

# Exile and alienation in Paul Tiyambe Zeleza's *The joys of exile*

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The title of Paul Tiyambe Zeleza's collection of short stories, *The Joys of Exile*, is strikingly ironical in that no real joy is reflected in any of the stories in the book. The dominant experience depicted in the work as a whole is human alienation. Perhaps the only joy experienced by the author himself is a distinct measure of cosmopolitan detachment with which he portrays and analyses the various forms of human estrangement in both African and western societies.

My argument in this paper is that this cosmopolitan detachment stems directly from Zeleza's own status of exile which is, in itself, a form of alienation as it entails his physical separation from Malawi, his original home country. I further contend that exile has intensified the author's perception of human alienation, and deepened his apprehension of its disruptive effects on individuals as well as on society in general. Indeed, the various forms of human alienation depicted in this collection come through as various states of literal or metaphorical exile, in themselves.

Zeleza's artistic preoccupation with human alienation, in general, is not unique to *The Joys of Exile* as a similar concern characterizes the short stories in his first collection, *Night of Darkness*, published in 1976. But what distinguishes the recent work from the earlier one, apart from the author's new cosmopolitan vision, is the fundamental sense of homelessness his characters in *The Joys of Exile* are seen to experience as they struggle for existential meaning in their various predicaments. In *Night of Darkness*, the characters are always located in definite home environments and human communities in which they have natural roots. Their senses of dislocation are always measured against their established and enduring backgrounds. In *The Joys of Exile*, the supposed base from which a character is estranged remains elusive either because it is itself fractured or it does not exist anymore. Sometimes there is no clear distinction between a character's state of alienation and his supposed authentic state of being.

According to *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, "The term 'alienation' (estrangement)

has many different meanings in everyday life, in science, and in philosophy.”<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I use the term primarily in the psychological and sociological sense in which it refers to “an individual’s feeling of alienness toward society, nature, other people, or himself.”<sup>2</sup> I also use the term in the psychiatric sense of “deviation from normality; that is insanity.”<sup>3</sup> In both cases, a key feature of the estrangement is a state of separation between the individual and his object of alienation; an object the individual normally belongs to or identifies with as an integral part of his being. It is in this sense that I relate exile with alienation. For, according to the *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary*, exile literally means “enforced or regretted absence from one’s country or home: banishment”<sup>4</sup>. In my view, therefore, human alienation, in all its forms, is a state of existential exile as it entails an individual’s metaphorical absence from his natural state of being. The major forms of this malaise that Zeleza depicts in his short stories are political, cultural, social, psychological, and spiritual alienation. And the victims of all these types of estrangement are seen to lead fundamentally impoverished lives.

The cosmopolitan detachment with which Zeleza portrays and analyses the various forms of human alienation in *The Joys of Exile* is striking when this collection of short stories is compared with the earlier one, *Night of Darkness*. Most, if not all, of the stories in *Night of Darkness* are afrocentric in perspective and substance. They are strongly African in setting, cultural content, cosmological outlook and economic concerns. About half of the stories are set in rural areas of Malawi and the other half are set in urban areas of the same country.

In the rural stories, the author highlights the people’s traditional values and practices. He consistently uses traditional terminology in references to environmental and temporal factors such as the weather and seasons; and demonstrates the people’s belief in the existence and power of ancestral spirits as well as shows the potency of magic. Economically, the rural societies are shown to engage in subsistence farming and hunting.

In most of the stories set in urban areas, the characters are presented as still rooted in their traditional societies. These characters not only maintain contact with their relatives back in the rural areas, but visibly regard the urban areas as places of temporary residence while they are engaged in wage employment. Their real homes remain among the traditional communities in the rural areas, where they are destined to return upon retirement or death.

The situation in *The Joys of Exile* is radically different. In all the stories in this col-

lection, Zeleza clearly shows that genuine traditional African communities and culture no longer exist. In the only two stories, "Waiting" and "The Soldier's Tale", where he depicts authentic African societies, the author presents the communities in a precolonial past. But even here the societies are eventually invaded by external forces in the form of Arabic or European slave raids, Islamic or Christian evangelism and, finally, western political and economic colonialism. These external forces bring with them various influences that leave permanent marks on African life and culture. As a reflection of these historical experiences, the traditional culture of African societies depicted in some of the other stories is shown to have been adulterated by the foreign influences. In yet some cases, the African communities themselves are seen to be fractured by ethnic prejudice and hatred, clear legacies of divisive colonial rule and oppression.

In all these stories the author maintains a definite critical perspective, which is characteristic of his new cosmopolitan vision. But more indicative of this vision is the complete absence of geographical or national bias in his choice of setting for the stories. Indeed, the whole universe is a stage for Zeleza's critical dramatization of human life in *The Joys of Exile*. The collection opens with "Waiting" a "surrealistic"<sup>5</sup> story depicting a spirit who surveys the travails of mankind for centuries as it tries to identify the ideal human family to be born into. In the rest of the stories, the author comes down from this transcendental viewpoint and takes a more terrestrial stance. But out of these stories (nine of them) only three are wholly set in Malawi, two are set in Kenya, one in Zimbabwe one in an unidentified African country and two in western societies. Internal references indicate that the last two stories are set in North America.

