

ALLUSIVENESS, LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY IN FRANCIS MOTO'S *GAZING AT THE SETTING SUN*

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Abstract

*Francis Moto is a Malawian writer who has published poetry both in vernacular (Chichewa) and in English. His poetry in English appears in a collection titled **Gazing at the Setting Sun** published in 1994, the year Malawians voted Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda and his Malawi Congress Party (MCP) out of power. Besides recording the suffering of Malawians during the autocratic leadership of the first post-independence president, Dr Banda, and remembering the author's childhood experiences, the poetry also celebrates Malawi's political transformation from one party rule to multiparty democracy in the early 1990s. In the poems, Moto also looks to the future with a sense of hope for a better society where human rights and the rule of law will be respected. This article analyses Moto's poems with the aim of celebrating his successes as a poet. This is done by focusing on his more successful poems in terms of style. It is argued in this article that the success of some of Moto's poems in **Gazing at the Setting Sun** depends on his allusions to and evocations of dictatorship and political change in Malawi. These evocations and allusions depend on his imagery and choice of words and expressions. In the analysis of the poems, close reading with a particular focus on style is done. The discussion is in two parts. The first part discusses Moto's poems that allude to the dictatorial reign of Dr Banda in Malawi and the second part provides a discussion of Moto's imagery in relation to his evocation of political change.*

Keywords: *Allusion, Moto, Imagery, Poetry, Political Change, Dictatorship, Kamuzu Banda*

Introduction

Francis Moto is well known as a linguist, literary critic, diplomat and short story writer, but rarely as a poet. However, Moto has published poetry both in vernacular (Chichewa) and in English. His poetry in English appears in a sizeable collection with forty-three poems titled *Gazing at the Setting Sun* published in 1994. The date of publication coincided with a general election in Malawi where Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda and his Malawi Congress Party (MCP) were voted out of power. The general election was preceded by a referendum of 14 June 1993, which gave Malawians the opportunity to choose whether to continue with the one party system of Dr Banda and his MCP or to introduce multiparty democracy

in the country. Malawians voted overwhelmingly for the introduction of multiparty democracy. In the general election of 1994, Banda lost to Bakili Muluzi and his United Democratic Front (UDF) party.

In the poems, Moto, among other things, records the suffering of Malawians during the autocratic leadership of Dr Banda, remembers his childhood experiences, celebrates the end of Banda's dictatorial reign and guardedly expresses hope for a beautiful future for his country, one characterised by justice and respect for human rights. Themes in the poems include those of dictatorship and oppression, silence, hope, childhood, freedom, love, homecoming and political change. In expressing these themes Moto uses a range of environmental and cultural aspects. From the environment, Moto draws and utilises aspects such as beaches, lakes, rivers, hills, valleys, flowers, winds, rain, animals, clouds, waves, seasons, and the sun. Aspects from culture include shrines, spirits, loincloths, and rituals such as rainmaking. Further, the poet in most poems emerges as a seer who sees visions and hears voices from the clouds (supposedly from God or ancestors) and performs incantations. Despite its relevance in themes, Moto's poetry has not received much critical attention. The only work of criticism is an undergraduate essay by Martin Misinde (2016) titled 'The Sun as a Motif in Lupenga Mphande's *Crackle at Midnight* and Francis Moto's *Gazing at the Setting Sun*.' The paucity of critical attention could be because the oppression of Banda and the euphoria over democratisation referred to in the poetry have become distant memories.

In style, Moto prefers a narrative and conversational style. Either because of the conversational nature of the poetry or perhaps because of the emotive nature of the subject matter, the poetry is characterised by, among others, verbiage, prosaic expressions, and more telling rather than showing. This article, however, is not about the weaknesses of Moto's poetry. Anyone can point out weaknesses in another's literary craft, but that hardly enriches literary debate and often deflates and undermines potential, instead of inspiring and invigorating creativity. This critical analysis of Moto's poems is aimed at celebrating his successes as a poet by focusing on what is considered his more successful poems. Success here refers to the quality of the poems in terms of style and the poet's competence and mastery of his craft. It is argued that the success of some of Moto's poems in *Gazing at the Setting Sun* depends on his allusions to and evocations of dictatorship and political change in Malawi. These evocations and allusions depend on his imagery and choice of words and expressions. For the purpose of this article, nine poems that best illustrate Moto's allusive and evocative style which if maintained would elevate the quality of his poetic output are analysed.

In this analysis of the poems, close reading with a particular focus on style is done. Style refers to 'the literary element that describes the ways that the author uses words[for], the author's word choice, sentence structure, figurative language, and sentence arrangement all work together to establish mood, images, and meaning in the text' (ReadWriteThink 2003, n.p.). In the use of the term, the author also draws from Victoria Zhukovska's view that 'style denotes the collective characteristics of writing, diction or any artistic expression and the way of presenting things, depending upon the general outlook proper to a person, a literary school, a trend, a period or a genre' (2010: 17). Where Moto's poetic style and language use are concerned, this article focus is on his allusions and evocations.

