

Book review

Leveling the Ground in Chichewa Literature: Francis Moto's *Trends in Malawian Literature*. Zomba: Chancellor College Publications, 2001. 194pp.

Francis Moto's critical book, *Trends in Malawian Literature*, marks a significant development in the study of Malawian literature, in general, and Chichewa literature, in particular. Though Moto is not the first scholar to attempt a critical appraisal of Chichewa literature, he is the first to produce a book with an ambitious and serious discussion of Chichewa drama, poetry and novels all at once. He rightly observes that "Despite the existence of a sizeable literature written in Chichewa no sustained substantial and extensive critical appreciations and analyses have been made to date. Some of the few that exist do not deal with the material in a detailed and revealing manner" (p.11). Lack of criticism for works by Malawians has seen the names of many important writers fading into oblivion. This has the negative effect of discouraging would-be Malawian writers who do not see their predecessors appearing in the limelight. By dealing with Chichewa literature, a literature that is despised by many ill-informed scholars and students, Moto acts as a torchbearer leading his kith and kin back to their roots. The great challenge that Moto put upon himself in dealing with three genres in this text cannot be over emphasized.

The 194-paged book is divided into nine chapters. Chapter one is the introduction of the book. In this section Moto, quite fittingly, looks at how politics affected literary production in Malawi, how the oppressive dictatorial Banda regime affected literary output and how the stiff censorship rules crippled Malawian writing from 1964-1994. Moto observes that following the establishment of the Censorship Board in 1972, after the introduction of a Censorship and Control of Entertainment Act of 1968, "the press was muzzled and writers risked imprisonment once it was known or suspected that their literary output was critical of the leadership" (p.5). It is fairly well known how form and style especially in poetry was affected as the authors tried to devise survival tactics to outwit the uncompromising censors, in some cases leading to notoriously obscure versification. The author also briefly comments on the impact of the declaration of Chinyanja (later Chichewa) as a national language on vernacular literature. Like censorship, this had its negative repercussions on Malawian writing as "...some scholars saw [the declaration] as a political ploy to impose a Chewa identity on all Malawians who are both ethnically diverse as well as multilingual" (p.9). Worse still, the neg-

ative attitude held by many towards literature written in Chichewa, a language they consider 'inferior' to European languages, has affected the development of not only Chichewa literature but also Malawian literature in general. More importantly, Moto also traces the development of Malawian writing to early missionary initiatives. He rightly observes that "Malawi, like most countries in Africa, owes its early written literature to the efforts of the early missionaries" (p.12). This ancestry was to affect the messages in the early Malawian literature for, as Moto puts it, "the missionary initiatives ... made it plainly obvious that the literature was meant to Christianise the so-called backward and barbaric natives and bring them closer to the western idea of God" (p.12). Thus, works like Josiah Phiri's *Kalenga ndi Mnzake*, Samuel Nthara's *Nthondo (Man of Africa)*, Sylvester Paliani's 1930 *Kunadza Mchape* and *Sewero la Mlandu wa Nkhanga* "clearly emphasize the distinction between good and evil in a very straight forward manner" (p.13).

Although Moto later mentions the language debate in African literature initiated by Ngugi wa Thiong'o in his *Decolonising the Mind*, he does not take sides. He simply comments on the necessity of writing in one's mother tongue. One can easily guess why. His precarious situation of criticizing/analyzing Chichewa works in English, a foreign language, would make him a black sheep in Ngugi's flock. At this stage Moto also introduces the dominant theme in the book, the hitherto ignored question in the analysis of Chichewa literature, namely the portrayal of women in Malawian writing. The feminist ideology reveals itself clearly here. The author does not hesitate to point out that the female has been portrayed as an appendage of man in most East and Central African writing. He, however, singles out Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Tsitsi Dangarembga, and Tiyambe Zeleza as some of the few writers who have portrayed the woman positively in these parts of Africa.