In keeping with this cosmopolitan perspective, Zeleza's language, terminology, and concepts in *The Joys of Exile* are predominantly western, and most of the characters featured are seen to be engaged in modern professional and economic activities. The African stories set in the precolonial past are the only exception in this regard.

In terms of mode, the author uses two main types in *The Joys of Exile*, namely realism and surrealism. In *Night of Darkness*, Zeleza only uses the realistic mode. This difference does not just indicate a simple stylistic choice on the part of the author, it reflects a change in his perception of human alienation from the earlier period to the recent one.

Whereas realism tends to distinguish the various contrary states of rationality and irrationality, reality and fantasy, consciousness and unconsciousness, sanity and madness, surrealism seeks to resolve the contradictions between these various states.<sup>6</sup> But while

the original intention of the proponents of surrealism was to liberate the human mind from its conventional sense of contradiction,<sup>7</sup> the surrealistic mode in Zeleza's stories has the effect of deepening the reader's perception of human alienation. This is because in the surrealistic stories, it is the negative aspects of the contrary states that are seen to dominate the human condition. In addition, all the realistic and surrealistic stories in *The Joys of Exile* reflect an intensified perception of human evil on the author's part. And in the whole collection, human evil comes through as the fundamental source of human alienation.

The primary form of this evil is greed which causes individuals, social groups and nations to commit untold atrocities on others in their rabid pursuit of selfish interests. Zeleza presents political power and material possessions as the major objects of human greed.

The opening story, "Waiting", powerfully establishes the mood, theme, and tone for the rest of the stories in *The Joys of Exile*<sup>8</sup>. In its explanation of why spirits have to temporarily leave their blissful spirit world and undergo incarnation in the brutal terrestrial world, the spirit-character in the story comments with great sadness on the grim nature of human existence:

If we were really given a choice, none of us would have wanted to be born, to go into the terrifying exile of human life, leaving behind the charmed life we led in the spirit world. We spent our time playing and feasting and we knew only love and none of the pain, loneliness, heartlessness, and cruelty that humans seem to love inflicting on one another. But we had to be born at least once in half a millennium if we wanted to continue enjoying the eternal joys of the spirit world. That was the pact each one of us made with the Master of Eternity when, in his and her infinite wisdom, for the Master was both male and female, or rather neither, summoned us from nothingness. It was a small price to pay: human life is short, made shorter by all the suffering, brutality, and unhappiness. Many of us preferred early death. It was easier in the old days when infant deaths were so common and the span of human life was so much shorter than it is now. (p 3).

The concept of human life as a state of exile from a blissful spiritual existence is the central motif of *The Joys of Exile*; therein lies the irony of the title. And the exile the spirit has to go through, as a precondition for continued existence in its eternal home, is the primary form of alienation it has to experience. But within the human world itself, the other forms of exile and alienation have to be endured. And as it searches for the right parents to be born to, the spirit watches with extreme dismay from its celestial perspective all these forms of exile and alienation in the human world. At times the spirit itself indirectly experiences human cruelty as it is about to enter the

world. The first case of this traumatic experience occurs in the African precolonial period when the spirit's first father, as he is referred to, is captured by European slave traders and shipped across the ocean to the new world. This happens four months after the spirit has been conceived by its first mother and it is anxiously waiting to be born at the end of "the customary nine-months waiting period"(p.3). Prior to this terrible loss, the spirit evokes the simple and harmonious life enjoyed by the father and mother in their untainted society. The onset of the slave trade immediately destroys this idyllic life. And this iniquitous trade lasts four centuries during which the spirit suspends its plan to enter the human world.

The greed for material wealth which led to and sustained the slave trade is pathetically decried by the spirit as it expresses its perplexed shock upon the tragic loss of its first father:

My mother wept for weeks. How could they do that to her? How could her husband be captured, sold, and bought as if he were a chicken? How could human beings do that to one another?

My spirit friends asked me what I was going to do now. I was so confused. I loved both of my parents. I could not imagine growing up without my father. I knew my mother would love me and do the best she could to raise me properly. But I was afraid of disappearing like my father, and like so many other people since this curse had fallen upon the land. What else could it be called if not a curse, this cheapening of human life, turning human beings into commodities exchangeable for worthless trinkets and guns? So it was that a few weeks after my father disappeared I left my mother. She was devastated. I felt sorry for her, but there was nothing I could do. I don't know whether she ever forgave me. (p.5).

However, more devastating to the spirit itself is the gang rape by colonial invaders, four centuries later, of its second mother while she is six months pregnant with the spirit's human foetus. This beastly defilement of the defenceless woman's sanctity of being stuns the spirit into losing its will to enter the human world again: "I was not born. I did not want to, nor could I be. I lost my interest in birth and living. How could such evil be possible? How? And why? None of my spirit friends had answers" (p.10). And the Master of Eternity would not provide any answers for he/she expected the spirits to use their intelligence in puzzling out the painful reality of human existence.