The discussion below is in two parts. The first part discusses Moto's poems that allude to the dictatorial reign of Dr Banda in Malawi. It is argued that while the allusions underscore the poet's restraint in his engagement with the political context of the poems and imbue a quieter tone to the poetry, the decontextualisation on which the allusion also depends entails that one has to be familiar with the poet's political experiences in Malawi to fully appreciate the meanings of the poems. The second part is a discussion of Moto's imagery in relation to his evocation of political change in the poetry. It shows that where reference to political change is concerned Moto uses images from nature such as weather, seasons and flowers, mainly for their instrumental value as images and symbols. Nevertheless, the use of these aspects of nature suggests the poet's embeddedness in his environment. He also adopts a joyful tone to underline the excitement that swept across Malawi in the early 1990s, the twilight years of Banda's dictatorship and the beginning of a democratic political dispensation.

Political Allusion

There are a number of poems in *Gazing at the Setting Sun* where Moto's use of style enables him to allude to Malawian politics during Banda's reign. One of these poems is 'The Songs Men Sang' (1994: 3-5) which recalls the fear and oppression that Malawians suffered at the time without explicitly mentioning Banda's regime. Moto's use of animal imagery and his expressions, however, suggest that he is referring to that dictatorial regime. In the poem Moto writes:

Only yesterday
or is it the day
before yesterday,
the lion was still alive,
roaring, scaring men
into corners of helplessness.
It tore a goat to pieces
and drank its steaming blood.

We, paralysed,
watched from a distance
as the lion dragged
the remaining pieces
into the darkness of its den. (1994, pp. 4-5)

The animal image of the lion here is a reference to Dr Banda, who was also referred to as *Nkango wa Malawi* (the Lion of Malawi). While in the expression 'the Lion of Malawi' it was the lion's association with royalty that was being exploited, in his reference to the lion in the poem Moto exploits the lion's fearfulness and brutality that scared 'men/ into corners of helplessness.' In the context of the poem, writers, poets, academics and others who could have spoken against the evils of the regime were scared and chose to remain silent. The poet uses the word 'paralysed' to underscore the fear that the would-be

critics and many Malawians had of Banda who often threatened his detractors with long detentions or with being turned into meat for crocodiles.

Although the conversational tone, especially the question, ‘Or is it the day before yesterday?’ spoils the rhythmic flow of the poem in the stanzas quoted above, the poet manages to highlight the brutality of Banda, whose angry tirades are compared to a roar of a vicious lion that scares people. The idea of the metaphoric lion tearing a goat to pieces again highlights the brutality of the Banda regime. The goat mentioned here, and the ‘wobbly gazelles’ (1994, p. 4) that Moto mentions in the first stanza of the poem, refer to the victims of the regime. In using the goat as a symbol for the victims of a dictator Moto highlights the harmlessness of these victims while emphasising the brutality of the dictator. Besides, in inscribing animals as symbols in the poems, Moto exploits the animal-centric folk tradition of Malawians and other inhabitants of sub-Saharan Africa who would find it easier to understand and appreciate his meaning. The evocation of the bloodthirsty and ruthless lion, that is Banda, continues in the final stanza where it drags the remains of its prey into its dark den as the other people who are paralysed by fear watch helplessly. The dark den here could be a reference to detentions where most of Banda’s critics languished without charge or trial (Mapanje, 2011). Moto’s use of animal imagery here and evocation of blood reminds one of his Malawian counterparts Jack Mapanje and Frank Chipasula. In his poetry, Jack Mapanje uses a lot of animal metaphors for a range of reasons including ridiculing Banda and his cronies (Mthatiwa, 2009 and 2012; Moto 2008), while most of Chipasula’s poems evoke the blood spilled by Banda in Malawi in his attempt to consolidate his dictatorship.

Moto’s evocation of blood as he alludes to the brutality of Banda is also clear in the poem ‘Songs from the Clouds’ (1994: 5) where he writes:

I sat at Chingwe’s hole
and heard songs from the clouds.
Songs bathed in blood;
the blood of a people
sacrificed to quench the wrath
of bloodthirsty gods (1994: 5).

