

Hopes and illusions of existence: the poetic voice in Bright Molande's *Seasons*

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Introduction

There is an elusive and illusive sense of existence prominent in human affairs. This is due to a tendency of life's patterns to end in tragedy. Some poets have tried to exhibit the existential meaninglessness and despair of life through their works. Amongst them is the Malawian poet, Bright Molande, who captures his experiences of the inexplicable sense of existence in *Seasons*, his first poetry anthology. As a country, Malawi has gone through different governmental systems from colonialism to dictatorship then democracy. Drawing on his society and human existence, Molande has crafted poems that suggest disillusion of post-independent freedoms, elusiveness of life in general and faint hope in humanity. This essay will centre on illusions of existence, in general, and broken hopes of democracy, in particular, as portrayed through some of the poems in Molande's collection. I argue that a noticeable tragic nature of existence portraying absurdity of life and the hope that comes with re/birth run through some of the poems.

Albert Camus has viewed life as absurd and meaningless. In his essay titled "Life is an Absurd" (2006: 546-551), he compared life to the myth of Sisyphus wherein God condemned man to roll a huge stone up a mountain, watch it roll back down and retrieve it and the process continues endlessly. In this sense, existence is seen as a struggle through life, pessimistic and void of hope. Agreeing with Camus, Thomas Nagel in his essay, "The Absurd" (2006: 555-562), illustrates that occasionally, most people feel the absurdism of life while others feel it vividly and continually. However, Nagel feels that the reasons that account for the feeling of absurdity are inadequate. Reading selected poems of Bright Molande one would see this sense of absurdity of life being portrayed, as a tragic nature of life experiences is expounded.

Tembo (2012: 35) has described most poems in Molande's collection as "traumatic poetry". He argues that Molande's work "offers a unique socio-

political, historical and psychological spotlight on the ‘fearful states and experiences’ that engulf Africa in general.” The “fearful states and experiences” that Tembo talks about are the ones that set the tragic tone of Molande’s poetry, in the sense that even situations that give humanity hope may, eventually, end in catastrophes. While the poetry does not state why life is tragic as such, it is highly eminent that the absurdity is intrinsic in life and is all-natural.

The illusion of human existence is a result of the recurrence of fortunes and catastrophes in life. As such, humans find themselves in a tragic state: where they expect to find tranquillity, they are sometimes un/naturally confronted with disaster. In his review of *Seasons*, Mpaka (2011:44) observed that there is “truth of the split nature of life as being frustrating as it could be rewarding run[ning] through the verses of *Seasons*.” This preceding observation about life explicated in *Seasons* sustains Nagel’s opinion in “The Absurd” that “there does not appear to be any conceivable world about which unshakable doubts could not arise” (2006: 559). The world experiences are mostly indeterminable, as the universe appears to be indifferent to humanity. As selected poems of Molande render a noticeable tragic tone of existence, some fragments, on the other hand, portray a faint hope that comes with re/birth.

The following discussion proceeds by examining the metaphoric significance of ‘seasons’ that informs the poems. The intention is to highlight how this concept, being the title of the collection, metaphorically informs the poems. I will discuss how the concept of ‘seasons’ becomes a running metaphor in order to explicate the subtlety and illusion of existence as life inevitably ends tragically. I will also discuss poems that connote illusions of democracy as a socio-political arena where humanity seeks the meaning of existence.

Allegory of seasons

For Molande, the idea of ‘seasons’ signifies an allegory of recurrence in nature. It also includes recurrent political eras that come with socio-political problems that Africa has to grapple with periodically. Human history is fleeting in that life affairs tend to fade quickly and recur later. Both good and bad situations come and go. Molande views these situations as “fleeting shadows never meant to last” (Molande 2010: v). The happiness that comes with birth is later in life overtaken by the sadness in death. Thus, laughter is superseded by mourning, a

year of bountiful harvest may be followed by a year of famine, the rainy season is followed by the dry season, while harvesting season is subsequent to planting season.

However, even if the seasons recur or supersede one another, the same seasons may bring different experiences. One hot season may be just a little hot while the other may be scorching. One rainy season may bring floods and hence, sadness, while another will bring a bumper harvest and complacency. The temporal nature of seasons and the differences in experience that the same seasons bring make the main spatial-temporal meaning of existence elusive.

