

Opinion

The panopticon in Malawi's literary criticism

Steve Chimombo

Introduction

It is fortunate that some writers are given an opportunity to respond to their critics otherwise they would die mutely at the mercy of hostile and misguided responses. I am ungagging myself to respond to Mdika N. Tembo's "Stuck in Napolo's Rut" (*JH* 16 2002). My rejoinder is a direct echo to his title. I maintain that Tembo himself is enmeshed in a critical rut he has deliberately espoused to the detriment of honest criticism. Here, I am enlikening his critical rut to the panopticon syndrome.

The panopticon syndrome

The late Professor Edward Said of Columbia University who taught me modern literary theory and criticism used to lament in his classes the tendency of different critics to subscribe too much to established schools of criticism. Young critics coming after them were even timorous to venture out into their own original thinking for fear of upsetting their tutors or derailing accepted literary canons or dogmas. My professor equated this alignment to the panopticon popularized by Michel Foucault recently (Foucault 2000). In summary, a panopticon was an eighteenth century one-way surveillance architectural structure to enable warders to watch prison inmates without themselves being observed. Initially, the prisoners were aware of the warder's presence and the fact that they were under observation. So they behaved themselves accordingly. However, after a time, there was no need for the warders to be present at all for the prisoners to behave themselves. The panopticon mentality had been ingrained in them.

According to Professor Said, the panopticon mentality works similarly in literary theory and criticism. [I dare say, even in colonialism, religion, teaching methodologies, globalisation, etc whether in Western or African camps.]

Emerging critics zealously fall into the rut set up by their masters in spite of the literary material under scrutiny protesting to be interpreted differently. In the Malawian context we see young critics who read Napolo into everything that Chimombo has written. We shall take Hangson Msiska as a starting point via Anthony Nazombe and see how panopticism infected Mдика Tembo.

After an impressive discussion of the *Napolo Poems*, Hangson Msiska concludes with statements related to the density of the earlier poems and the transparency of the recent ones:

The example of Steve Chimombo's recent long poem shows the pitfalls of an aesthetic that has not adapted itself adequately to changed circumstances. Chimombo's *A Referendum of the Forest Creatures* written during the transition from a one-party state to a multi-party democracy employs the same methods of presentation as his earlier anthologies (...). Though the metaphorical density of myth and folklore is still there, it no longer has the multiple referentiality of the geological agency of the *Napolo* collections (...). The formulaic structure of the poem is shorn of the complexity of the structural organization of *Napolo* (*The Quiet Chameleon* pp.96-97).

The fabulation might have been generated from the same initial impulse. However, not in any instance did the poet model himself on the *Napolo Poems*. There are no direct or indirect references to the earlier poems. It belongs to a different period altogether.

It is, perhaps, only Anthony Nazombe who read the "Forest Creatures" series right (Nazombe 1994). After the Banda era, he ventured, it was no longer fashionable to be cryptic à la Jack Mapanje or to camouflage one's statements in obscure metaphors à la Chimombo. One wrote plainly and spoke directly to the readers: this is what I mean. In other words, contrary to Msiska's pronouncements, the poet had read the socio-political setting right and had already adjusted his aesthetic to the changed circumstances. Evidently Msiska had taken the plain statement adopted or the fabulation to be an aesthetic failure to adjust on the writer's part or his decline in craftsmanship.

Tembo echoes the above misplaced perceptions when he writes:

His [Chimombo's] overacquaintance with the mythical-cum-historical subterranean serpent, Napolo, and the equally horrendous woes it is supposed to bring once roused to anger as told in some pieces have now stopped producing their intended effect on the people (...) because of the repetitive, unavailing (unrelieved?) and somewhat, unidirectional (one-directional?) stance with which they (the works) are handled (p.87).

Like Msiska, Tembo maintains the writer produces only one type of literature which has now grown insipid through overuse and lack of improvement or variation. One wonders if the critics have read any of the other recent works which have no bearing on the Napolo phenomenon and have different frameworks or metaphors.

Yet Tembo acknowledges Chimombo's other literary products and summarizes them for the reader's benefit:

Seven full-length books of poetry (and ... single poems) and a string of other literary endeavours in such fields as the short story, the novel, criticisms and playwriting (p.89).

