

# Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Alfred Msadala's Exploration of Life Between Birth and Death in Malangano Book Review

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*"I am writing for my own honour. And I do not intend to bore you with a thesis. But I will take this opportunity to correct some facts; facts that are being misrepresented in the social media." (Msadala 144).*

Malangano reads like an awareness of specific facts about life and death and anything in between. The novel tackles issues like mental illness and how people associate with those inflicted by it. The book also comments on social classes and the problems in different homes. Malangano means *testament*, taken from the Ciyawo language of Zambia. The novel's title comes to life when a character named after it appears and fulfils its meaning as he becomes proof of what Molly, the protagonist, wanted in life and how much she had cared for someone once. Msadala is a poet, critic and novelist who believes that a work of art reflects the author's feelings, especially in relation to their background and the context they are writing in.

The novel is divided into two parts; part one is an introduction to the protagonist and her interaction with other characters. The book opens with the main character, Molly, a young girl who finds her journey in life and the travails lonesome as no one is worthy of being her confidant. She finds comfort in a familiar face who happens to be her childhood friend, Henry, but appears to be mentally disturbed. Molly develops a relationship with this newfound friend, and

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everyone seems to notice her change in behaviour which calls for concern, but no one is willing to question her. She writes “mental illness” in her book after her first encounter with Henry, reflecting the author’s way of expressing emotions through writing. Molly’s inability to express her concern about her discovery of Henry and the possibility of him being mentally challenged is only written down and not spoken about, signifying the lack of knowledge from the community about such conditions. The openly discussed issues eradicate false myths, but in the absence of that, people are left to their opinions. In the case of Molly, she is not aware of how to approach Henry because he is behaving “abnormally”. There is so much tension in the secrecy that builds walls in Molly’s relationship with her parents, best friend Doris and naNkhoma, the house help. Her strange behaviour is even noticed at school and calls for concern, but the school lacks sympathy as they heap accusations on Molly and try to discredit her by claiming that her involvement with Henry affects her grades. Regardless of the concerns of everyone around her, she chooses to be by her friend’s side and offers him food and love. Molly continues to meet Henry in secret, which later leads to a situation of life and death.

Part two recounts the consequences of Molly’s secrecy, and Msadala takes us through Molly’s life after a tragic event. Later we encounter Malangano, who is the complete opposite of Molly as he is more determined, outspoken and a go-getter. He has a plan for his life and overcomes his obstacles with great humility. He finds happiness despite his poor background. The ending appeals to the reader to reconsider certain stereotypes against people with mental disorders through Doris’s perspective, who later becomes Malangano’s guardian and lover. Doris’ reaction towards Malangano, who appears not to be mentally disturbed despite his background, dismisses the negative thoughts she had about people with such conditions. Doris also condemns her colleagues’ behaviour by writing a letter to address a personal issue that she feels needs public attention. This creates a platform for Msadala to address private matters that affect society, as it happened with Malangano’s family and his love affair with Doris. Doris’ intention appears to be that of a concerned citizen who needs to school the ignorant society of “intellectuals”.

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Molly is depicted as being sad from beginning to end. The author intentionally tries to portray a depressed individual with no sense of what is going on, and a lack of understanding from society makes it worse. This is made evident by the school that pushes Molly back into a shell by confronting her with the news that has started spreading of her involvement with Henry. Everyone seems concerned about their relationship since Henry is “abnormal”, which is questionable considering none of them had noticed him until his death. Molly assumes Henry is “abnormal” because of his rugged clothes and lack of communication. The novel depicts Henry as abnormal as he behaves out of the ordinary by having no next of kin to look after him, and his homeless situation supports that idea of instability. His mental condition is inconclusive even after his death.