Seasons are cyclic by nature. The sense of cyclicity comes in when we consider a conceived beginning and end of a season. This beginning and ending is a mere illusion, only made real by time markers within the cycle. In a circle, you start at a point, go round the circumference and eventually arrive back at the same starting point. A planting season may be conceived as the first and the harvesting season as the last. The seasons may also be viewed as points on a circle or cycles that have particular names or meaning. The cycle continues as seasons come into existence and go out of existence only to return at an appropriate time.

The cycle of situations coming into existence and going out of existence is intrinsic to life. Thus, existence can be interpreted as the alternation of 'death and life' with the tragedy condensed into a sense of 'death and life'. This persistent seasonality informs Molande's poetry with a sense of the persona being disillusioned and hopeful at the same time. This is because as life patterns give way to each other, and while some patterns are bad, others are good. These alternations of bad with good life patterns also give humanity hope even when going through a catastrophe as one anticipates rapture in the next season. To use a cliché, every cloud has a silver lining. Even the bad patterns give humanity a lesson and meaning to life.

The motif of birth/death/rebirth is recurrent in *Seasons*. "The Year of Floods" (2010: 70) is one of the poems that employ this allegory of seasons in detail, as it portrays the different experiences that the same seasons can beget. The first stanza reads:

It rains
And we bury
Our seeds in earth's womb

When your sperms from above
Slowly sink the womb
Dry seeds suddenly
Spring into life
Sprouting on the face of land
We harvest, eat, dance and tell stories.

This stanza intimates what happens at the onset of the beginning of a rainy season in the poet's tropical environment. It is in the present tense as it refers to habitual events. The metaphor; "When your sperms from above/ Slowly sink the womb" connotes rains coming from heaven while "the womb" refers to the earth. People jubilate after harvesting. This is a paradox: the earth acting as both a burial place to symbolise death, and as a womb from whence the dry seeds "spring into life" after they have been planted. This paradox suggests how birth is generated from death. "[W]e harvest" in summer after which we bury the seeds again (to symbolise death), thereby forming an eternal cycle.

The harvest image also connotes a cycle of planting, springing into life and then subsiding into death. Jones (1973: 145) describes harvest as "a culmination of the essential rhythm of life; the cyclic rhythm of the death of the seed, followed by growth, which in turn leads inevitably to death even in the harvest." Eating, dancing and storytelling accompany the harvesting season. Sometimes, it is not humanity that rejoices for a harvest, especially when mother earth is the one that harvests a soul.

The poem also exploits sexual imagery in saying that "It rains ... / When your sperms from above / slowly sink the womb". This exposes the idea that the season in question is that which brings life into the land. The comparison of rain to sperms sinking into the womb symbolises a cosmic mating and the process of fertilization to bring forth new life. Clearly, this stanza portrays images of seasons making a cycle through death and rebirth archetypes. The death archetype is symbolised by harvesting while planting signals the rebirth archetype. Generated life is alluded to in the stanza by the seeds "sprouting on the face of the land".

"The Year of Floods" intimates that seasons cannot be the same all the time, giving a sense of hope and disillusionment at the same time. The poem then presents us with a turn of events. We are informed: "But this year Chameleon and Lizard/ Exchanged laughters of joy and mockery" (2010: 70). The word

“this” serves to show that the season alluded to in this stanza is a particular rainy season that is going to come with a different experience from the usual rainy seasons. It is the word -“But”- that shows the “-turn of events” in this particular season.

The poem alludes to the Sena myth of how death was brought onto earth. The myth, about Chameleon and Lizard, says that while Chameleon was taking a message of humans’ choice to be immortal to God, Lizard with its swift running triumphed over Chameleon and delivered the message that humans have made a choice to be mortal. God implemented Lizard’s choice. As the myth alludes to death and life being at the disposal of God to decide, it leaves humanity in a tragic situation. God’s implementation of Lizard’s message, that man has chosen to be mortal, makes him responsible for the coexistence of death and life.

The poet has shown his fascination with the tragic state of human kind in most of his works. In his doctoral thesis titled “Postcolonial Tragic Vision in Steve Chimombo’s Writing” (2011: 6), for example, Molande has used tragedy in reading themes of violence, catastrophe, agony and bereavement in Chimombo’s works. Amongst other descriptions of what is tragic, he says, “tragedy confers dignity and value on human experiences of pain and suffering”, in addition to “...describ[ing] events that leave us horrified, emotionally devastated and terrified.” However, Rebecca Bushnell (2005: 1) presents a positive side of tragedy as she says that “tragedy can shape experience and history into meaning, and the shock of significance may have the power to transform us. [K]nowledge might emerge in the chaos of human suffering.” Thus, while the human mind is left to wonder what the truth of life is as its anticipations are not always realised, one must accept that tragedy is part of life. Life includes a progression of disenchantments from which we can draw lessons. Humans often transcend facticity which confines tragedy within itself. Within the progression of this world-weariness, they find a ‘soft focus’ that make them conclude that life is not a complete low down dirty shame.

