Steve Chimombo. **The Basket Girl,** Limbe: Popular Publications, 1990.

The Malawian Writers Series now has a back-list of some twenty-nine titles with a strong emphasis on work in Chichewa. There have been problems since the first volume appeared in 1974, and it was only when looking through the list in the front of Steve Chimombo's novel **The Basket Girl** that I realized my name had been suppressed as the editor of **Nine Malawian Plays.** The collection is now credited, with a certain justice and a certain injustice, to "Seven Malawian Playwrights".

The Basket Girl began life as a short story in **Zed Magazine.** During 1987 and 1988 various chapters followed in **Impact** so that about half of the volume had appeared locally in separate episodes before the novel was published. Publication in magazines has been selected by many authors over the years and has the particular advantage of bringing literature within reach of a public prepared to buy magazines but not able to afford books.

The plot in the novel is summarised in the following blurb:

> What happens when a respectable gentleman [Winston], on a sudden impluse, stops at a disreputable place [Mtalikas View Bar], has one too-many and has an affair with the most beautiful woman of easy virtue [Rose]? The action sets into motion a series of reactions, discoveries of parentage, adoptions, clandestine affairs, blackmail and recriminations leading to suicide. The Basket Girl herself emerges as a sophisticated; independent and lovable mature woman the narrator [Bona Thunga] cannot resist untill the inevitable marriage in the end.

In Chimombo's novel 'history repeates itself': Rose's child by Winston, the Basket Girl of the title and Wina by name, has an 'affair', well she is raped by an importunate fellow-countryman, Shaibu, and she - you've guessed it - becomes pregnant. These are the devices on which Chimombo's story hinges and they place the novel within a moralistic conventional tradition.

In line with the morality-melodrama convention, Rose dies soon after giving-birth. (She was after all a prostitute~) Wina is brought up by another 'woman of easy virtue', Margaret, until she is adopted by her natural father, the 'respectable' Winston. who, we can never forget, abandoned his wife, Taona, in the throes of child-birth. There is a certain inevitability in the inability of Winston and

Taona, his wife, to have more children of their own and in the way Winston makes a rod for his own back when he suggests they adopt Wina and bring her up with their own child, a son called Win.

Meanwhile, back at the Mtalika View Bar, and bereft of a child who had come to mean much to her, lonely Margaret blackmails Winston so ruthlessly that eventually he commits suicide. The expression he is 'driven to suicide' suggests itself, but it has to be used with caution because Winston settles himself behind the wheel of his car and speeds to his death. And because it suggests a movement towards suicide which is only occasionally hinted at, and which appears to be an unlikely solution for a man in Winston's position.

The novel, which clearly touches on powerful emotions, is set, as the blurb indicates, in both New York and in what is described as 'an unnamed African country'. In fact the country is named: it is Mandania (p. 70), and there are no prizes for guessing which African country is most clearly evoked. Indeed some of the best passages are descriptions of places for Chimombo has wisely chosen to set his story in areas he knows well. For example, he frequently settles down on the slopes of the Zomba Plateau.

For much of its length, the novel is a brisk and diverting read: descriptions and dialogues fall convincingly from the pen of one or other of the narrators Chimombo entrusts with his tale. Several 'set-pieces', including the ambitious wedding sequence - 'the inevitable marriage' - with which the novel ends, have considerable impact.

Chimombo uses several narrators and they give the volume an attractive complexity and a certain vigour. Unfortunately, however, the narrators are not always as clearly differentiated or as full of individuality as they might be. For example, the descriptions of the Mtalika View Bar in the first part and of New York in a later section are entrusted to different narrators, Winston and Wina's first boy-friend, Bona Thunga, respectively, but they sound very much alike. Having said that I would not want anyone to be left in any doubt about the stylishness of some of the accounts of places, for instance Bona's description of Manhattan (p.75).

The author has plenty of interesting material to work with and he makes good use of much of it. Sometimes, however, sections seem to be jammed in rather than used as part of the evolving narrative. The meditation on the origin of 'galimoto' and the discussion about Afro-American hairstyles fall into this category.

