

Book review

Jack Mapanje, *skipping without ropes*. New-Castle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1998, 80pp.

The work under review is Jack Mapanje's third volume of verse after *Of Chameleons and Gods* and *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison*. It falls into three sections, namely, "From Mikuyu Prison to Exile", "Impressions of Exile" and "The Return of the Rhinoceros".

There is considerable overlap between the prison poems in the first section of the new collection and those in *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison*. The poet takes time to shed light on the experiences described in the earlier work. For example, the piece with which the new book opens, 'The Following Dawn the Boots', talks about the first night spent in prison and the speaker waking up to this new reality. The title poem itself starts off by dramatizing the lack of exercise in detention. However, as it develops, it transcends the world of prison and encompasses the inmate's home, the mountains and the entire globe. Several compositions return to the immediate aftermath of the poet's release in order to record some memorable encounters.

The circumstances of Mapanje's departure for exile are given in a moving poem called 'The Vipers Who Minute Our Twitches'. Here the writer and his family bid farewell to assembled relatives and friends. As is evident from the title of the piece and from the reference to 'informers' in the text itself, the main reason for leaving is a growing sense of insecurity in their own land. Although according to another composition the poet's release from detention was unconditional, the police still have him under surveillance, making it difficult for him to settle down to a normal life. To make things worse, the label 'rebel' previously applied exclusively to him, now covers his wife and children as well, and their awkward exit, with the help of 'friends from/Far away' appears to be the fulfilment of a long dreaded government ban.

An important motif runs through Mapanje's new book. This is the saying "Travel so that you can see the (strange) navels of the world's hounds" (p.75). It is present in several key poems including, in the first section, 'Another Clan of Road-fated Shrews' and 'The Vipers Who Minute Our Twitches'. A more significant context for it, however, is

the part of the collection entitled "Impressions of Exile". Travelling alone or with his family, the poet registers telling encounters with the outside world. 'The Delights of Moving House, Tang Hall', for example, describes a head-on collision with British racism, as the newly arrived African family seeks a home in the United Kingdom. In 'St Margaret Chitherow of York', the poet acknowledges that his host country too has a history of persecuting dissenters. Recorded elsewhere is a failed attempt to trace the Dutch sender of a postcard which miraculously reached the poet in detention. Two spirited efforts express solidarity with the executed Nigerian writer, Ken Saro-Wiwa, while another pair mourns the victims of the genocide in Rwanda. The poetry ranges far and wide, conferring upon its author a truly international status.

Since moving to Britain in August, 1991, Jack Mapanje has been a keen follower of events back home, corresponding with several relatives and friends. He has also visited Malawi on a number of occasions. Included in the third section of *Skipping without Ropes* are poems dealing with the fast changing social and political scene at home. Particularly relevant as reference points are the Catholic Bishops' Lenten Letter of March, 1992, the referendum of 1993 (during which Malawians voted overwhelmingly for a multiparty system of government), the Malawi Army's disarming of the much feared Young Pioneers in Operations Bwezani later the same year, and the general elections of May, 1994, through which the United Democratic Front (U.D.F) came to power. Together these developments brought to a dramatic end the thirty year iron fisted rule of Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda, the person Jack Mapanje holds ultimately responsible for his incarceration in Mikuyu Prison as well as for his subsequent exile.

While sharing the general euphoria of his fellow country men, the poet warns them against the fabrication of false myths in the new dispensation:

so when you turn over the new leaf of
This gentle nation, do not tell the children
Another lie,...

Do not dare another fib, for many invisible
Voices have invested in this victory of ours,
Many more than you will ever conceive! (p. 70)

Most characteristic features of Mapanje's style reappear in the new book. These include wry humour, irony, the rhetorical question and the fable. It is notable with respect to the last mentioned device that the poet's favourite target, the late Hastings Banda, is cast variously as 'the monster,' 'our lion', 'the beast', 'our life serpent' and 'elephant'. Other *dramatis personae* are portrayed as rhinos, buffaloes and hyenas, while the poet

by turns presents himself as a chameleon, a pigeon or a swallow. All this implies that the poetry is still accessible to a wide public, especially at home. If at all Malawian readers are going to have any problems understanding Mapanje's future poetry, that will most probably be because of its remoteness from their everyday experiences. This disturbing tendency is already apparent in the poems recounting the writer's travels abroad which comprise the middle section of the volume. To make the point more bluntly, from now on the poet will have to think seriously about what constitutes his primary audience and learn to adjust his sights accordingly.

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