The Lizard and the Chameleon, in “The Year of Floods” “exchanged laughters of joy and mockery”. These characters symbolise life and death respectively. Their reference in the poem highlights the juxtaposition of life and death. They mock each other because the messages that they brought are both manifested

in humanity. Neither Lizard nor Chameleon triumphed over the other, which implies that neither death nor life triumphs over the other.

“The Year of Floods” also intimates that the same seasons can present different experiences. It portrays that, contrary to the habitual experiences that come with rainy seasons, in a particular season,

It rained and we planted
and look!
there was life and beauty on the land
Chameleon ambled proudly from the benevolent ones
Hugging the message of life (2010: 70).

At the beginning of this cycle, people had hopes because when they planted “there was life and beauty on the land”. But as Chameleon was coming with the message of life “Lizard outpaced Chameleon/ And announced a message of death to the land” (2010: 70). This portrays the paradox of the very sense of existence that when we expect the good tidings that come along with seasons, life crumbles down. As such, the experiences become capricious such that man cannot draw the meaning of existence a priori. In addition, man cannot predict what is going to happen to him since the same seasons can be experienced differently in different cycles.

Humans in their nature meet tragedy when life has sprouted to a climax. The poem alludes to this catastrophe because when there was life and beauty on the land, Lizard came and announced a message of death. This turn of events, connotes the mysteriousness of life, and what Albert Camus (2006) calls ‘the absurd.’ We are punished for eternity to struggle in life only to fall back when we have achieved success just as “...in the mystery of time when life is made/ Paused, and delivered death” (Molande 2010: 71). On a broader context, this is to say that after life has been generated at a certain point in time we all die and then the meaning of life becomes obscure. It is as though the meaning of life lies in death itself and that existence is in itself a living death.

“The Year of Floods” has a contrast of tone to indicate the jubilation and mourning presented by the same seasons in different cycles. The contrast also pictures out the juxtaposition of death and life in existence. The poem concludes with “Today, death has spread her mat across the land/ She sits spreading her legs across the land” (2010: 70). This last stanza has a very hopeless tone in contrast

to the first stanza which has a gay tone. If death is all over and has spread her mat across the land, then, there is nothing man can do. Man is helpless. In the first stanza, we are presented with jubilation experiences of the first cycle, as people “harvest, eat, dance and tell stories.”

While the first cycle of seasons alluded to in the poem has given grounds for jubilation, the other cycles bring a different experience since there is tragedy. This is because in another cycle of seasons it rains and Lizard brings in a message of death; only for it to be followed by yet another cycle where “It rained and rained again” and the giant snake lying across the land “Sneaked into the village/ ... got pregnant with rage/ ...and delivered death” (2010: 70). Here, the persona alludes to the Napolo myth by referring to “the giant snake”. Napolo is “a subterranean snake believed to be responsible for landslides and floods” (Nazombe 1996: 93). According to Molande (2011: 33), the Napolo myth is often invoked when a disastrous event is of such impact that it confounds the human psyche beyond comprehension. There is a sense of grievousness beyond comprehension running through “The Year of Floods” from the fourth stanza as we are told that in this other season “the giant snake” uproots anything anchored by the land. In an agrarian society, like that of the poet, there is always a resuscitation of hope when rain falls. However, at times, the rain has unexpectedly brought tragedy as Napolo accompanies it. That is to say, sometimes things change and we meet catastrophes instead of the expected bliss. Thus, the paradox of life coming out of death and death coming out of life, hope and disillusionment going hand in hand indicates the tragedy imminent in existence and all life circles.

The elusiveness and illusions of existence

Life is a puzzle whose solutions tend to differ from individual to individual. As individuals, we have the right to choose what makes life worth living to us. Yet, even in that personal meaning, we tend to find a certain degree of emptiness upon achieving our dreams. It is natural for humanity to look forward to a bright, distant thought. It is however paradoxical that though complacency is rarely fully attained when that future comes, the very uncertainty of the future keeps our hopes alive. In essence, this creates void in humanity. “The Hollow Souls” (2010: 50) is a poem that alludes to the meaninglessness and despair that dog humanity. The “hollow[ness]” in humanity comes as a result of our yearning

for insubstantial things as we struggle to find the meaning of life, yet we end up lamenting the failure of our visions. In an epigraph to the poem, we learn that

(The American dream is to become a millionaire

And the African dream is to be an American) (italics in original).