In effect, the rape of the spirit's second mother is not only symptomatic of the general evil characteristic of human life, but is also immediately symbolic of the political and material rape of Africa by western powers during this period. Notably, Zeleza depicts

the violent plunder and devastation of the continent which accompanied its invasion by the western powers. And during the colonial period itself the colonialists brutally turned the indigenous inhabitants into wealth-producing slaves for them. Zeleza further shows that the economic and political oppression to which the Africans were subjected alienated the people from their land of birth so completely that they could not achieve self-realization. Consequently, their only way out was struggle for political liberation. It is during the phase of struggle that the author presents the spirit as reluctantly identifying its third set of parents whom it first encounters as guerrilla fighters in one of the continent's jungles.

Zeleza's perception of evil as a general human problem is further confirmed by the fact that liberation from colonialism does not bring real peace and freedom to Africa. For, the country of the spirit's third parents is plunged into a factional power struggle among the Africans themselves soon after the attainment of independence. The political feuding quickly degenerates into a vicious civil war, and the group opposed to the government commits unspeakable atrocities on the ordinary people which includes the gruesome murder of the spirit's grandparents. In extreme bitterness and outrage, the spirit describes the rebels as "worthy successors to the slave traders, the colonial invaders, the Nazis, the Stalinists, and all those heartless people who have stalked the blood-stained pages of history" (p.16).

This comment succinctly summarizes the history of human evil this story traces from precolonial times to the twentieth century. And this civil war is a prototype of all those others that have raged, and continue to rage in Africa and elsewhere in contemporary times.

The continued prevalence of evil in the human world, at this stage, does not deter the spirit's determination to become human, as time for it to fulfil the pact with the Master of Eternity is running out. "Barely a decade remains before the half millennium is over" (p.14), and the spirit gets extinguished for ever if it does not qualify for another half millennium by undergoing the ordeal of human existence. And consistent with the hard reality of that existence, the spirit is finally born through a caesarian operation to its third mother as she recovers from an attempted suicide after her husband has deserted her for another woman. All this happens in Canada where the parents live, exiled from their war-torn country.

By virtue of its cosmic scope, this story, "Waiting", introduces most of the forms of human alienation Zeleza depicts in his other stories, in *The Joys of Exile*. But what dis-

tinguishes it from all the other stories in the collection, apart from the massive scope and extraterrestrial perspective, is its comprehensive depiction of human evil as an intensely foul disease that is as old as humanity itself. This timelessness, and universality of evil is only implied in the other localized and contemporary stories in the collection. Nevertheless, even in these stories Zeleza maintains his fundamentally pessimistic vision of mankind and its society. No intimation of human goodness or affirmation of established moral order occur in any of the stories. The only story that comes close to being an exception in *The Joys of Exile* is "School Reunion" which ends with the exposure and imprisonment of well respected priests who have, for years, been engaged in the homosexual exploitation of materially poor students at their hitherto reputable boys secondary school. But this moral corruption within the clerical establishment, the supposed bastion of moral purity, negates the validity of that very establishment as custodian of religious and social values. Worse still, secular authority in the society where this story is set is in the hands of a military junta.

"School Reunion" notwithstanding, therefore, in all the stories in *The Joys of Exile*, there are no moral certainties, no social stability, no authentic cultural values, and in some cases, no definite sense of reality. In addition, in none of these stories, except "School Reunion", is there clear individual responsibility for the cases of human alienation depicted. Instead society itself is seen to be the source of human alienation. By virtue of its hostile or fragmented nature, society either actively or passively denies the individual an affirmative base for the realization and fulfilment of his being. Herein lies the fundamental homelessness of humanity in the world of *The Joys of Exile*.

Political oppression, ethnic and racial prejudice, cultural colonialism, and self-seeking materialism are shown to be the major causes of this alienating homelessness of the characters depicted in the stories. These are also seen to be the main causes of both the literal and metaphorical states of exile in which the characters are forced to languish.

"Suspended Dreams" is one of the most harrowing stories depicting political oppression and its alienating effects in *The Joys of Exile*. Although Zeleza does not openly identify the country in which the story is set, the events presented are reminiscent of those which occurred in Malawi in the early seventies. The fictional setting of the story is a university campus where the main targets of the political oppression and persecution are lecturers and students. But what happens in the university community clearly reflects the situation in the whole country.

On the campus, one after another, lecturers and students are systematically picked up

by the secret police and thrown into detention without any explanation. The story is told through the perspective of the main character who is also a university student. He begins the narration in his Sociology class where the college Registrar makes a callous announcement of the detention of the course lecturer, Dr Juma. This first victim is quickly followed into oblivion by a chain of his colleagues and students. As the main character narrates the story, he powerfully evokes the climate of fear and silence that is created by this reign of terror. He also gives a vivid description of attempts by lecturers and students to cope with their traumatic state of psychological alienation. While the lecturers avoid discussing political and other controversial issues in class or in any other public place, the students just wallow in beer drinking during their spare time.

For some strange reason, the secret police consistently pick up their targets on Fridays, but the college community hears news of the latest arrests on Mondays. As a result of this chilling pattern, the whole community is numbed by a general dread of these two days of the week. Those students who can afford it, which include the narrating character himself, attempt to escape the particular terror of Friday by leaving campus on Thursday evening or Friday morning and returning on Sunday evening.

