi Akatayika* opt for the modest career as a primary school teacher, and when Lisungu in *Njala Bwana* claims that women

are slower drivers than men. According to Moto's feminism, women as a category are disadvantaged unless they follow exactly the same paths as men. Paradoxically, what men do becomes the measure of success, and feminism consists in women's attempts to reach the standards defined by men. Alternative standards become inconceivable.

My reading of Zingani's novels has indicated the importance of class and generational differences for women's options in life. In *Madzi Akatayika*, for example, Josaline comes from a wealthy family and is able to be selective about men. In *Njala Bwana*, the madman's mother is a mature person who has been able to achieve a comfortable life despite the tragedies in her family. The novels can, therefore, contribute to our appreciation of multiple contradictions which, as Nfah-Abbenyi puts it, are 'valuable and empowering tools necessary to subverting gender(ed) dichotomies and exigencies' (1997: 34). Another kind of feminism begins to emerge when the critic sees beyond dichotomies to complex and contradictory trajectories that novels allot to both women and men (see Aegerter 2000). Ethnographic research, as I have shown, can also assist in imagining the interpretative possibilities that novels open out. The gender dichotomy between men and women has been revealed as culturally relative, with ethnographic evidence from Africa and Melanesia pointing to the ways in which persons have embodied elements of both genders (see Strathern 1988; Oyèwùmí 1997). Much as contemporary Africans view their relationships through the gender dichotomy, such insights may provide more tools for resisting interpretative closure in literary criticism.

Some critics fear that attention to complexity and contradiction serves to dilute the political dimension of literary criticism. It has been claimed that this kind of attention, apparently influenced by post-structuralist and post-colonial theories, obscures, in turn, insights into difference in such critical approaches as Marxism: 'post-colonial normativity inheres in its claim to discover complexity and difference hitherto submerged by totalizing axioms' (San Juan 2002: 222). My aim is not, however, to propagate 'post-colonial normativity' but to engage with a particular type of feminism that constricts both literary and political debate. An exposure of interpretative closure in the state feminism represented by Moto's criticism is an exposure of power relations. While Moto claims to expose gender stereotypes, his reading of Zingani's novels is based on a narrow understanding of gender relations and their accompanying imbalances of power. In the dichotomous world-view of state feminism, the more a woman is like a man, the more she is liberated. Genuinely critical questions remain unanswered, or are not even asked, such as how this kind of feminism fails to distribute power beyond a tiny elite in most African polities, and why elite men should define the standards whereby emancipation and empowerment are measured. In their search for alternatives, critics, teachers and students have a lot to learn from the complex worlds of African literature.

5. Conclusion

It takes an open mind to realise the considerable potential of African novels to enrich classroom debate. If the aim is to seek imaginative perspectives on African historical and cultural processes, students and teachers can hardly expect novels to illustrate their preconceived ideas. It is through a careful examination of narrative detail that novels can be used as valuable learning materials. This requirement is complicated by the fact that literature in African languages often has to enter metropolitan classrooms through secondary sources, some of which are provided by self-appointed gatekeepers. In the absence of competing readings of African-language literature, the risk is that the gatekeeper's own objectives displace the actual contents of literary works. The result is that these works remain seriously 'underread' (cf. Harman and Meyer 1996), at worst read only as illustrations of ignorance, inequality and sexism.

Zingani hardly wrote his popular novels as contributions to feminism, but my analysis has shown how much they can advance classroom debates on gender relations. This potential is threatened by the fact that ours is an age of self-conscious gender politics whose impact is evident from development aid in the South to affirmative action in the North. Once institutionalised by a state whose democratic credentials are yet to be established, gender politics may entail few changes in the status quo, with its own arbiters of literary taste prescribing proper readings of popular fiction. Moto's interpretations of Zingani's novels are an example of political expediency in literary criticism, encouraged by the self-congratulatory rhetoric of a post-authoritarian regime and the expectations of its foreign sponsors. The problem with Moto's interpretations is not unlike the one he identifies in much Chinyanja literature; a 'didactic mission' (Moto 2001: 183) overrides the search for interpretative possibilities. The literary critic is eager to deliver a message, based on a particular view on gender relations. As Kishindo, another literary and linguistic scholar at Malawi's Chancellor College, has remarked about didactic literature, the result is that 'the message is all there is' (Kishindo 2001: 157).

