

Book review

Troubling possibility, hidden fires and secret drawers: Tiyambe Zeleza's *Smouldering Charcoal*

Tiyambe Zeleza. 1992 (reprinted 1997). Oxford: Heinemann. MK150 (£5.99)

Tiyambe Zeleza's stunning novel is a most important first fruit of the new freedoms of expression in Malawi. Written in 1982, the book remained unpublished until 1992. In a recent issue of *South African Political and Economic Monthly (SAPEM)*, the author gives his reasons thus:

My literary silence was largely imposed by the long shadows of Banda's tyrannical regime. I finished writing the manuscript of *Smouldering Charcoal*... in 1982. I was planning to send it for publication when I learned that my young brother then in Malawi was taken for questioning. What happened is that an expatriate Canadian who had taught in Malawi and to whom I had shown a draft of the novel... had written someone in Malawi concerning the novel and the well honed ears of the security picked it up. So I kept the novel in my drawer, afraid that if it was published, I would be endangering the lives of my family and relatives, until 1989 when I met David Rubadiri who... convinced me to get it published.¹

Zeleza, winner of a 1996 Noma award, is a distinguished economic historian and it shows. The novel, as a socialist realist text, is firmly grounded in the socio-economic and political context of Banda's neo-colonial regime. Zeleza's fiction traces the birth and growth of 'the movement' toward liberation from the regime by juxtaposing and bringing together the development of resistance in the lives of the central characters, the educated intellectual Chola and his girlfriend Catherine, and those of the 'grassroots' figures of the bakery worker Mchere and his wife, Nambe

Readers of Ngugi will not take long to experience a feeling of *déjà vu* as they find the situation in Malawi inscribed within the same framework as Ngugi's novel of Kenyan independence, *Grain of Wheat*. The same motifs of betrayal, resurrection and salvation recur here through the agency of flawed saviour figures and good

prostitutes, strikingly similar types to those created by Ngugi. There are similarities too in details of the plot: Zeleza's Mchere like Ngugi's Gikonyo returns from detention to find that his wife has been violated by another man. In both books, through the defilement of a woman, the authors present a quasi-post-edenic scenario of wholesome life and human relationships being spoilt by the force of sociopolitical circumstances. Thus the novel is firmly in the Ngugi mould. However, *Smouldering Charcoal* should not be dismissed as derivative. Rather it should be noted that Zeleza has recognized that there are sufficient similarities in the dynamics of both struggles to warrant his adoption of a model, originally applied to Kenya, as a useful framework within which a history of Malawi can be written.

There are important differences. For example, there are many instances in the book where the author goes far beyond Ngugi in demonstrating his deep understanding of the colonialist roots of the problems and of their neo-colonialist continuation. In Zeleza's novel, unlike Ngugi's, the sufferings and the struggle are owned by the bourgeois intelligentsia, as well as the proletariat. While at pains to draw attention to the distance of the lives of ordinary people from the fantasy world being constructed (literally in vast urban concrete structures) by the fat cats of the regime, Zeleza nevertheless draws both his heroes and villains from 'all walks of life'. The main villain, however, remains Malawi's idiosyncratic ruler. In this context, the choice of a framework in which the existence of ordinary heroes and martyrs can be asserted is an especially apposite way in which to phrase, what Zeleza acknowledges to be, 'an angry attack'. Banda constructed himself as a messiah figure, causing the writing of new praise songs and silencing old ones. Zeleza here establishes the existence of resistance in the common people, the act of asserting even the possibility of finding a multiplicity of martyrs in 'ordinary' flawed men and women is a factor deliberately unwritten in the official discourse. The novel thus implicitly challenges Banda's claims to unique messianic status.

Another striking feature of the book is the zest with which Zeleza boldly allows his women to take an integral part in their liberation struggle. They refuse to dance for their leader and from this act of resistance gain momentum to become an essential component driving force of 'the movement'. This novel marks an important turning point in the literary representation of women in Malawi. For the first time any author, male or female, depicts not only the injury done to women by a male-dominated society operating within a neo-colonialist framework, but also powerfully asserts the inseparability of the liberation struggles of both men and women.