In chapter two the author offers a serious discussion of some of the pioneer works by Malawians looking at the cultural and religious collisions between Africa and the West and the portrayal of women. Two plays, *1930 Kunadza Mchape* and *Sewero la Mlandu wa Nkhanga* both by Sylvester Paliani, and three novels, *Nthondo* by Samuel Nthara, *Mkwatibwi Wokhumudwa* by P. P. Litete and *Kalenga ndi Mnzake* by Josiah Phiri are critically analysed. Moto exposes *Nthondo's* and *Kalenga ndi Mnzake's* proselytizing theme. Josiah Nthara's preoccupation with the Christian message, his quest to symbolize "the triumph of Christian values, ideals and practice over the ways of the Malawian pagans" (p.30) in *Nthondo*, according to Moto, weakens the text. The author ignores the truth about succession in a Chewa chieftaincy. Nthondo who had not been initiated into the Nyau secret society and could therefore be considered a child could

not be a chief. *Kalenga ndi Mnzake* like *Nthondo* also shows the psychological consequences of Christianized and colonized peoples. Instead of fighting and attempting to protect his culture (gule wamkulu) like Achebe's Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* who defends his Igbo culture, Andrea Mumba gives in to an alien culture without resistance (p.44).

Both *Mkwatibwi Wokhumudwa* and *Kalenga ndi Mnzake* are not spared from their unfair handling of the gender issue. In these novels, women, Naomi and Flora Chagwa in *Kalenga ndi Mnzake* and *Mkwatibwi Wokhumudwa* respectively, are portrayed as "tangential" human beings. As an unmarried woman Flora Chagwa in *Mkwatibwi Wokhumudwa* "epitomizes the predicament of the African woman in general and the Malawian one in particular. ... traditional expectations and dictates ... subjugate her to marriage whether or not she wants to get married" (p.29). Moto's dissatisfaction with the plots of Paliani's plays is also clear here. *1930 Kunadza Mchape* in particular ignores the socio-cultural and historical influences that led to the societal disintegration around the Bembeke area in Ntcheu in the 1930s in the quest to show that Mchape had failed to restore communalism in the area. The truth however is that "...by 1930, Bembeke society was already disintegrating due to external forces of colonial rule and Christianity which enhanced rather than discouraged, individualism and inter-ethnic division" (Mtenje 1977:220) (p.38).

A different genre is introduced in chapter three. This time it is poetry that appears in Enoch Timpuza Mvula's anthology of Chichewa poetry *Akoma Akagonera*. Here Moto's critical powers are clearly revealed when he takes issue with unrealistic employment of proverbs, rhymes and repetition in some poems. The poems chosen for discussion in the book are Catherine Lipenga's "Chilindekha" and "Mwanawe", Clement Chete's "Phiri la Mulanje" and "Kwa Inu Wondibala", Sam Mchombo's "Ulimi" and Jack Mapanje's "Nyimbo ya Udzuzu" "Kuyenda kwa Namdzikambe" and "Kuchokera Kutauni". Catherine Lipenga and Clement Chete are commended for their effective use of diction and imagery while Sam Mchombo gets credit for managing to elude censorship in his poem "Ulimi" which, according to the critic is "permeated by unmistakable sexual symbolism" (p.70). Moto offers a very illuminating analysis of Mapanje's two poems. He rightly analyses the poems in the context of the Banda regime and exposes the deeper political messages in the poems. Both poems reveal the oppressive nature of the political system. The *udzuzu* (mosquito) in "Nyimbo ya Udzuzu" is, among other things, yearning for freedom of expression while "Kuyenda kwa Namdzikambe" symbolizes the fear and sense of insecurity that surrounded every Malawian at the time. The fear of the unknown that triggered self-censorship is here

cleverly metaphorised as a Chameleon's way of walking. "Kuchokera Kutauni", on the other hand, laments the educated Malawian's disregard of relations and traditional or cultural practices. In concluding this section Moto rightly observes that the poetry in *Akoma Akagonera* records the authors' awareness of their history and of their socio-cultural and political being.