However, it is doubtful if Tembo actually read the works themselves before pronouncing his judgements on the writer being in a "rut". Chimombo has published over thirty titles, a small fraction of which are based on Napolo or folklore. The "Forest Creatures" series, definitely not. *Breaking the Beadstrings*, no. *The Basket Girl*, a novellette, no. How could Napolo come into it? *The Rainmaker; Sister! Sister! Wachiona Ndani?*, the plays, no. The short stories, none. The prose writings, no. So where is the rut?

The writer has moved on. His critics have not. They are the ones who are wallowing in the rut of Napolo, now a discarded metaphor.

Beyond the panopticon

Tembo makes another startling statement that there are few critics:

[Chimombo has] received comparatively little critical attention (...). Apart from Anthony Nazombe (...) I am yet to come across other renowned scholars who have critically appraised his works.

After looking myopically around and not found any other critics, Tembo advances his own "significant reasons" for this paucity:

The very features which ought to draw critical attention from the reading community seem to prompt critics to keep a respectful distance from any of his work (pp.87-8).

Tembo becomes his own authority in advancing reasons for this critical reticence. Yet Nazombe (1993), whom Tembo mentions, gives a more plausible reason albeit just as limited: the poet writes "privatist" poetry. Interesting that Chimombo can write what is "privatist" poetry, while Jack Mapanje is "cryptic". However, that is how the panopticon translates itself in Malawi's literary criticism.

Most researchers (and manuals) are wary of a critic who announces that very little has been done in a field. The conclusion is that the critic has not done enough spade work. Now, here is Tembo declaring that there is only one critic on Chimombo. Yet there are other critics and even reviewers on *The Wrath of Napolo* which is the work under discussion. On the Malawian scene alone there is Fiona Johnson Chalamanda (2000). On the *Napolo Poems* see Hangson Msiska himself and Mufunanji Magalasi (1999). The works of these Malawian critics were available to Tembo at the time of his writing. Where was he looking?

The writer himself has got two fat folders entitled "Responses to *Napolo Poems*" and "Responses to *The Wrath of Napolo*". His other works have other separate folders. These folders were accessible to Tembo, if only he had asked for them or even for references to them.

The Internet also has quite an impressive array of criticism on the same writer. One only needs an effective search engine to retrieve the entries listed there.

All the above are basic research sources a critic needs to survey to avoid being accused of being one's own authority.

Basic or deliberate misreadings

The onus should not be on the writer to point out how his works ought to be interpreted. However, where there are basic misreadings the writer cannot just sit back and “simmer with anger” like Tembo (2002). He has to lash out.

A basic misreading is to give the impression that *The Wrath of Napolo* is only about Chilungamo Nkhoma and his quest for the truth behind the sinking of the *MV Maravi*. This reduces the novel to a mere detective story. What about:

- The plight of women under the previous regime?
- Husband-wife relationships in the major characters, black and white?
- The colonial paradigm and the resultant black-white relationships?
- The disillusionment with the current regime?
- The feminist stand of the major female characters?
- The politics of tribalism and regionalism?
- The real meaning of the wrath that is Napolo?

An honest critic could not ignore these substantial sub-themes and pretend he has done justice to the work. Here are spontaneous responses from two expatriate readers who saw some of the essentials of the novel. His Excellency Mr Asbjorn Eidhammer, the Norwegian Ambassador, told the writer after reading the novel: “Now I understand a lot about Malawi and Malawians.” Another, who shall remain nameless for the moment said: “You have to stay a long time with expatriates to be able to portray them the way you did.” These were unsolicited comments. On the other hand, Tembo clutches at trivial “unanswered” questions like:

What is the immigration authority’s stand on Chikondi’s presence in the country? What is her future like? Has she found relations at last? What is the impact of the truth commission? Most of these questions have been raised because of lack of detail in the novel (p.90).

Obviously, Tembo did not read the novel until the end. The answers are already there:

- Chikondi has no problems with the immigration authorities, being a Mandanian and about to be repatriated.