The palpable intensity of the state of terror in which the university community lives is vividly dramatized one Friday night when the narrating character decides to stay on campus for a rare Saturday date with a much desired college beauty, Grace. A midnight knocking on the door that Friday petrifies the youngman and his roommate, Makala, into believing that their turn to be picked up for detention has come. They therefore write letters to their relatives stating their fate and throw them out of the window. On finally opening the door it turns out that the person who has been knocking on it is a drunken fellow student, appropriately named Bulutu (fool), who had gone to the wrong floor of the hostel. The two roommates' relief is overshadowed by anger at having been psychologically tortured by the drunkard's knocking. But this anger is quickly replaced by renewed fear when they remember the letters they have thrown out of the window. And so the narrator and Makala frantically try to retrieve the letters. But they do not find them after days of searching.

Two Fridays later, another lecturer and a student are picked up and detained. The narrating character then vows never again to stay on campus on Fridays. On the fourth Monday after the knocking on the door incident, the narrator returns from his weekend refuge only to find that his roommate, Makala, has been **picked up by the secret police**. At this point, he immediately leaves the campus and **flees into exile**.



The perpetual state of fear and anxiety in which the narrating character and the whole university community are forced to live by the pervasive reign of terror psychologically estranges them all from their nativeland. Even without going into literal political exile, these people are shown to be already in a state of metaphorical existential exile. And, although they are physically in their home country, they are, in a fundamental sense, homeless. For, a true home is a place where one feels secure, at ease, comfortable, "free and unrestrained."<sup>9</sup> And such an environment does not exist in the country depicted in "Suspended Dreams." Not only that, it is the exact opposite of this home-like environment that is shown to exist in the unnamed African country.

A similar case of fundamental homelessness is portrayed in "Blood Feuds"<sup>9</sup>, another story focusing on the alienating effects of political oppression on defenceless citizens in a country that is also torn apart by ethnic prejudice and hatred. The story has two parts whereby the first is set in Zimbabwe and features the experiences of the protagonists in a literal state of political exile, and the second is set in a thinly disguised Malawi, the home country of the protagonists to which they return during the ferment of multi-party politics. It is the second part that portrays the alienating effects of political oppression on people in their own land of birth.

"Blood Feuds", like "Suspended Dreams", has an internal narrating character who is also one of the main actors in the story. This narrating character, who is also unnamed, primarily focuses on the brotherly friendship between his father and another elder Malawian, named uncle Phala. In the first section, the elder men represent an older generation of Malawians who initially went to Zimbabwe as economic migrants; the narrating character and Uncle Phala's daughter, Mwali, represent a younger generation who were born in the foreign land and have not yet been to Malawi, as the story begins.

The experiences of literal exile for both generations are a mixture of emotional loneliness and nostalgia for home, on the one hand, and intellectual detachment from the harsh political realities of home, on the other. These two sets of experiences constitute the only real joys of exile Zeleza depicts in this collection of stories. For, the exiles' emotional loneliness and nostalgia lead to blissful idealization of home, whereas their intellectual detachment facilitates an objective assessment of the one-party political oppression in the home country. In addition, their common experiences level out any ethnic differences among them, which 'back home' have been used to create political divisions among the people. Consequently, the exiles are able to form a united movement in opposition to the one-party regime in their motherland.

This unity is further strengthened by growing national chauvinism and xenophobia on the part of indigenous Zimbabweans. In self-protection, the Malawians draw closer together, yearn for home and intermarry. It is during this phase that the narrator marries uncle Phala's daughter, Mwali, to the great joy of their parents. But when the young man, his family, his father, and Uncle Phala return home during the ferment of multi-party politics, triggered by an Episcopal pastoral letter, all these joys of exile vanish.

Zezeza's reference to the pastoral letter and its impact on the narrator's home country is the clearest indication in the story that the said country is indeed Malawi. In a direct reflection of history, the author, through his narrator, states that after thirty years of unchallenged autocratic rule, the regime suddenly found itself a target of open criticism by church leaders:

One Easter Sunday priests read a pastoral letter throughout the country. The letter did not make outlandish demands. It called for simple things like social justice, the rule of law, and respect for human rights. But the letter hit the nation like a volcano. No one within the country had ever publicly made these demands before. The letter was confiscated. Distributing it became an act of subversion. Some church leaders were arrested and threatened with dire consequences. (p.123).

In a continued reflection of history, Zezeza mentions the unprecedented political agitation that followed the reading of the pastoral letter in the country. First came student riots and demonstrations accompanied by demands for "free and fair elections and the release of all political prisoners" (p.123). Then workers followed suit with strikes, demanding better wages. Police intervention in the strikes "only succeeded in shooting scores of workers and setting the whole country on fire. Even foreign governments and lending institutions that had long supported the regime began to see the writing on the wall and threatened to cut off aid" (pp.123-124).

The narrator and his group therefore return to Malawi when the government in power has already given in to this pressure and legalized the formation of opposition parties in the country. But upon reaching their villages, the returnees are shocked by the abject poverty of the people and disillusioned by the vicious tribalism and regionalism tearing the country apart. To their further dismay, the new political parties are not only tribalistic and regionally-based, but also lack ideological sense of direction and seem to be led by individuals whose primary motives are self-aggrandizement and personal material gain. Their political rallies themselves are characterized by inter-party violence fuelled by ethnic prejudice and hatred.