The beginning of the poem shows that the persona, designated by “We”, tends to yearn for things he cannot attain: the American wishes to be a millionaire and an African wishes to be an American. To the persona, this creates “hollow” and “starved souls”. The persona intimates a sense of pessimism and voidness of hope where our leaning on dreams is described as ‘nothingness’ because of their insubstantiality. This is because when we attain those dreams we find that they are not as glamorous as they looked from afar. In the end, the persona pronounces, “(...*this should serve as a penny for the New Guy/ Who pinched money for a valentine’s card*)” (2010: 50; italics in original).

The title of the poem, “The Hollow Souls” is an allusion to Thomas Stearns Eliot’s “The Hollow Men” and Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*. The epigraph to Eliot’s “The Hollow Men” “Mistah Kurtz- He dead/ A penny for the Old Guy”, is itself an allusion to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and children’s action on Guy Fawkes Day in England (Murphy 2007: 254). Conversely, the epigraph to Molande’s “The Hollow Souls” “*The American dream is to become a millionaire/ And the African dream is to be an American*” (2010: 50) is an allusion to Fanon, who says in his treatise that “[t]he black man wants to be white. The white man slaves to reach a human level” (Fanon 2008: 3). For Fanon dignity is not about being the other but oneself with all that is intrinsic in you, just as Molande intimates in “The Hollow Souls” that the otherness perspective leads to emptiness of the spirit.

The poet has also alluded to “A penny for the Old Guy” in “*I thought this should serve as a penny for the New Guy*” (2010: 50). The significance of the movement from Fanon’s idea to Eliot’s is to merge the two observations. The poet wants to highlight that the African’s tendency to seek equality with the White man extends to what Eliot has thematised in “The Hollow Men” as ‘the emptiness of the human spirit’. Suffice it to say that Fanon’s and Eliot’s ideas must have fertilised the architect of the “The Hollow Souls”. This, however, substantiates what Molande has said in “Fragments” that “...we all borrow when we write/ What matters is to pinch creatively” (2010: 1). He has also

pointed out in his article “Moments of Rewriting” (2006: 95) that “...a single author’s writing needs to be understood within the notion of *intertextuality* in which texts echo each other because each text is in/formed by fragments or genes of prior texts...” This is a reflection on the idea that humans tend to recycle ideas. It has to be noted, however, that this recycling may happen either consciously or subconsciously.

The poem, “The Hollow Souls”, is satirical and the implication is that we want to copy the White man’s culture while alienating ourselves from our traditional norms and values, even when Fanon (2008) warns us that dignity is not located in seeking equality with the white man and his civilization. Most African nations perceive western values as the best and appropriate yet the Westerners themselves are not contented with what they have. We always view virtuousness in other people’s cultures. That is why Molande warns us – with structural echoes of T.S Eliot’s, “The Hollow Men” (Eliot 1963: 79) that

We are the hollow souls
We are the starved souls
Leaning on nothingness
Filled with froth (2010: 50).

The diction: “hollow”, “starved” and “nothingness” gives an image of emptiness which is the main idea that is being communicated in the poem. An empty choice or value is meaningless. The idea of emptiness runs throughout the poem as it says:

Our decanted voices,
Our own dried whispers
Rustling like a wind in dry leaves
Are hollow and meaningless
Dry like broken grass (2010: 50).

The diction makes ‘emptiness’ a leitmotif in the poem. The use of words like “hollow”, “starved”, “nothingness”, “froth”, “straw”, “decanted”, and “dried”, to denote loss of inner essence connotes emptiness. This suggests that our dreams in general are paralysed, hence they are meaningless.

As the imagery of emptiness recurs in the poem, it is then noticed that this emptiness has been created by either someone or something. The voices have

been “decanted” (emptied) and the “whispers dried”. This means that some essence has been removed from the voices and the whispers by someone or something. It is not natural emptiness. Humans are the architects of the “hollowness” of their spirits.

Since “The Hollow Souls” talks of dreams that people have, it can well be suggested that these dreams are the ones that make these voices “hollow and meaningless”. Humanity encompasses itself with frailties as it tries to find meaning in existence. This in turn has created a vain and empty worldliness in which man cannot fathom the meaning of existence.