- Gondwe, the politician and proprietor of *Bwalo News*, is going to take her on the staff since she is a journalist. Nkhoma's request is clearly stated on page 592.
- Dzikolidaya is going to take her to her relatives. It says so on pages 536, 586 and 590.
- The president is going to establish a Truth Commission. The representative announces it on page 585. Its future is referred to by the other characters (p.588) and how it will affect the other principal characters (pp.597 and 598).

Where were Tembo's critical eyes on these pages? Are we reading the same novel?

A second misreading is the result of Tembo isolating the issue of the hit squads for special consideration. He says:

The quest is (...) shrouded in a labyrinth of unknown threats – some of them wistful (p.88).

There are several instances when the author introduces these seeming threats on the protagonist and his family (...) the author does not develop those "little threats" for the reader (...) Nor does he qualify them with those artistic innuendos that arrest the reader's emotions (...) Chimombo's "implied reader" is thus shocked to learn that after being kept waiting for something to happen, there is no "information", no moral, no credibility from the other end (...) s/he can only simmer with anger after discovering that s/he has been taken for another ride (p.90).

It does not take a detective to pick out the clues right from the first staged road accident. Susan Mphepo, a passenger at the accident spot, points out Mwale's role in it. As in all investigative reporting, Nkhoma confronts Mwale in the end with the evidence (p.595). Mwale blusters: "you have nothing on me" (p.596). He is surprised that Nkhoma lets him off: "you're not going to take revenge?" (p.598).

The threats need not be overt. In the panopticon image, we started out with: Nkhoma has already internalized them. After the few initial attempts he sees

every “little threat” as an attempt on his life. He subsequently behaves as if he is perpetually a victim of a hit squad, real or imagined. Another “ordinary” Malawian reader in the sense that he is not a “critic” grasped this panopticon image quite readily and without prejudice:

I feel Nkhoma’s suspicious verge on paranoia, as they are based on very thin ice in the early stages: he jumps too early to murder suspicions. But, then, I was never there: I suppose paranoia was the prevailing attitude of the people in the first Republic, of course, based very much on realities (Louis Nthenda).

Those of us who were there and went through the Banda era can appreciate the paranoia and the panopticon effect. We lived with the Special Branch, secret police, youth leaguers, young pioneers and informers. We grew to believe that they were always there even in our very sitting rooms, bathrooms and toilets. Even when I was in New York and was asked about Banda, I had to look around me first before responding. We tended to behave as if they were omnipresent (Big Brother is watching you à la Orwell’s *1984*). When we emerged into the Muluzi era some of us continued behaving as if things had not changed. People kept reminding us: “this is not the Banda era, you know.” As recent as 2004, I said to a colleague I was afraid of someone I knew was in the intelligence in the Banda era. He said: “those things ended with Banda.” I rejoined, “did they?”

To come back to Nkhoma. Even if the hit squads had ceased operations, Nkhoma’s mindset made him behave as if they were still in evidence. To miss this panopticon effect is to misread the novel. Tembo does. Nthenda read it right: given the same clues and information.

Unsupported assertions

In trying to understand Tembo’s responses to the novel, I am comparing them with other readers’ responses to the same text. A few other examples will suffice.

Tembo’s judgmental statements are represented by the assertion that:

There is no artistic (some would quickly add wit and grandeur of expression) that could be said to help structure the novel and sustain its plot (p.89).

Yet the novel is based on one of the strongest classic structures of the quest which sustains the plot. Fiona Johnson Chalamanda (2002: 30) could say on the same issue, "The details of the plot are intricate and complex."

Tembo asserts without substantiating:

There is no brilliance of presentation in the text. What we have are gratuitous descriptions of scenes and events, and boring digressions that lead nowhere (...) I would like to suggest that the author desist from introducing scenes or events which he thinks he cannot handle to the audience's satisfaction until he can demonstrate some knowledge and understanding of the importance of such scenes and events (p.90).

A few examples of some of these scenes and events would have helped us to gauge whether or not the assertions are valid. However, Johnson Chalamanda has this to say about the same aspects of the novel, which she believes were handled satisfactorily:

The Wrath of Napolo is at its strongest when it explores the processes of memory and writing history. Chimombo makes experimental and visual use of typefaces and fonts to depict official documents and letters, conveying a sense of immediacy, as we appear to be reading facsimile reports, minutes, etc. (p.31).