However, the author indicates that the new political parties are not wholly responsible for this national malaise; the tottering regime itself created and encouraged regionalism and ethnic prejudice as tools of political control throughout its thirty-year rule. Therefore, by the time of the multi-party politics, the country had already become a fragmented society with no sense of national unity.

To compound their horror, the returnees find that, on arrival, they themselves get divided along tribal and regional lines. The narrating character and his father come from the south of the country, whereas his wife and Uncle Phala come from the north. Consequently, each one of the older men finds himself settling in his own region, and joining its tribalistic political party. The narrating character himself refrains from politics and attempts to ignore the entrenched ethnic divisions by settling in his wife's region where he then starts a transport business. This idealism nearly costs him his life. For one day, during the run-up to multi-party general elections, his northern compatriots burn his trucks and seek to kill him, thereby forcing him to flee south, leaving his wife and children behind.

The depth of human alienation the returnees now feel, in their own country, is poignantly shown in the concluding section of the story; this is when Uncle Phala, accompanied by Mwali and her children, visits his old friend in the south. The two old comrades fail to communicate with each other. Their former amity and intimacy have been extinguished by the flood of tribal politics sweeping across the country. Within a few days of his arrival, Uncle Phala returns to his own northern base of internal exile.

Zeleza then intensifies the bleakness of the political situation by departing from his artistic reflection of historical events in Malawi and ending the story with a military take-over of the government. The coup occurs after the ruling party wins the general elections and the opposition parties reject the results. Considering the fact that military regimes have been the bane of Africa for decades, this development points to further political oppression, social fragmentation, human alienation and exile.

Clearly, in real life as in fiction, the rampant tribalism fragmenting the people creates a conducive climate for military take-overs such as that depicted in "Blood Feuds." Zeleza shows his great concern with this problem by revisiting it in "The Soldier's Tale" where the central character, Maganizo, is nearly killed by his own relatives for marrying a woman from a supposed enemy tribe. Maganizo, an 'ex-soldier' just returned from one of the world wars, is a Paramount Chief designate, but also a victim of amnesia. When he returns home he is already in this state of deep psychological

alienation. Due to some traumatic experience at the war front, he has lost his memory. Consequently, he does not know who he is, where he is coming from, where he is, and who the people around him are. The “hero’s welcome” his people accord him makes no sense to the mentally disoriented man. Maganizo’s inability to recognize and understand his people gradually becomes a source of friction between him and them. The situation gets worse when he rejects his traditionally approved fiancée and falls in love with a woman from an enemy tribe of his own clan. Maganizo cannot accede to his father’s throne if he does not marry the approved woman. It is when he persists in his courtship of the woman he wants, Saba, that the plot to kill both him and the “enemy” woman is hatched. And they go into exile as soon as they learn of the conspiracy.

In a flashback, Zeleza shows that the historical cause of the enmity between Maganizo’s and Saba’s people was power struggle between two sons of the ancient founder of the original kingdom from which both peoples descended. The feuding brothers split the kingdom into two, and each branch subsequently became a distinct tribe exposed to different foreign influences. While one tribe came under Islamic hegemony, the other was Christianized by European colonialists. The ensuing religious differences only served to deepen the schism between them and entrench their mutual prejudice and hatred. Maganizo belongs to the Christianized tribe whereas Saba belongs to the Islamized one.

The agency of Islam and Christianity in the entrenchment of tribal hostilities between peoples with a common ancestry signifies not only the tragedy of African tribalism but also points to the continent’s general cultural inauthenticity. This inauthenticity of African culture is the central subject of “Homecoming” a story in which an African American is disabused of his initial belief that he would achieve personal revitalization on the continent. Richard Gates, the African-American, lands in Kenya, and on the very first day befriends a Kenyan called Maina Kamau, who drives him around Nairobi, showing him places of touristic interest including night clubs. On the following day, after his arrival, when Maina offers to take him to a game park, Richard objects, saying:

He wanted to meet people, not animals. He wanted to have a taste of real African culture this time, not the imported revelry of the previous night. He had come to Africa seeking something deeper than mere fun, which he could get in Chicago. Everything seemed to be falling apart. His marriage had collapsed, the second in five years. He had lost his job at the art college, and his younger brother had just been imprisoned for drug trafficking. Above all, he had lost the inspiration to do his work. He had not painted or sculpted anything in a long time. Maybe Africa would unlock his creative energies.

(p.144).

But what Zeleza shows through the protagonist's experiences in the course of the story is that the uncorrupted African culture of Richard's imagination does not exist any more. And as Richard proceeds with his quest, his idyllic image of the continent is gradually destroyed by the harsh reality of economic and cultural colonialism, moral decadence, rural poverty and political insecurity.

While Richard is frustrated and re-educated by reality in "Homecoming", reality itself is uncertain in "The Lift" "The Rocking Chair" and "The Fire this Time", the most technically complex stories in *The Joys of Exile*. In these stories, the characters' states of alienation are not clearly distinguishable from the characters' authentic states of being. This is because the crass materialism of modern man has turned daily life into a virtual nightmare conterminous with the nightmare of dreams. Consequently, man has plunged himself into an abysmal state of spiritual alienation.