In the fourth chapter the reader is introduced to a discussion of Willie Zingani's novels, *Ndazona Ine*, *Njala Bwana* and *Madzi Akatayika*. The moralizing mission of Zingani in these works is well exposed by Moto. Zingani laments "the moral demise of the society he is writing in and for" (p.90) highlighting such evils as greed and others. But perhaps, more important is the way Moto analyses Zingani's portrayal of women. Zingani, like many African writers, fails to escape from the problem of stereotyping women. Having failed to understand why Zingani kills Yusufu's mother in *Njala Bwana* Moto surmises that the author does so to "heighten the mother's stereotyped role of having to suffer simply for being a woman" (p.85). One would feel that the woman's suffering and endurance shows her strength of character. But Moto sees things differently; this is the perpetuation of the negative portrayal of the woman as a sufferer. Zingani's negative portrayal of women is also noticeable in *Madzi Akatayika*. Here Mayamiko Tionenso, a male character, aims high in life. He would like to go to university while the less intelligent, less ambitious Esnat cannot imagine this being possible for her; she would rather be a primary school teacher. Moto does not only criticize Zingani on his portrayal of women alone but also on his handling of plot and character as well. Moto writes: "In terms of literary merit, the stories have little. From the scanty details the setting is in fictitious Malawi and yet no real convincing setting is provided. Characterization is so weak that in most cases the reader concludes the story without an everlasting impression left about a single or group of characters." (p.94). One is left to wonder what the critic means by the setting not being convincing. Some authors choose not to explicitly or 'convincingly' show the setting of their stories to make their works universal. And this is usually a merit rather than a weakness.

Steve Chimombo's play *Wachiona Ndani* dominates the whole of chapter five. Moto has more lavish praises for this work than any other. He rightly observes that the play "explores the themes of love, class and gender conflict, hypocrisy, exploitation, social and economic oppression, alienation and deceit" (p.95). And, of course, the devastating effects of colonialism on the native psyche. One such effect is noticeable in the use of language by the characters most of whom use Anglicized words. One will have to be short sighted or blind not to agree with Moto that the play, unlike some of the works discussed in the book, shows a female character, Biti Selempani, whose lone voice

ries out in a male dominated society. She tries to shake off the chains that imprison her in such a society. And indeed as a woman she “highlights the plight of those people who are relegated to subservient roles due to oppressive social and economic systems” (p.101). Moto also notices post independence disillusionment in the play. The characters’ failure to form a syndicate and later finding themselves in the same economic situation they were before dramatizes post-independence disillusionment – and one may add, post-Banda disillusionment. Unlike the other plays discussed before, the characters and language in this play receive a lot of attention from Moto. The reason may be Moto’s great familiarity with and admiration of the work and its author. Without intending to demean the value of the play one cannot help wondering if the characters in the play, The Wachiona Ndani boys, Shumekala (shoe maker), Telala (tailor), Wotchimani (watchman) and Biti Selempani the prostitute, who even today form a class of illiterate or semi-literate people were at the time (1983) sophisticated enough to have an idea of forming a syndicate and calling it such. Besides one tends to question the critic’s objectivity here when only praises and merits are offered. To some extent, one is tempted to side with Kulemeka who observes that the play is not “a serious example of the masses’ attempts to counter the onslaught of [capitalist] exploitation” (Kulemeka:ibid) (p.98). If for no other reason, the boycott of Mataya’s shop organized by the Wachiona Ndani boys was out of their own selfish motives, namely they wanted to have customers to exploit. It should not be forgotten that these boys also exploit the less wary citizens. Even the motives for forming the syndicate are questionable. They rise from the characters’ ambition to climb the social/economic ladder and one doubts if once there these characters will think of those below them. What would make us believe that they will not perpetuate the exploitation?

Moreover, the allocation of a whole chapter to the discussion of Steve Chimombo’s *Wachiona Ndani* when other equally important texts have been discussed briefly lacks justification. One can only suspect that the author’s great familiarity with the text might have contributed to the biased allocation of space and time to this play..

In chapter six Moto examines Jolly Max Ntaba’s work. Ntaba’s three novels, *Ikakuona Litsiro Sikata*, *Akazi Aphetsa* and *Mtima Sukhuta* are analysed based on theme, narrative technique and characterization. Ntaba, whose works mirror “the social and economic realities of contemporary Malawi”, also shows “fascination with relationships that exist between men and women, older men and young girls, and daughters and their parents” (p.145). The idea of punishment for social rebels is also central in Ntaba’s works. His use of symbolism and imagery especially in *Ikakuona Litsiro Sikata* is also a point of concern for Moto. Ntaba uses symbols such as sun, earth and water/rain to