Tembo finds all this contributing to "the tediousness of the text" (p.90) blind to the artistic design behind it. In the last sentence, he condemns it as "a collection of inflated writing" (p.91). Johnson Chalamanda, on the other hand, finds the style "often racy and idiomatic" (p.30). Both critics were presumably reading the same text.

The work and not the person

One of the diseases of argumentation is to stop presenting your points and start attacking the writer behind the text. It is a common logical fallacy. There are several instances when Tembo forgets he is examining a literary artefact and directs attention at the writer even calling to question his training and qualifications:

- Wonder along whether Chimombo (...) reads enough of the numerous textbook precepts on the art of poetry, criticism, playwriting and the novel itself (p.87).

Although it is only one recent novel he is writing about, he makes statements about the writer's other and even whole writing career. Another logical fallacy. Then he advises the author:

- How he can make full use of his literary training (p.87).

As above, another logical fallacy. Tembo then takes upon himself to point out what the writer is suffering from as he exhibits:

- The carelessness of a man who cannot plan and scheme and shape.

As above. One wonders who to believe Tembo or Fiona Johnson Chalamanda?

One wonders what could inspire such divergent readings of the same text. Tembo's declared aim is "to bring to light some significant flaws" (p.88). He pursues this aim so zealously that he is blind to any positive qualities the novel has and which Johnson-Chalamanda actually brings out as we have seen above.

This crusading zeal also blinds Tembo to his own "editorial carelessness" (p.90). He corrects "without a drag" (p.455) (i.e. without smoking a joint) to "drug" (p.91) yet this is a common expression among smokers and even non-smokers familiar with the lingo. He corrects "chamba" fish (p.576) to "chambo", the common type caught, sold and eaten every day (p.91). Yet the "chamba" fish the writer had in mind are the reputed cannibal type as indicated in the context "mauled at by chamba fish" (p.576). The ordinary type could not be described as "mauling" anything. A little bit of reading on the marine life of Lake Malawi would have helped cure this over zealously.

Therapy for the panopticon syndrome

The panopticon syndrome is infectious. It is not only the prisoners who believe that it works. The warders, too. Both the prisoners and warders are so locked in its workings they cannot escape its effect without some form of therapy. It cannot be cured by simply getting up to check if the prisoners are still behaving

themselves or if the warders are still on duty out there. Yet, it can be cured by simply waking up and exposing what the panopticon is really like.

In literary theory and criticism there are some tried remedies. They, too, work. Most of the remedies have already been suggested as this discussion progressed above. First, the work of art should be approached from its own parameters. It says "This is what I am, take me as I am, not as grandmaster of literary theory so-and-so says." Both the acolyte and mentor have everything to lose when the text refuses to conform to their external yardstick or foreign framework or alien aesthetic. Second, one critic alone cannot give you a balanced view of the text. Read several critics first and base your conclusions on what you have come up with. Both the negative and positive (and even neutral) views will give you a solid background for presenting your own views and intuitions on the text. Independent readers going through your presentations can see how you arrived at your conclusions. They can accept or reject without being frustrated by asking why they are only being given a one-sided argument. Third, no amount of assertions will persuade an intelligent reader without validation, confirmation or exemplification. The text is there to prove that your statements are supportable from within it. Or vice versa, the text gives you substance from which to draw your conclusions. Any literary theory or criticism should only confirm what is there. If it does not, scrap it. It is not appropriate for this particular text. Fourth, any argumentation is fraught with logical fallacies. Be on the look out for them especially in literary criticism, yours and other people's. The most dangerous one is the argument against the man because you are now on libelous ground. Finally, the terminology we use betrays us to which literary school of theory or criticism we belong. Although I am using an eighteenth century image, the panopticon, as indicated at the beginning, was popularized in the twentieth century by Foucault – he only died recently. In any case, I am quoting my University of Columbia professor, himself, still alive and influential in modern literary theory and criticism. However, once you use terms like "wit" and "grandeur of expression," as Tembo does, one wonders if you are not using archaic terms or literary tools for a modern text. As I admonished above, the panopticon syndrome is not only a prison metaphor, it is a mentality that manifests itself on different levels. The best cure for it is to get out of the critical rut.

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