Despite his criticism of the didactic element in Malawian literature, Kishindo takes a more sanguine view than Moto on its future. Whereas Moto ends his book by claiming that 'the future of Malawian literature/drama in whatever local language is not bright' and lamenting the paucity of 'enduring literature' (Moto 2001: 185), Kishindo points out the ultimate unpredictability of literary tastes: 'what may be judged "low quality" or plainly "bad" today might conceivably be regarded as beautiful in a different age' (Kishindo 2001: 168). Kishindo recommends that the arbiters of literary taste let popular literature in Malawian languages flourish. And flourish it will, at least in Chinyanja, as attested by its output as short stories and poems in Malawian newspapers and as novels in the country's publishing houses. The challenge, for critics and students, is to develop an open mind that will enable them to gain insights into popular concerns and desires.

I conclude, therefore, with two lessons that this article suggests for interpreting African-language literature. The first is to desist from confusing an author's description of undesirable attitudes with his or her own convictions. The need is to examine carefully the uses to which these attitudes are put in a literary work. Is the author trying to describe something that is common in society, and what is, in the overall narrative framework, the purpose of that description? The second lesson follows from the first and concerns the respect for detail in literary criticism. While objective interpretations are not possible, it is necessary to assess the extent to which interpretations take into account the details that narratives provide. The more the critic notices details, the more his or her criticism is likely to resist interpretative closure. If the aim is to do justice to literary works, these two lessons probably apply to interpreting all literature. And yet they are never repeated often enough in a context where political expediency imperils literary appreciation.

Notes

1. Between 1968 and 1999, the official name of the language was Chichewa. Kamuzu Banda, Malawi's first president, changed the name of the language from Chinyanja to Chichewa as a part of his attempt to promote the Chewa identity as the core of Malawian culture (Vail and White 1989; Kishindo 1994; Kamwendo 2002). After the political change in 1994, despite moves towards changing the name back to Chinyanja, particularly in the domain of education, the majority of Malawians continue to call the language Chichewa. The language is also widely spoken in Mozambique, Zambia and Zimbabwe, where it has always been known as Chinyanja.
2. Kishindo (2001) has examined Chinyanja/Chichewa literature in the context of the 'new' Malawi. His conclusion is similar to Ross's (1998), who also noted the continuing appeal of didactic stories revolving around intimate relationships. It appears that popular musicians have more directly addressed the promises and frustrations of the new era (see Chirambo 2002).
3. Ross refers to a draft of Moto's book, but nothing was changed in this passage for the published book.
4. When Zingani wrote the novel in the early 1980s, public discussion about HIV/Aids and other sexually transmitted diseases had not started. One can plausibly argue that, given the saturation of the current Malawian media and popular arts with warnings against HIV/Aids, Zingani's female characters would also voice concerns about sexually transmitted diseases if the novel was written today.
5. Although Moto reports that 'the mother refused to die' (2001: 85), suggesting that Yusufu did try to kill her, Zingani's text is more ambiguous at this point. It makes Yusufu's former fiancée say that 'nthawi ina yake akuti amafuna kulemera, chomwecho mlonda wa kuntchito kwake adamuza za sing'anga wina yemwe akuti amakhoza kulemeretsa anthu, koma atapita kumeneko adauzidwa kuti chizimba chake ndiye chakuti akaphe mayi wake. Atakana basi misala idayambira pomwepo' (one time when he wanted to get rich, a watch-man at his work told him

about a healer whom he said could make people rich, but when he went there he was told that he had to kill his mother in order to activate the medicine. When he/she refused, that's when the madness began; Zingani 1984b: 38). Because the subject prefixes in Chinyanja do not distinguish between the genders, it is impossible to ascertain who refused what in the above excerpt.

6. Yusufu's mother's words are: 'Ali kutauni komweku pantchito yapamwamba kwambiri' (she is there in town in a very high position; Zingani 1984b: 36). The expression 'ntchito yapamwamba' summons up the work as something 'heavenly' – pamwamba means 'in heaven'.
7. As I have mentioned, what Moto calls the 'Malawi male writers' trap' (2001: 14) is a central theme in his criticism and not presented only as Zingani's problem.
8. For accounts of how the new rhetoric has not displaced intolerance and intimidation in Malawi's political culture, see Kayambazinthu and Moyo (2002) and Mapanje (2002). As recently as in 2002, the popular singer Billy Kaunda received threats to his life after releasing the album Mwataya Chipangano (You Have Broken the Agreement) which is highly critical of Muluzi's government. As an incumbent of a public office and a prominent businessman, Moto therefore treads a politically slippery slope.
9. The critique of interpretations that effect a closure has been elaborated by post-structuralists, influenced especially by Derrida (1976). As my reluctance to accept Moto's interpretations indicates, I do not subscribe to the extreme relativism in some forms of post-structuralism. Nevertheless, post-structuralist insights into multiple subject positions are worth pursuing in feminist theory and practice (see Weedon 1997).

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