Both are interesting; neither feels part of the web and waft of the story. The former seems to come straight from a university professor with an interest in language; the latter sounds too much like a Johnny come not so very lately from the Big Apple.

The narrators are better at descriptions of places than at bringing people vividly before the reader with a few deft strokes. For example contrast Bona's description of his reaction to a photograph of Wina taken in her mid-twenties (p.53) with the clumsy way of showing how the couple came together (p.75).

I may have been a bit hard, but it seems to me that the novel has uncritically taken over too many of the assumptions and the conventions of the magazine story: some of it is trite and very run of the mills and boon. However, even within the area with which Chimombo has most difficulty, the exploration of adult relationships, there are passages of considerable interest. In New York, Bona goes to *taekwando* classes where he meets Hope. The understanding which develops between them is explored largely within the framework of the martial arts class. Although apparently restricting, this is, in fact, a liberating context: it provides opportunities for interaction which Bona describes with far more conviction than anything that happens physically, emotionally or intellectually between him and Wina.

At one point, we are told, Bona is paired with Hope for 'one-step-sparring'. He is irritated by the verbal 'punctuations', the loud 'Whams~' and 'Zaps~' with which she 'accompanied each block and punch'. He soon puts her in her place, and teaches her not to 'use her mouth' (p.89).

The same couple are later brought together for 'gentle slow motion blocking and punching' with quite different results:

> . . . We reached unison within a minute or two: legs and arms flowing in and out of each other, seeking the other's openings and thrusts. I penetrated Hope's defences by shifting forward to deliver a reverse punch. The movement carried me between Hope's thighs . . . (90).

The intensity of this account, far more than merely a *taekwando* version of bodice ripping, indicates why Bona feels that Hope may be a challenge to his relationship with Wina - even after the 'inevitable marriage' with which the book closes. The reader shares his concern.

The effectiveness of Bona's account of these aggressive and erotic movements is in contrast to some of the other descriptions of movement and action. For example, in the fist part of the novel Winston records the experience of a drunken expatriate who has had an accident while driving from a Mtalika Plateau Motel:

> His car had rolled over the cliff edge several times before providentially meeting a tree growing on a thin cliff ledge. (p.19)

Had it rolled over the cliff edge several times? That sounds like a fatal accident. It is more likely that it had 'rolled over several times' and further revision of the text would have picked this up.

Sticking with the motoring sequences - which are particularly important in view of Winston's choice of a route into the hereafter, there is the description of an encounter with a chameleon. This time it is from the more or less omniscient narrator who takes over in the middle of the novel (p. 32). There are reasons for introducing the chameleon, which has associations in folk-lore and mythology which Chimombo is well equipped to manipulate. However, I take issue with a sequence of events which has not, in my opinion, been clearly imagined - however slowly the car is going. Symbolism has been allowed to dominate.

Chimombo has cultivated his gifts as a story-teller, and he has experimented with narrative techniques in ways that add both texture and interest to his story. Because I admire so much in it, I wish the tale had emerged further from the magazine story format from which it began. For example, the author could have used the space available to him to provide more details about the world in which his characters move. I found myself wanting more information about how they earned their daily bread and about the communities in which they existed, about their families and friends. I wanted to know what kind of 'public servant' Winston was? What sort of people Wina worked with in New York? What 'projects' Bona occupied himself with. I thought, for example, the meticulous plan for the wedding was delightful and distinctly 'Mandanian'. And I liked the comment 'It's only time-tabled for a day. The rest of married life is not that scheduled.' (p. 130) But on the next page, I found myself wondering where on earth Bona had found anyone to be his best man.

My curiosity was also aroused about Wina's half-brother, Win, but perhaps there are good reasons why his position was not clarified. At one point Bona reveals that Win is 'incommunicado'

and when asked "What happened?' replies 'I don't want to go into that at the moment. It's rather delicate.' (p.54) This holds out the half promise that sometime his story will be told and certainly the chapter heading 'The Basket Girl's Brother' would fit easily on the contents page.

In the basket which Wina carries from the market there is much that can be enjoyed, but the novel in which she appears poses several questions which remain unanswered. Wina and her story have already 'evolved' since publication of the first episode in **Zed Magazine**; both have the capacity to evolve further.

James Gibbs