

Opinion

Stuck in Napolo's rut: Steve Chimombo's *The Wrath of Napolo*

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After seven full-length books of poetry (and at least a substantial number of single poems that continue to appear in various publications) and a string of other literary endeavours in such fields as the short-story, the novel, folklore, criticisms and play writing, it is not hard to discern that Steve Chimombo has so far received comparatively little critical attention deserving of his three or so decades of artistic output. Apart from Anthony Nazombe who has pedantically reviewed some of his poetry¹, I am yet to come across other renowned scholars who have critically appraised his works.

Kofi Awoonor, echoing Dylan Thomas, states that one of the handicaps besetting Amos Tutuola's works is that he continues to write the same things he has already re/presented in his earlier works. In his review of Tutuola's sixth and last book, *Ajayi and His Inherited Poverty*, Awoonor fails to hide his annoyance when he states that readers 'are getting tired of these stories now; will poor Amos come out and tell [them] something else?'² he asks. It is time perhaps to wonder aloud whether Chimombo, like Tutuola before him, reads enough of the numerous textbook precepts on the art of poetry, criticism, play writing and the novel itself and how, in principle as well as in practice, he can make full use of his literary training. Simply put, I think Chimombo's pieces are oftentimes bypassed by many a reader/critic because of the repetitive, unavailing and somewhat undirectional stance with which they are handled.

Another more significant reason may be that his 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 of his pieces have now stopped producing their intended effect on the people. His Napolo tales have since died a natural death because, as Charles Nnolim would have put it, the issues that [would help] keep them current [have now] faded into the limbo of memory.³ Most baffling in all this is the fact that the very features which ought to draw critical attention from the reading community seem ironically to prompt critics to keep a respected distance from any of

his work.

The present criticism brings to light some significant flaws which, I think, continue to show in Chimombo's recent novel, *The Wrath of Napolo*.⁴ *The Wrath of Napolo* is Chimombo's sequel to *The Basket Girl*, his first novel. The story of the novel revolves around the movements of Chilungamo Nkhoma, an investigative reporter who embarks on an assignment to uncover events that led to the foundering of *MV Maravi* fifty years before. The quest is, however, shrouded in a labyrinth of unknown threats - some of them wistful - intended for the protagonist and his family, until what would otherwise have been a successful mission is appropriated by a hoard of greedy politicians and everything climaxes in a mass rally in which all the 'concerned' parties are seen croaking for truth and reconciliation.

The pervading theme of *The Wrath of Napolo* turns on the conflict between honesty and falsehood in human affairs. In spite of all the trials and tribulations the protagonist experiences, the end of the text appears to hold out that truth, in bondage since time immemorial, will again be resurrected. There are numerous wrongs committed by the colonial government (one would quickly add the disillusionment and accusations of failed promises of the first and second regimes) which, the author feels, ought to be brought out in the open for the sake of transparency and accountability. The hero of the novel, Nkhoma, is determined to pursue truth to its end until the whole society is cleansed of all the 'terrible wrongs' done it. He declares hence:

There is something sick in a society that can remain silent for fifty years on such an obvious derailment of justice.... By asking pertinent questions, I'm making people think, I'm awakening their dead consciences to a terrible wrong done in their lifetime (p. 314).

It is through this all-encapsulating theme that we can suggest that Chimombo here advances toward one of the great questions that have been posed since the beginning of time - justice - and adumbrates the answers by the time we are through with the text.

But it is time to turn from the author's treatment of theme to the major concern of this piece - the plot and style of the book. The plot of *The Wrath of Napolo* shows the heroic determinism of the Nkhoma family, one would almost say, to mine gold where all the others have tried and failed. The novel is held together and organized basically around the motif of 'stubbornness' or strong-mindedness of the Nkhoma family in general, and Chilungamo in particular. This is the type of family that would not let the proverbial sleeping dogs lie. In Chilungamo we see a man following a seemingly

thorny path that in the end turns out to be only a hoax aimed at dissuading him from attending to his chosen course.

Chimombo shows great skill in handling the tenacity of this man. Early in the text, when a plan to resuscitate things dead and buried is broached, Chilungamo's commitment comes to the fore: 'If I have to get to every little port or village where survivors and relatives are hibernating or dying I will' (p.24). Again, when Thoko, his wife, expresses doubt that he might not be permitted to have access to all the necessary background information to his investigations, we see him undaunted in his chosen path: 'If I have to break down company doors or break into archives to get it, I will' (p.26). With Ted Mwale, next, when he is forewarned that he might not be successful because someone along the way is bound to withhold the much needed information, he forcefully reminds his room-mate of old: 'You know me. I like finding out the things behind the hush-hush' (p.48). Finally, when Susan hints to him that the accident they had had might have been deliberately arranged to dissuade him from pursuing the *MV Maravi* saga, he chooses to ignore the warning signs.

Chimombo, then, writes what reads like a detective novel. In the so-called detective novel, the motivating forces are tenacity and an ambition to deliver in a not too conducive environment.