The novel revolves around the relationships Molly develops and seems to break as she goes through a “precarious period”, in the words of aNankhoma. The rest of the characters flesh out and create a relationship with Molly. Molly evokes a sense of sympathy in the reader and causes them to despise her for some of her choices in life. However, she is too quiet, which ruins most of her relationships as she fails to voice out her thoughts and seek help. This echoes her secret meetings with Henry. On the other hand, Molly’s parents are to blame as they are afraid to approach her for fear of upsetting or making her rebellious. Their role as parents is questionable but typical of parents that are well-to-do and always want to treat their children like they are fragile, which is confirmed by naNkhoma as she appears to be the voice of reason when Molly’s parents act as if nothing has happened. They barely discuss issues with Molly even when they sense or are alerted of any unusual behaviour. This echoes the theme of snobbery as the author portrays Molly as an entitled child that does not feel the need to report everything to her parents. As a result, her relationship with her parents is almost non-existent. Molly’s father appears distant in attending to her issues as he constantly asks his wife rather than approaching her.

Malangano explores the cycle of life through characters who experience birth, death and the energy in between. Some characters fail to understand and

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accept situations and are caught between a rock and a hard place. Msadala narrates the story of characters who live and die with circumstances they can and cannot control.

The characters are well developed and represent people present in our societies, for example, a domestic worker that turns into a family member due to their loyalty and time frame, friends like Doris that are not reliable as they change character when something wrong happens and fail to recognize a friend in need, fathers that act tough but have no idea that their actions have consequences. For some reason, the book is sombre for the most part until Malangano appears with a natural character that suits him with his sad story and upbringing. However, despite all that, there is a change of luck when he meets Doris. Malangano becomes the central character for me even though he comes towards the end, but his role has a lasting effect on the reader. He is determined, knows what he wants and is a go-getter regardless of the circumstances he finds himself in. He appears to be an extension of Molly as he seems to live where Molly felt dead; he voices his concerns while Molly is silent. As the story starts, it does not reveal much as it is dragging in announcing the central idea, but the technique keeps one turning the pages to know what happens to the characters. It's a slow read but worth it in the end, as the characters remain with you as they grow and develop new habits and behaviours.

One disappointing part of the story is the lack of completion on the character of Henry, considering that mental disorder is a taboo issue, especially amongst men in Malawi. Still, now it has become a widely spoken about topic. Henry is a character without a voice, and his abrupt ending appears to be problematic as if the issue of mental disorder needs to be avoided and not addressed. The circumstances that lead to Henry's silence are not disclosed, and how he becomes homeless, if at all he is/was, is unknown, leaving the reader wondering if his role is not that important to be explored. However, there is a mention of his parent's death and how he is left with his brother, who is also an absent character, and that can be a bit frustrating as his ending is tragic but hardly looked into. Since

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this proves disappointing, the author may do this deliberately, intending to raise awareness of the issue that must be addressed as society deals with it, silencing the issues surrounding mental illness especially concerning men. The author talks about topics relevant in the Malawian context, such as mental illness, suicide and matters to do with the property division after the deceased leaves no will. These are issues that dominate most social media and printed news, and currently, different activists are raising awareness of the various problems.

The novel is a must-read to understand what ordinary Malawians go through daily and how some issues go unnoticed because our society assumes we do not have such problems, and if we do, they belong to a specific group of people. I would rate the novel seven stars out of ten for the plot twist, and relevance of the explored and elaborated themes. Other characters address Henry as a mentally disturbed boy, but no one can confirm except for their description of him wearing dirty clothes and not showing where he is currently staying. Molly mentions his past, and the sadness in it could be one of the reasons why he acts the way he does, as trauma usually affects people. The tone is relatively light until death happens, and many characters die, and some lose loved ones, creating a sombre tone and a sad mood. This appeals to the audience who understand people's circumstances when death happens, such as the change of fate in life and fortune. The author is great at teasing out problematic issues in the Malawian society like parent-child relationships, death and the consequences of having no will, as that leads to relatives taking advantage of the situation and exploiting the deceased's remaining family members like the widow/ widower and children.

Msadala has outdone himself for a first novel in tackling relevant issues creatively; however, the grammar needs to be assessed as there were a few instances I had to re-read to get the point. Also, the terminology is not ordinary, requiring a person to read whilst trying to find the meaning. On the other hand, everyday language makes it easy for the reader to relate to and understand the conversations. There are passages where speeches were made, but the language used appears absurd regarding the age group and the status of the people speaking. However,

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the infusion of local words brought it home as most people would familiarize themselves when one speaks their language. This also shows the need to respect and preserve our culture through literature.