good effect. Like Ngugi wa Thiong'o in his *A Grain of Wheat*, Ntaba uses rain in *Ikakuona Litsiro Sikata* as a symbol for cleansing. The most dominant issue in the text, portrayal of women, is also a yardstick for Moto with which to measure Ntaba. Ntaba, like many other Malawian authors fails to portray the woman positively. Mayera in *Akazi Aphetsa* is portrayed as an embodiment of evil –an insatiable prostitute and materialist who manipulates her own daughter, Lorita, into falling in love with her own manfriend Jojo Khoswe Kalize, and as a rebellious woman who refuses to follow the trampled down path laid out by men for every woman to follow. Alefa who is “depicted as an individual who has her priorities upside down” (p.138) is yet another victim of Ntaba’s negative portrayal of women and so is Tamara. On the contrary, Dr. Miki Chidule, a male character, is portrayed as a morally sensitive character, an “unfortunate husband and character who falls into the hands of a woman who eventually causes him untold misery, mental anguish and eventually and inevitably his death” (p.140). The “silent” politics in the novel *Akazi Aphetsa* does not escape the probing eye of Moto who observes that it can be claimed that the characters in the novel can be said to be “attempting to struggle against the negative implications of independent Malawi” (p.141).

Chapters seven and eight deal with poetry. Benedicto Malunga’s *Kuimba Kwa Mlakatuli* features in chapter seven while Charles Shumba’s “Lero Kubwera Fisi” and “Toto Mwambo Wanu Ndakana” are dealt with in chapter eight. Moto analyses eight poems from Malunga’s collection, amongst which are “Dzinja”, “Nasuwema”, “Khululukire Bonize” and “Usungwana”. Like Sam Mchombo’s “Ulimi” in *Akoma Akagonera*, Malunga’s “Dzinja” contains disguised sexual innuendoes apart from documenting “how man relates to his environment” (p.151). “Unalidi Nasuwema” is attacked for its stereotypical portrayal of ‘the woman’ – “as a tangential human being” - and “Khululukire Bonize” is commended for overturning the table, as it were, and a man is reduced to the level of begging forgiveness from a woman. Moto’s critical skills reveal Malunga’s cleverness in discussing political issues in veiled language. This Malunga does in his poem “Makangano a Nyama” where the lion could stand for Banda and the birds for the praise-singing men and women of the first republic. “Usungwana” comes under fire for the same weakness common to many Malawian authors – negative portrayal of women. In this poem Malunga “seems to attack self –affirmation, the right of choice to woman’s liberation and self expression” (p.161). However, it becomes clear to the reader that in his discussion of this poem Moto ignores the positive side of the poem, namely that it warns the girl of the potential traps and vicissitudes that lie poised on the way of the unwary. Nevertheless, Malunga’s other poems are satisfactorily analysed and his poetic gifts well exposed.

The reason for the choice of Charles Shumba's prosaic poems is not hard to deduce. In a work whose dominant theme is the feminist ideology, Shumba's poems will always be welcome. The feminist nature of "Lero Kubwera Fisi," which, according to Moto, gives voice to the downtrodden, and the protest in "Toto Mwambo Wanu Ndakana" which protests against the enslavement of the female by an old custom, is highly commended by Moto. The concluding chapter nine summarizes and wraps up what issues have been tackled and discussed in the text.

That *Trends in Malawian Literature* demonstrates a high level of academic research and scholarship is a fact that one would find hard to deny. Scholars such as Al Mtenje and Pascal Kishindo, to mention but two, who analysed some of the works discussed in *Trends* before are duly given their rightful place in the text. Moto's dealing with the woman question will no doubt make him a darling among feminists and gender activists. He is obviously uncomfortable with the oppressive socially constructed gender roles which the woman is supposed to adopt without raising a dissenting voice. In his attack on novelists, playwrights and poets whose works are discussed in *Trends in Malawian Literature* Moto is calling upon all writers and would-be writers to consider portraying the woman positively. Even with the proliferation of the feminist ideology in Africa today Malawian writers continue to portray the woman negatively as Moto laments:

...we are yet to read a short story or novel written in a Malawian local language in which the woman character does not depict tendencies towards feminine submission to some societal dictates. We also have yet to read a story with a woman character who does not possess an extra ordinary insatiable desire to be unfaithful to her husband or boyfriend while at the same time being economically, socially and emotionally attached, in what the writer assumes to be an irrational desire, to a man of some description (p.58).