But this is as far as the author can go in articulating Chilungamo's decisiveness to the reader. Beyond this, I think, there is no artistic merit (some would quickly add wit and grandeur of expression) that could be said to help structure the novel and sustain its plot. Chilungamo may impress as a man with firmness of purpose only to emerge, upon closer examination, as a confused journalist who does not want to do what he is supposed to do. He can best be described as a careless reporter who is himself creating cracks into the protective fence surrounding him, and his family. First, his lack of seriousness is seen when he picks up anyone from the street and immediately takes them into confidence without even bothering to know about their background. One such person is Dzikolidaya, the watchman. Second, he exposes himself further by telling this 'unknown man' of the vulnerability of his house when he shows Dzikolidaya all the 'weak points' around his house and answers all the leading questions (pp.87-88). Then there is the *sans-logis*, Khobili, whom he takes to his house without even knowing what is it that he wants to discuss with him (p.103). All this could have made a strong case if the author endowed his hero with wit to handle these strays into his homestead which, unfortunately, is found wanting in the text. If Chilungamo fulfils his mission, nothing is clarified by saying so.

Another artistic device which could have helped sustain plot in the text is that of use of threats. There are several instances when the author introduces these seeming threats on the protagonist and his family. We can pick out four such instances to illustrate the point. The first incident happens at Chilungamo's house, where a headless black chicken is found in his garage. This, as Chikhwaya says, does not bode well for the household (p.179). It is important to note that Chilungamo's insistence on the absurdity of believing in omens, superstitious though they may seem, reflects his denial to look beyond the present situation. The gardener's speculation might be poppycock, but for the reporter this ought to present to him food for thought which, to our dismay, it doesn't. The next three incidents happen away from home. In all of them we get the sense that the protagonist's life is in serious danger: the car stalling, or having loose bolts which lead to near disaster (pp.139-40); rocks being mounted in the middle of the road (p.246); and, lastly, an attempted assault on the protagonist's life when he is leaving a drinking joint (pp.361-62).

But the author does not develop these 'little threats' for the reader. Nor does he qualify them with those artistic innuendos that arrest the reader's emotions. All we are told is that they are actions of 'hit squads hired by unknown adversaries'⁵ What a round claim to make of threat to life on so scant information! 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. 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 to the reader.

Again, there are several points of contention in the novel which needed clarification. What is the immigration authority's stand on Chikondi's presence in the country? What is her future like? Has she found her 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.

Let me now turn to style, the manner of expression, in *The Wrath of Napolo*. Style is one of the things that contribute to the tediousness of the text. Chimombo could well be said to be careless in this matter, the carelessness of a man who cannot plan and scheme and shape. 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. There is also too much dialogue. At some point, we even fail to distinguish between

dialogue and newspaper articles (pp.341-44, 384-85, 579-82).

There are also instances where documentary veracity is doubtful. For example, the number of victims at the sinking of the *MV Maravi* keeps on increasing as we flip through the pages '200 passengers and crew... lost their lives in the *Maravi* sank on the 30th July, 1946' (p.1), 'over three hundred people lost their lives' (p.373), '...four or five hundred Mandanians... lost their lives tragically when the *MV Maravi* sank' (p.571), 'more than five hundred people died in the *Maravi* alone' (p.581). One is left to wonder if at all the author was aware of this confusion when he was writing the book.

Finally, one must not fail to draw attention to Chimombo's editorial carelessness. I must confess that I am not a grammarian, but I think even a semi-literate audience can point out such needless errors severally scattered in the text. We are told that Brainious Jere, the university lecturer, is Brains (p.25) for short. But later on, the author confuses the reader by referring to the same person as Brians (p.64). Then there is u-turn (p.34) instead of 'U-turn'; publised (p.82) instead of 'published'; hadlooked (p.125) instead of 'had looked'; quess (p.161) instead of 'guess'; By for now (p.174) instead of 'Bye for now'; Lake Mandania (p.183) when it is supposed to be 'Lake Tamanda'; controversial (p.320) instead of 'controversial'; carthefts (p.320) instead of 'car thefts'; the west (p.322) instead of 'the West'; several hundred (p.418) instead of 'several hundreds'; the police becomes (p. 454) instead of 'the police become'; without a drag (p. 455) where it is supposed to be 'without a drug'; where millions has been involved (p.479) instead of 'where millions have been involved'; *kanyeny,a* (p. 485) where it is supposed to be '*kanyenya*' ; nkhotho beer (pp. 517 & 524) when it is supposed to be '*mkonho beer*'; he was haing (p.546) instead of 'he was having'; Chamba fish (p.576) instead of 'Chambo fish'. The list could be inexhaustible. Such linguistic infelicities make one wonder if at all the author-editor is well informed on the importance of proof-reading before a literary piece is out for public consumption.

The foregoing analysis prompts the conclusion that *The Wrath of Napolo* leaves a lot to be desired as a novel in terms of form and style. After all the promises and expectations on reading the blurb, the reader is annoyed to discover that the whole five hundred and ninety-nine paged novel is but a collection of inflated writing in which so little is delivered.

Notes

1. Anthony Nazombe, "Malawian Poetry in English from 1970 to the Present Day: A Study of Myth and Socio-Political Change in the Work of Steve Chimombo, Jack Mapanje, Frank Chipasula and Felix Mnthali", PhD Thesis, Sheffield University, June 1983.
2. See Awoonor's class discussion at the University of Texas, Austin on May 18, 1974. In Karen L. Morrel, (ed.), *In Person: Achebe, Awoonor and Soyinka*, Seattle: African Studies Program, University of Washington, 1975, p. 154.
3. Charles E. Nnolim, 'Structure and Theme in Munonye's *Oil Man of Obange*': In Eldred D. Jones, (ed.), *Africa Literature Today: 12 New Writing, New Approaches*. London and New York: Heinemann and Africana Publishing Company, 1982, p. 165.
4. Steve Chimombo, *The Wrath of Napolo*, Zomba: Wasi Publications, 2000. All page references are to this edition.
5. Taken from the blurb of the text.

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