Significantly enough, "The Rocking Chair" and "The Fire this Time", stories which depict the deepest cases of this alienation, are set in the West, the most materially developed part of the world. But Zeleza first introduces the theme of materialism and spiritual alienation directly in "The Lift" which is set in Kenya, a firmly westernized African country. The surrealist method the author employs in all these stories powerfully evokes the nightmare quality of the experiences presented.

In "The Lift", Zeleza merges the conscious and unconscious perceptions of the main character who is also the narrator, so imperceptibly that the distinction between them only becomes evident towards the end of the story. The narrative begins with anxious reflections of the protagonist who is in a lift on his way to a job interview on the fifteenth floor of an ultra-modern building. As the youngman assesses the other passengers in the lift, wondering which of them could be on his interview panel, the machine stops functioning and gets stuck on the twelfth floor. In the ensuing panic, the author smoothly shifts the focus of the story from the narrator's conscious thoughts and observations to his unconscious perceptions. Due to the smoothness of the shift, the exact point where the narrating character passes out is not clear. And the unreality of the experiences narrated after the lift stops is not immediately evident. Things only begin to appear fantastic later when the narrator reports that the door of the lift opens and all the passengers are ushered into a hall where they are to attend a mass interview for the same post of "development officer". Even then, one is not quite sure of what is really going on until towards the end when it is disclosed that the narrator regains consciousness in hospital after having "been trapped in a lift for more that twelve hours on

[his] way to an interview" (p. 96. ). It is during his presentation of the narrator's unconscious perceptions that Zeleza introduces the theme of materialism and spiritual alienation.

At one point, the narrating character gives imaginary statements in which each one of the trapped passengers argues why he or she thinks he or she is the most suitable candidate for the post of "development officer". In these statements, all the passengers, except one, directly equate development with production of goods, generation of money, and creation and maintenance of a consumer culture. Among the speakers are the narrator himself, an Indian former teacher, a former policeman, a former bank clerk, a former secretary, a former supermarket manager, and a priest. The priest is the only one who does not present a materialistic view of development. According to his opinion,

Development was a moral issue; it was not just about money, material things, and the GNP, but about sharing, tolerance, love. Look at America. It has all the money any country could ever want, yet its people are plagued by violence, hatred and despair. Give a man of God a chance to lead the development crusade in order to avoid such a bleak future. (p.84).

Zeleza demonstrates the validity of these observations in "The Rocking Chair" and "The Fire this Time".

In "The Rocking Chair", the author focuses on the lonely life of a mentally unbalanced old man. Having been deserted by his materialistic children, this old man who is also a widower, lives and dies alone in a room, completely cut off from humanity and the outside world. Indicative of his mental derangement is the fact that he identifies with his rocking chair, which he calls Magdalene, as his only companion. And he virtually lives in a continuous world of fantasy and reality. In the words of the author,

Like a baby, he slept several times a day. Night and day became artificial interludes in a relentless slide to timelessness and nothingness. He slipped from sleep to awakening, dreams and reality with the ease of a sleep walker. Memory lost its power to intervene, to impose order and meaning, to mediate the past, the present, and the future.

Only Magdalene remained real, a permanent link to something outside himself. He had outlived friends and his wife. And the children, afraid of the curse of age, had abandoned him. The whole world had forsaken him. It worshipped the shallowness of youth over the endurance of age, material possessions over the sanctity of human relations. (p.178).

Up to the time of his death, therefore, the old man is seen to **repeatedly engage** in imag-

inary conversations with his only faithful companion, Magdalene, the rocking chair. And since the chair is consistently referred to, and addressed as Magdalene, it develops into a full human character with feelings of jealousy, tenderness, caring and even pity. Zeleza achieves this effect by fusing the third person narrative voice with the old man's point of view, thereby presenting his surreality as a matter of fact.

The intimacy between the old man and Magdalene, projected through this technique, is virtually that between a man and his wife. It is in her warm embrace that he continually rests, and it is in the same embrace that he finally dies at the end of the story. While the old man's continual hallucinations indicate his mental alienation from his rational self and external reality, his existential isolation constitutes his deep alienation from society and general humanity.

In the whole story, the old man is shown to have only two sources of flitting contact with the outside world, both of which have symbolic significance. These are: an old lady who, in the early sections of the story, brings him food and cleans his room once a month, and a garbage dump near the building, across from the window of his room.

The woman represents the revitalizing power of human touch, for each time she comes, the old man feels "animated by the warmth of her presence. He [feels] human, complete" (p.179). And Magdalene is said to feel jealous on such days. But when the old woman abruptly stops coming, the poor man loses interest in his own life and stops taking his monthly bath. The external world itself recedes further away from him. This recession of the world is symbolized by the shrinking "view of the outside world as grime gradually enveloped the window" facing the rocking chair (p. 179).