The poet is so bewildered with cultural movement and the tendency of people to wish for things that are far from their own culture. As such, he questions in the second stanza of “Valentino” (2010: 51) that

Why should true love wait for some day?
Why should we wait for a season of the year
When bitches and cultural mongrels are in season?
Why should I really buy a diamond ring
To whisper that I love you?

It has become a culture in most African nations to copy and express love in western style. The natives are crazy on Valentine’s Day such that it is turning to be significant to express love on this day than any other day. Yet, this is one area that extends the spiritual emptiness of the modern man; “the New Guy” intimated in “The Hollow Souls”.

As well as being a foregrounding to “Valentino”, “The Hollow Souls” also anticipates “Holy Wedding of the Dead” (2010: 52) where because of holding on to trivia, we see the church asking Mukhito, “to find rings and all that” “-when he baited his heart and hooked love”, to have a holy wedding. But then poor Mukhito could not afford all this and he ended up hanging himself. The hollow dreams that humanity holds on to only lead to spiritual emptiness and make life meaningless to the extent that sometimes suicide becomes the option to curtail unfulfilled dreams and unmet expectations.

“The Hollow Souls” continues to explicate that the tendency of having choices and values in other people’s perspectives is what is killing us. The persona says: “O, may we rest in peace/... O please, may we rest in peace!” As the message

of “May we rest in peace” is meant for the deceased, the poet emphasises this deadness in humanity because of vanity. This is achieved by repeating the line and using an exclamation mark at the end of “O please, may we rest in peace!” The intention is to show that cultural movement is just one of the “fleeting shadows [that] are never meant to last” (2010: v). We are lured by the magnificence we imagine exists in the life we see from afar. But when we get to that life, it is not as blissful as we thought it to be and the realisation that life is an illusion is vivified.

At the end of the poem, the persona alludes to the penny for the Old Guy. For Eliot, the Guy is one of the hollow men just like Mr. Kurtz in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (Murphy 2007). Alluding to the “Guy” directs the message in the poem to men whose spirits are made hollow because of their ‘otherness perspectives’. This has an overtone that our dreams create a spiritual emptiness and that the illusions of life are there because we cannot accept our status but we cling to our visions and dreams.

In his “Preface” to *Seasons*, Molande has observed that our human tragedy arises because “we hug the shadows cast from the real things” (2010: v), as we dream of a world that has only been seen in pictures. “An African Tragedy” (2010: 27-28) is a poem in which the poet celebrates mysteries of a man’s place in the world and the wonder of the universe itself.

The long flight of the soul from Heathrow came to an end.
The home landing was well patronised and supervised,
Even a daughter born in my absence was here
To relieve the stranger from the boon of the ear-dogged books.

The poem starts with a reminiscence of the poet persona’s arrival into his society from abroad where he went to study for his Master’s degree. On arrival, he became conscious of the political turmoil and the other catastrophes that have struck his society. Amongst the catastrophes are deaths. However, there is also good phenomena like being welcomed by his daughter to whom he was a stranger as she was born “in his absence” (Tembo 2013). The persona also says that “it was [his] uncle who really plunged [him] home” (2010: 27). His uncle laments the deaths that occurred while the persona was away, and he takes him to visit village graves as a ritual. At the graves, he found that “lunatics, heroes, villains, clowns, / martyrs of the land...” (2010: 27) were gathered acting differently. Then he hears a gentle knock from within and voices from a

labour ward. Eventually, he realises that the voices are not real but “a knock of the wind”; for all he could hear from the delivery cave was

Groaning
Gasping for air,
Whispered fears
Sighs
Whispers
Whispered sighs (2010: 27).

Then he hears irate silence “As Africa keeps delivering/ astride hungry yawning graves”.

The poem makes use of the birth/death archetype to render the tragedy inherent in existence. So inspiring is the graphic imagery used to show the falling of lives and the terror that comes with death. The persona is told:

Since the day you left the village, we've been
falling
g e n t l y
spinning
flopping p
i
n
falling n
gently i
one by one n
like g
in
lonesome leaves the wind,
in the wind of death
down
to the bottomless graves (2010: 27).

The concrete form of the poem combined with the diction employed conveys not only a picture of falling leaves but also the dynamics of the actual movement

of leaves hence the subtleties of life. The persona employs a simile to compare the highest death rate of people in his society to the falling of leaves. Souls are being lost at a high speed like a movement on a slant to a bottomless pit.