Hitherto there has been a tendency to either dismiss the validity of feminist claims or, as Felix Mnthali does in his poem 'Letter to a Feminist Friend', to suggest that taking 'first things first', the woman question is a separate issue and must give way to the more important political struggle.

In one of the most powerful and moving scenes in the novel (and there are many), the author challenges the validity of essential role differences between the sexes. Mchere, who has up to this point been seen as the epitome of careless and carousing macho manhood, is shown to be most fully human when he discards this role and takes on a responsibility traditionally assumed by women. Here he prepares to step into the darkness and rain to take his sick son to hospital:

'Are you sure you will be all right? Maybe I should come with you.'

'No, I don't think you should, you are not in a good condition . I can manage.' He pressed her closer to him. He felt the wetness of her face as tears coursed down her cheeks.

'We will be all right.'

'Don't go!' she cried suddenly. He led her to the bed where she sat down.

'What else can we do?' It was not a question but a deep moan addressed to the night. Nambe felt weak all over her body, as if water and not blood was flowing in her veins. She got up and pulled down the curtains that separated their room and the kitchen. Mchere was perplexed.

'You should use them to tie him on your back. Come, I will do it for you.' He obeyed. She tied Ntolo onto his back. Grandmother watched them silently. Nambe caressed Ntolo's hair as Mchere stood at the door ready to go. Grandmother had closed her eyes in prayer. Using a torch which he had borrowed from one of his friends, Mchere ventured into the rain. In a spontaneous move the two women fell into each other's arms. Soon they could see him no more.

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Perhaps with the optimism of youth (he was 27 when he wrote the book), Zeleza makes an important departure from the Ngugi mould at the end of his novel. In *Grain of Wheat* the element of hope is tenuous and is represented by the fragile life of an unborn child. However, previous prejudice, fear and misogynies all dissolve in Zeleza's visionary ending. His characters are finally allowed to realize their full human and intellectual potential while maintaining fruitful and harmonious relationships. They work openly against oppression. However, it seems such a vision is unattainable within the confines of Banda's Malawi, and the author has to move his characters into exile to achieve it. It is perhaps no accident that the

book's ending mirrors the author's own history. Zeleza, the brilliant scholar, has found a bright academic future but, like his heroes (and so many real life colleagues), this has been achieved outside the site of struggle. Despite the insider point of view, this is a true novel of exile. The novel is in itself perhaps another drawer inside that first drawer: a deliberate and well-constructed place of hiding for the anger, pain and struggle of exile.

This is a strange book to contemplate. Its images and scenes continue to haunt. Also troubling is the knowledge that much of its potential impact has been lost, hidden in the drawer in which it lay. It is easy to speculate on what might have been. But what if the authorship of this novel had remained anonymous? What if it had somehow been published under a pseudonym? Read in Malawi and abroad at the time of composition? What if Zeleza's 'angry statement' had been allowed to be ineffective? If. If. If. And yet it is necessary to construct 'ifs' and posit alternatives. This is exactly what fiction must do. This is what Zeleza does in his novel. Malawian history does not record a bakery strike. It does not record the growth of a movement. These are the stuff of fiction, constructed possibility. The bishops' pastoral letter of March 1992 was perhaps the first published document to suggest the *possibility* of a bright future. The articulation of the existence of an alternative was what was so subversive and stunned people into joy when they read it.

What is lost needs to be mourned: the books which were never written and never read; the creativity which was stunted; the literature which was never given the opportunity to warn; the anger which was never allowed to burn but remained, as the title of the book, only smouldering charcoal. This novel is a survivor which can testify to the existence of Banda's lost heritage.

Even if the subversive effect of Zeleza's novel was largely dissolved by its years in the drawer, the value of its accomplished literary documentation of the past remains. It is a part of Malawian history which should be read and recalled. It is certainly the very best novel ever to have been written by a Malawian author and sets a high standard for what will hopefully prove to be an exciting new era of Malwian fiction.

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