After the woman abandons him, the old man takes to sitting in Magdalene's lap, and listlessly watching trucks dumping garbage in the pit across from the window. The author uses this preoccupation first to show the gradual deterioration of the old man's already unbalanced state of mind, and secondly, to symbolize the destructive materialism of the outside world. The noise of the trucks initially irritate the old man, but later he starts mimicking their rambling sound. As time goes by, he identifies his own noise with those of the trucks so completely that he cannot tell the difference between them. At another point he mimicks the driving manoeuvres of one of the drivers.

As the old man continues to watch the incoming and outgoing trucks, Zeleza symbolically represents the destructive and futile materialism of the outside world through a graphic depiction of the endless refuse that come from that world and is dumped into

the pit. The author also highlights the fact that this refuse affords the old man his only glimpse of the rot of the world that has so heartlessly forsaken him; and the lonely man watches the dump grow with morbid fascination.

In due course, a multitude of birds swarm the dump foraging for food, thereby symbolically enacting the greed with which man ransacks the world's resources. In addition, the birds act out the dynamics of human power struggle and capitalism as they compete for food and ruthlessly fight over territory.

One of the birds, which the old man names Marty, pairs up with another bird and sets up a family on the safer side of the dump. But soon Marty's family falls prey to other predatory birds and he is left alone. In his subsequent experience of solitude, old age, and lonely death, Marty projects the old man's plight and impending fate. The symbolic significance of Marty's case is made evident in his resigned reflection on the mechanized routine of life in a world where "All everybody did was work, eat, mate and sleep. He waited for the end. Only death could have real meaning, for it was final, the consummation of all that was possible" (p.183).

When Marty dies, the old man weeps for him and is perplexed at the apparent meaninglessness of life in a world where nobody cares for anybody else. Magdalene tries to comfort him, but to no avail. It is only much later, when a caterpillar develops gradually into a butterfly under his watchful eyes that the old man's spirits get rejuvenated. But before long, the old man himself becomes an ironic player in a drama of human possessiveness which is at the heart of materialism.

As the butterfly, which he names Bill, grows older, it begins to assert its independence from the old man, thus symbolizing the gradual distancing of children from their parents in the real world. The old man, who had adopted Bill as his "child", attempts to forcefully possess him, but he is rebuffed and rejected. In a heated argument with Magdalene and Bill, the old man asserts his right to possess Bill and expresses his bitter resentment of filial desertion of parents. Magdalene rebukes him by pointing out that "You don't own anything, not even your life. You didn't give yourself your life, did you? And lest you forget, you were born without possessions and you will also leave without possessions" (p.187). These words expose the illusion of possession which fuels man's obsessive materialistic drive.

The violent and cruel extreme to which people are prepared to go in order to assert their supposed right over possessions is shown by the old man's intention to break one of



Bill's wings so as to cripple him into immobility and submission. Again, Magdalene rebukes the desperate old man and urges him to "Let Bill go and find his own kind" (p.188). He responds with a bitter question: "But where is my own kind" And Magdalene cryptically says: "Everywhere and nowhere. Like air. Invisible" (p.188). Then overcome with intense despair, the old man expresses his deep sense of human alienation in a society where there is no sense of community, belonging or sharing:

"There are people everywhere, but nobody to relate to. You and I sit here every day, hearing and watching people all the time. They are always in a hurry, always preoccupied, disconnected. It was not like that where I come from and in my youth. I was alive then. Now they go through the motions of living, but they are dead inside. Dead like me." (p.188).

In other words, life without human warmth and connection is virtual living death.

Soon after this mournful lamentation, the old man is filled with shame and guilt for having wanted to harm Bill. Then overcome by a devastating sense of futility he opens the window and lets Bill fly away, free into the outside world. Immediately after that he flings himself into Magdalene's embrace for the last time, as he soon falls into a slumber of death.

The process of mental and physical degeneration the old man has been seen to slowly undergo throughout the story now enters the final stage of literal decomposition through which his body unites with the festering material in the dump outside. While maggots and worms come out of "every crevice and pore in his body", butterflies, birds, and dragon flies come from the dump "through the open window to peek at him, or entertain him and pay their respects" (p.189). This goes on until the remains are much later discovered by the outside world because of a fire raging through the apartment building. And predictably, the deceased's children appear only to bury him and quickly share his material possessions among themselves and disappear again.

The old man's lonely life and death make his case of human alienation the most tragic of all in *The Joys of Exile*. Unlike any other single character in the collection, he is literally exiled from human society itself, and in the end he experiences the ultimate form of alienation: the physical cessation of his individual life. The only other story with a similarly drastic ending in the collection is "The Fire this Time" where Zeleza projects the apocalyptic demise of sinful mankind in a deluge of fire. But the greater scope of this story as well as the very apocalyptic nature of its ending make it more psychologically harrowing than immediately tragic and heart-rending as the case is with "The

Rocking Chair”.

In essence, “The Fire this Time” is about human sin and Divine retribution. It features an episodic nightmare of human decadence, social fragmentation and deep spiritual alienation. The story is told through an omniscient narrator and is divided into twelve loosely-connected distinct sections with their own subtitles.