However, Moto's over-familiarity with the feminist ideology and his uncompromising attack on some of the authors makes one question his objectivity. For instance, Andrea Mumba's daughters in *Kalenga ndi Mnzake* are said to be "seeking a way of liberating themselves" when they go to attend nyau. This assertion is questionable and one is inclined to agree with Moto wholeheartedly on the alternative view that "the daughters are exploring avenues for appreciating and trying to understand a culture which is genuinely theirs" (p.29). Furthermore, Yusufu's mother in *Njala Bwana* is said to be suffering because she is a woman when on the other hand the author, Zingani, ought to be praised for creating a woman character who is strong and is not broken by suffering. The poem "Usungwana" by Benedicto Malunga, as mentioned earlier on, is said to be stereotyping the woman and its didactic nature is totally ignored.

Upon reading the book one also discovers that the term “trends” in the title is misleading. By pluralizing this term – defined in *The Oxford Advanced Learners’ Dictionary* as general tendency or direction – one would expect Moto to show general tendencies or directions of Malawian literature. But apart from the one lamentable trend to portray the woman negatively he identifies, no other trend is explored or exposed in the book.

Problems of translation can also be identified in the book. This perhaps underscores the challenging nature of the job at hand. The line which says ‘Pamenepo Nthondo anati: “Kodi ziri monga muja achitira akulu kukateta ku kachisi?”’ is translated as (And then Nthondo asked: “Is it the same way as our parents used to do at the shrines”) (p.31) instead of translating Nthondo’s question as (“Is it the same way as elders do at the shrines?”) since the question is in the present tense. The line “Ndiyimba ndani (ndiyani) amayi” in Catherine Lipenga’s poem “Chilindekha” (p.65) is translated (How can I sing on my own?) instead of: (Who will sing along with me, mother?) so that the pleading note is not lost. Further, the lines “Inetu mlongo wako ndikudziwa/Kuti sukagonera kumene upitako” are translated as (I speak like your brother/And I know that you are endangering your life) (p.173) instead of (I, your brother know/That you are not going to last where you are going). Still on translation, consistency seems to be lacking in the text. While the author undertakes to translate each and every passage or line that he quotes from Chichewa into English, passages on pages 61,62 and 63 have gone untranslated. The issue of translation is a very problematic one and it comes as no surprise that Moto fails to resolve it completely in *Trends*.

Another problem is an editorial one where the author confuses Flora Chagwa as a character in *Kalenga ndi Mnzake* when she should be in *Mkwatibwi Wokhumudwa* (p.86). The over use of the expression “against the /this backdrop” for over a dozen times in the book makes one wonder if the author had no alternative expressions to use. Such unnecessary repetition of the same expression when others exist tends to be tiresome and boring at times.

The illogical organization of genres/topics/chapters (chapter 2 novels, chapter 3 poetry, chapter 4 novels, chapter 5 a play, chapter 6 novels, chapter 7 poetry and chapter 8 poetry) leaves a few things to be desired. Although this has the advantage of introducing something new – a new genre/subject - to the reader in each succeeding chapter and reduces boredom, it is also confusing, as one has to switch to a different genre and mode of thought in each new chapter. For purposes of coherence or logic the author should have dealt with one genre at a time regardless of the fact that that one genre/subject would spill over to two or three chapters.

he publisher's mistakes are also a point of concern here. One of the two texts this author has used had mixed pages, pp.56, 69, 58-59, 72, 65, 62-63, 68, 65, while the other one has four missing pages, pp.178-79, 182-83. It is indubitable that this omission and mixture of pages was a mistake rather than a result of negligence. Nevertheless, the publisher ought to have been more careful so as not to make such a costly mistake.

In spite of these problems, *Trends* still remains an indispensable source book in the study of Malawian literature, and its publication a landmark development in criticism of literary works in Chichewa. Upon reading *Trends* one finds it difficult not to commend Moto for a job well done. Neither can one hesitate to recommend the book for use in secondary schools and colleges. The book raises many salient issues regarding Malawian literature, in general, and Chichewa literature, in particular, and, for sure, it can indeed "act as an essential tool for secondary school, teacher training college and university teaching" (p.11).

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