“An African Tragedy” does not only allude to the tragic nature of existence but proceeds to explicate the paralysis of political headway. The allusion to politics in the poet’s collection is, as Mpaka (2011: 44) has observed, “probably, because the human condition is tied to how politics manages things.” The persona says that visiting the village graves he found

Kamuzu quietly squatted before a calabash,
Washing hands in steaming blood.
[...]
As Comrade Mugabe perched on a jagged tree stump
tearing raw flesh of those he saved.
After offering their bone, blood,
beer, and flour at the door of the shrine
Muluzi and Kibaki jumped into a drunken dance. (2010: 28)

The poem employs blood motif, as well as sacrifice and cannibalistic imagery that give this stanza a sombre mood. There is a direct reference of the blood motif on Kamuzu (who washes his hands in blood), and Muluzi and Kibaki as they make sacrifices. Kamuzu, Muluzi and Kibaki are some of African leaders who have been known to be intolerant to dissenting views. They even involved bloody acts in which some of their opponents could mysteriously go missing. The cannibalistic imagery in “tearing raw fresh” connotes Mugabe’s shedding of blood of those who are opposed to his views and ideologies.

The sacrifice imagery that is created as Muluzi and Kibaki offer their “...bone, blood, / beer and flour at the door of the shrine” shows that the democrats, Muluzi and Kibaki, were initially motivated to serve. Later, however, they got into a “drunken dance.” The drunken dance could be mistaken for a lunatic’s dance and is unpleasant to watch. The metaphor “Muluzi and Kibaki jumped into a drunken dance” refers to the selfish political policies the democrats later employed. The policies were meant to benefit them more than the electorate.

In his Preface to *Seasons*, Molande has indicated that in Kamuzu’s era many people were killed and that the same people who served Kamuzu “still dine with us in the camouflage of the best democrats”. In essence, the same old regime has

only changed name from tyranny to democracy. Democracy is only a name but the democrats are no different from the tyrants.

In contrast, the poem also alludes to real freedom fighters like Chilembwe and Mandela. We are told that

John Chilembwe knelt on a ragged rock, praying.

[...]

Mandela sat against a tree in the shadows, worriedly

Listening to the distant roaring whispers of death (2010: 27-28).

Chilembwe and Mandela are arguably the only personalities that had real concerns for their people as the poem intimates. Chilembwe is seen praying while Mandela worries over the death whispers that he hears from a distance. The juxtaposition of true freedom fighters (Mandela and Chilembwe) against those that repress and oppress their subjects (like Kamuzu, Mugabe, Muluzi and Kibaki) suggests the tragic nature of politics in African democracies. While some rulers may fight for rebirth or liberty, others will bring death as they unleash terror and shed blood of the innocents. This indicates two extreme characters operating in politics and makes the political arena illusive.

“An African Tragedy” concludes with the hope that people have upon birth. The persona hears “a gentle knock from within” and thinks that “Salvation must be at the foot of the door”. Such hope is what makes humanity wander from idea to idea; dream to dream hoping that tranquillity lies in new seasons. Without faith the world would have been a place of dejection as “The Last of the Seasons” (2010: 17) says that “...human life spins on the tip/ Of the index finger of faith, of trust!” Our faith in existence is so minimal even in the political arena where events are very contingent. The contingency is a result of the rulers having different degrees of commitment and lack of political will to take responsibility as stipulated in their codes of conduct.

The persona of “An African tragedy” is hopeless in the end as he says: “But ha-aah, it must be a knock of the wind.” Wind is very empty such that when it blows all that is expected of it is to blow away and dry things. And indeed this wind is drying the little hope the persona has even in birth for he says that all he can hear from the delivery cave is

Groaning

Gasping for air

Whispered fears

Sighs

Whispers

Whispered sighs

Suddenly_

Silence!

Furious silence! (2010: 27)

There is always hope in birth or rebirth. The lines above portray an imagery of a woman in labour which ends in silence instead of a cry of a baby to indicate a new life on earth. But the “Furious silence” indicates the futility of this trial to give birth, the labour in vain. It is indeed tragic for “Africa keeps delivering/ astride hungry yawning graves” (2010: 27). Most African nations try to change government in presumption that a change will make a difference. But the people get disillusioned as the new rulers bring in other socio-political ills.

The image of pre-dug graves ready to receive dead bodies created by the lines “As Africa keeps delivering/ astride hungry yawning graves” paints a picture that tragedy is inherent in life whether in political circles or existence. This makes our hopes to change government or improve in life futile. It shows that Africa is giving birth to death. There will always be room down the earth to take in as many lives as they fall. This is horrendous image but it is pregnant with the truth: the tragedy is inherent in nature and there is no escape.