The first section, “Of the Beginning”, is introductory and describes the mythical origin of the universe from fire as well as depicts the destruction by fire of one city as punishment for the human sins of theft and selfishness<sup>10</sup>. It is stated that soon after the creation of the universe, man stole “the knowledge of fire from heaven and brought it to the earth” where he used it, selfishly, “To build two worlds, a world of nightmares and a world of sweet dreams” (p.159). Section two, “The Dreamers and the Survivors”, presents a realistic synopsis of a divided human society after the first punishment by fire. From section three to ten the author depicts individual cases of human alienation in the divided society after another fire devastates the privileged enclave of the society. The penultimate section, “And the Skies Lit Up” is basically a flashback on the cause of the second fire: the acquittal by an all-white jury of white policemen who abused a black motorist<sup>11</sup>. An infuriated racially-tense black community then set the white suburb ablaze. The last section, “Of the End”, is a symbolic projection of the final punishment of humanity and cataclysmic end of the world in a deluge of fire.

In the whole story, “The Fire this Time”, Zeleza effectively echoes the various myths of creation and destruction that have evolved in all societies since time immemorial.<sup>12</sup> And the problems of human wickedness, alienation and exile the author portrays in *The Joys of Exile* are central themes in these ancient myths. Ulli Beier, for instance, notes the recurrence of the theme of man’s alienation from God in African creation myths: “Numerous African myths develop the idea that man was originally living in closer harmony with God, and that through his own fault the intimate relationship was destroyed.”<sup>13</sup> In the Christian world, the archetypal case of human alienation and exile is the Fall of Adam and Eve, and their expulsion from the blissful garden of Eden. Through this Fall man alienated himself from his original perfect nature, from the rest of nature around him and from God. In the words of Peter V. Marinelli, (1971:20).

The vanishing of the golden Eden not only plunges man into a world of mutability...it fundamentally alters his nature. In the orthodox Christian view, human nature, created in a state of perfection, is limited and vitiated by the Fall in the garden. Death enters the world of creation, and the oneness of man with Nature in perfect obedience to the Creator is lost through the irruption of a rooted concupiscence. The hierarchy of reason over

passion is inverted... The consequence is exile from the pastoral garden, exile to a world of toil and labour...

Whereas the Fall of two individuals causes the alienation and exile of the whole of humanity in this Christian view, in the classical myth of the golden age<sup>14</sup>, a gradual degeneration of the whole race is presented as responsible for man's loss of his original state of natural perfection and existential bliss.<sup>15</sup>

In whatever mythological or religious view, this tragic loss constitutes mankind's loss of identity. And as Northrop Frye observes, throughout the ages, various writers have bemoaned this loss and imaginatively attempted to return to the original state.<sup>16</sup> In this regard, Frye argues, the "story of the loss and regaining of identity is... the framework of all literature."<sup>17</sup> However, Frye also notes that most modern writers seldom depict the golden period. Instead, "they spend a good deal more of their time on the misery, frustration or absurdity of human existence" which shows that "literature not only leads us toward the regaining of identity, but also separates this state from its opposite, the world we don't like and want to get away from."<sup>18</sup>

Zezeza's reticence on the possibility of regaining the lost identity and his unrelenting depiction of human evil in *The Joys of Exile* clearly align him with the modern writers. But in his overall apprehension of the nature of human evil he is as ancient as Hesiod, Virgil, Ovid, Juvenal and Seneca. For the same evils of greed, materialism and violence Zezeza depicts as the main sources of alienation are shown by these classical authors to have taken root in the world during the iron age, the final stage of man's degeneration from the golden age.<sup>19</sup> The archetypal themes of alienation and exile, in themselves, endow an additional universalism to Zezeza's cosmopolitan artistic vision.

In the final analysis, therefore, Zezeza's own experience of exile has deepened his understanding of the human condition. And the fundamental homelessness of the characters in *The Joys of Exile* is, in a broad sense, a metaphor for the homelessness of man outside the golden age, be it that of classical mythology, the garden of Eden, the African mythical past, or simply that of an original human goodness embodied in the ideals of love, freedom, and justice.

## Notes

1. Paul Edwards ed (1967) p.76.
2. Édwards ed(1967 ) p.76.
3. Edwards ed(1967 ) p.76.
4. *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary*, New Edition, (1972), p.458.
5. This is a loose application of the term “surrealistic” because the story does not have some of the aspects of surrealism such as dreams, but it has others such as the mixture of realism and fantasy.
6. For the definitions of “surrealism” as conceived by Andre Breton, see C.W.E. Bigsby (1972), pp. 37 - 38.
7. Bigsby (1972),, p. 37.
8. Paul Tiyambe Zeleza(1994), All other references are to this edition.
9. *Chambers* (1972), pp. 623-624.
10. The fire motif here is reminiscent of the story of Prometheus. See Betty Radice, (1973), pp. 205-206.
11. This is probably an allusion to the case of Rodney King which triggered the Los Angeles racial riots and fire in the early 1990s.
12. See, for instance, the ancient creation myths in Wolverton(1975), pp. 3-10.
13. See Ulli Beier ed (1966) p. viii.
14. For a description of the golden age, see Marinelli (1971) p. 15.
15. Marinelli (1971), p.16.
16. Northrop Frye (1963), pp. 12-21.

17. Northrop Frye (1963), p.21.
18. Northrop Frye (1963), p. 21.
19. Marinelli (1971), pp.15-16.

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