By and large, as Molande explicates the tragedy in nature through death, it implies that though humanity will seek to find the reality of existence, they will not fully comprehend it especially if they rule out tragedy as part of it. But tragedy consists of death and catastrophes and death means non-existence, therefore life is a paradox in itself and existence will always be elusive. In addition existence becomes an illusion when our hopes and dreams keep on becoming empty as tragedy lingers.

Illusions of democracy

Democracy is a form of government under which the power to alter the laws and structures lies, ultimately, with the citizenry in Malawi as elsewhere.² It is a type of government in which the ruled participate in the decision making

process through representatives. Most African countries have gone through phases of colonialism, dictatorship and democracy. The poet's own country, Malawi, is one such example. These governing systems can be viewed as three different points on a circle with different names or three cycles of seasons at different times with different names.

According to Molande, some of the people who surrounded Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda, Malawi's dictator, acted as the worst executioners of dictatorship. Yet, the same people dined with the subjects in the camouflage of the best democrats (Molande 2010) in the democratic era. This trend makes dubious the achievement of true democracy and leads to an illusion of the system. The idea of illusiveness of freedom in Malawi's democratic era in Molande's poetry has also been explored by Nick Tembo in his argument that Molande uses his poetry to tease out elements of despotism in the first decade of Malawi's democracy which ran from 1994 .

Malawi had one of the most repressive and oppressive dictatorial regimes in Africa. When a democratic system replaced the tyrannical regime, people had expectations that the coming in of a new system of government would bring in a change in their lives. Disappointingly, the government that replaced dictatorship ended in a fiasco. It relapsed into a dictatorship as the views of the subjects were nothing but nonsense to the rulers. The democrats turned it into another cycle of oppression and repression. In Molande's view, the country had only successfully installed a body of democracy without the spirit of democracy (2010: vi). Such an experience of disenchantment has been crafted in "The Last of the Seasons."

"The Last of the Seasons" is a poem that recounts the faith that people had on the first years of democratic era in the poet's society. The omniscient persona reminisces the hope and trust that Malawians had at the onset of a new season, the democratic era:

In the beginning was all faith
And the faith was full with us
Without faith nothing was
For human life spins on the tip
Of the index finger of faith, of trust! (2010: 17).

Malawians had so much faith in those who were deemed to be democrats. This faith made people to trust that there was really going to be a change in their

lives and the running of public affairs. Unfortunately “seasons of hope came and slowly passed by” because this last of the seasons “In the end [...] was all death marauding footpaths” as it presented the people with a ghoulish nightmare (2010: 17).

It is evident in the poem that the period, referred to as the last of the seasons, is Bakili Muluzi’s regime. The view that this poem is analogous to Muluzi’s era is also shared by Tembo (2012: 3), who thinks that “the first two stanzas of [“The Last of the Seasons”] correspond to the two consecutive five year terms Muluzi served as [Malawi’s] head of state.” The regime was characterised by issues of women’s breasts and private parts being hacked off while children were being found dead with some of their body parts, like teeth, removed by whoever killed them. Muluzi’s regime was branded with stories of

Praying with skeletal vampires at midnight
Stealing children and chopping breasts of our mothers
To offer midnight sacrifices at the altar of power (2010: 17).

There were rumours in the era that the body parts were used for rituals in a cult which would help Muluzi to lure people into accepting whatever he wanted. This brought in disgruntled hopes in the subjects in the final years of Muluzi’s tenure of office.

At the onset of this season of democracy, people were hopeful that the oppression and repression that had been in the previous regime would die out with the ousting of the dictatorship. But the trusted democrats started behaving like “Nosferatu the Dracula / ... / Praying with skeletal vampires at midnight ... / In the end, it was all death marauding footpaths / [making] the last of the seasons [...] a ghoulish nightmare! (2010: 17).

Dracula is a vampire in Bram Stoker’s novel *Dracula*, who has been “Un-Dead” for several hundred years and keeps his vitality by sucking blood from live unsuspecting victims (Umland 1983). *Nosferatu* is a horrendous silent film by G.W. Murnau, which is almost a retelling of *Dracula’s* story. The image of “death marauding footpaths” vivifies the seriousness of the invasions of un/natural deaths into the society. Some deaths were naturally caused by pandemics like AIDS and all other diseases in addition to hunger that plagued the society. However, other deaths were unnatural as the democrats planned deaths over the opponents. In addition, it also paints a picture of weird and

traumatic experiences as well as the relapsing of the democratic era into the precarious and unwarranted behaviours of the previous regime.

The image of death is also stretched by the employment of the bloodsuckers archetype symbolised by “Nosferatu the Dracula”. The poet has imported “Nosferatu the Dracula” symbol into his poetry so that it can run concurrently with the western derived principles of democracy. People had hopes that the new people in power will change things for the better only to find out that they have started to behave like Nosferatu the Dracula yearning for the subject’s blood like vampires just like the previous tyrant.

The behaviour of blood suckers is eminent in the persona’s society such that different poets have made reference to the blood suckers archetype. Jack Mapanje has referred to them as “Beasts of Nalunga”. According to Mapanje, the “Beasts of Nalunga” are

Veiled as Vampires that suck
Ordinary people’s blood at
night, often with intricate
Intravenous tubing, leaving
behind invisible blemishes.... (Mapanje 2007)

The archetype of Nosferatu the Dracula can go hand in hand with the beasts of Nalunga, the myth of Chameleon and the Lizard and also Napolo which has been implicitly referred to as the ‘giant snake’ in “The Year of Floods” (2010: 70). The use of this archetype and the myth in the poem metaphorically refers to a sense of illusion that is presented by life patterns. There is such an illusion in life and politics as well that we do not attain what we expect. We are always presented with new experiences in these two spheres and the periods have manifested a tendency of relapsing into tragedy.

The poem mentions skeletal vampires. There can be no vampires without blood. Nosferatu the Dracula is also a vampire. As such, the diction of ‘Nosferatu,’ ‘Dracula’ and ‘vampire’ in the second stanza makes an implicit reference to the motif of blood. This motif gives a dark sombre tone to the poem, intensifying the horror and magnitude of disillusionment that accompanied the last five years of Muluzi’s, so called, ‘democratic rule’.

The use of the blood motif and the blood suckers archetype make the democratic era of the poet’s society illusive. It helps to paint the tragic situation that

democracy in the country relapsed to. The common wo/man was full of hope in the first years of democracy, only for them to be taken by the democrats back to the experiences of dictatorship which was full of stories of calculated deaths on those who opposed the government. As democracy failed and ended into tragedy, its meaning and essence was made illusive.

Conclusion

The discussion was aimed at exploring the elusive and illusive state of existence and socio-political affairs in selected poems from Molande's *Seasons*. It has demonstrated that in the anthology this state is expounded by showing that the sense of existence includes tragedy as an intrinsic ingredient and man cannot run away from it. This exposition of life as illusive and its meaning as elusive attest to the absurdity of existence.

The imagery of seasons in cycles recurs in the poems I have discussed, as Molande alludes to the recurrence of patterns in space and time. There is a repetition of history itself, the prospects of which are unpredictable and hence the monotony and illusions of human existence. The socio-political episode is just but one of the patterns where we find repetition of history.

On a socio-political level, the birth/ death cycle of seasons entails a cycle that begins with hope; and then the hopes become dashed as the rulers fail to stick to the codes of conduct. Dictatorship and democracy in Africa are almost the same seasons that have only recurred differently. When there is leadership change, the rulers in the new government just depart a little from the social ills that were responsible for the loss of popularity in the previous regime while creating other ills. It is as though the same seasons are experienced differently indicating a paralysis of political headway and the tragedy of democracy.

Using allegories of seasons and the birth/death/rebirth archetype, Molande has explicated the tragic nature of existence and life spheres like the socio-political arena. People fail to find the meaning of life because of the nature of humanity to hold on to fleeting thoughts and sensations. Situations are always phasing out and recurring later. If this fact -that tragedy is part of life- is accepted then the elusiveness of life will be minimised as people will accept situations as they come.

Notes

- 1 A group of Bantu people found in the southern region of Malawi. For details, see J. Matthew Schoffeleers & Adrian Roscoe, *Land of Fire: Oral Literature from Malawi*, (Blantyre & Limbe: Popular Publications, 1987): 23-24.
- 2 See, for example, *Government and Politics in Malawi*, ed. Nandini Patel and Lars Svasand, Zomba: Kachere Series, 2007.
- 3 See generally, Nick Mdika Tembo: "Beyond the dark veil: Hope and despair in Bright Molande's *Seasons*", *Journal of Poetry Therapy* 25.1, 2012 pp. 9-21.

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