As Moto rightly mentions in the glossary, Chingwe’s hole is a ‘hole on the [western] edge of Zomba Plateau where, it is believed, wrong doers were thrown’ (1994: 99; see also Nazombe 1994/95). He goes on to say: ‘Now it is a place of historical interest, a tourist attraction and, more importantly, an almost irresistible subject for most Malawian poets’ (1994: 99). The Malawian poets in question are those that are characterised here as the Zomba poets who include Jack Mapanje, Anthony Nazombe, Steve Chimombo, and Francis Moto himself. These are poets who lived (and still live in the case of Moto) in Zomba and taught at Chancellor College, a constituent college of the University of Malawi. In the stanza above, the poet-persona who perhaps is a seer, hears songs from the clouds (from the gods or spirits) about bloodshed and human sacrifice. Although one may be inclined to think that this is reference to the people that were thrown in the hole, the idea

of the people being ‘sacrificed to quench the wrath of bloodthirsty gods’ alludes to Banda’s regime. The ‘Songs Bathed in Blood’ are, therefore, lamentations about the brutal regime. Besides, in the poetry of the Zomba poets, Chingwe’s hole variously refers to Malawi as a country, to detention centres, especially Mikuyu Maximum Security Prison located in Zomba, and to the literal hole. In this poem, Chingwe’s hole refers to the entire country under Banda which was a place of political murders or bloodshed. The bloodthirsty gods are the politicians who ordered the killings to, in the poet-protagonist’s words, ‘quench the[ir] wrath.’ Although he is handling a painful and emotive subject, Moto’s tone in the poem is calm and quiet rather than strident and outraged. This is partly because he avoids direct reference to the political context and to the perpetrators of the violence.

Further, in the poem, Moto also alludes to the sexual exploitation of women during the reign of Banda when he writes in the final stanza:

Sitting on concrete slabs
Sipping a cold beer
The clouds broke into song,
A song wailing for women
Beautiful, young and ignorant;
Live women hand-picked
To be the king’s pillow. (1994: 5)

Again, we notice from the above excerpt that the persona’s tone is calm and quiet rather than angry and loud because of the allusive nature of the poems. The women referred to above are those who danced before Banda during his many mass rallies or during other Malawi Congress Party (MCP) activities such as annual conventions. During rallies or conventions, women were transported for long distances to the rally or convention venue, leaving their families behind. Once at these venues, the ‘beautiful, young and ignorant’ women fell prey to party officials and other lascivious men. The women succumbed to the mean’s advances to alleviate the misery and suffering they experienced whenever they went to dance for Banda far from home. Commenting on the abuse of women by the Malawi Congress Party, especially when the women were required to perform traditional dances for Dr Banda far from home, Emily Mkamanga writes:

Leaving for the actual dance performances would signify the beginning of the women’s hardships. Accommodation was in classrooms or dilapidated community halls with no window shutters or doors. [...] Rape and other immoral behaviour were common. Men used to have field days knowing pretty well that in the absence of the rule of law, women had nowhere to appeal once raped. The living conditions would be so bad that no woman would refuse a date from any man provided he would provide a comfortable accommodation at some rest house. (2015: 67).

Mkamanga goes on to say that ‘it was a common practice in Lilongwe, after Banda’s functions, for uniformed women to converge at the Lilongwe hotel for some drinking till the middle of the night. Men would literally swarm after these women and it is anybody’s guess what happened after mid-night when the hotel bars were closed’ (2015: 70). The sexual exploitation of women during the MCP era is a subject that also finds expression in Steve Chimombo’s novel *The Wrath of Napolo* (2000) which shows the centrality of the subject in Malawi’s political and literary discourse.

The poem, ‘The Chocking Silence’ (1994: 9-11) makes reference to the silence or the stifling of dissenting voices in Malawi during Banda’s reign as people feared for their lives. Writing about what was considered calm and unity when in fact it was a result of fear, Sam Mpasu, one of Banda’s political prisoners,¹ says:

it is true that we had what looked like peace. But it was the peace of the cemetery. It was enforced silence which was misunderstood for peace. Our lips were sealed by fear and death. Our pens were silenced by long jail terms without trial. It is true that we had what looked like stability. But it was the kind of stability which is caused by overwhelming force. When the thick boot is on the neck of a person who is prone on the ground, there can be no movement. The jails were full and murders were rampant. The murderers were above the law. (1995: 2).

It was this enforced silence that Moto writes about in his poem ‘The Chocking Silence’ where people talk in whispers to avoid incurring the wrath of the leaders who had spies (ears and eyes) everywhere. Moto tells us:

On moonless nights
from secluded corners
stories transcribed
on parchments of fear
comb the plains and hills
in whispers along
the creeping vines
jealously guarded tales
loud enough to awaken
the wrath of the gods
crawl like chameleon
from mouth to ear and ear to mouth,
but are hastily erased
from the face of history (1994: 10).

Words and expressions used in the extract above allow us to relate the poem to political experiences in Banda’s Malawi. Here, stories that are considered seditious or dangerous

¹ Sam Mpasu was arrested by Banda and detained without trial for over two years from 1975 to 1977.

are referred to as ‘stories transcribed on parchments of fear’ or ‘jealously guarded tales’ as they are likely to ‘awaken the wrath of the gods.’ The reference to ‘the gods’ here is an allusion to Banda and his cabal who had the power to determine the fate of Malawians. These gods would be angered by the tales that Malawians shared in whispers about the situation in the country. It is the fear of political reprisals that ensured that the stories are ‘hastily erased from the face of history.’ The theme of silence is a popular one among Malawian poets who wrote during Dr Banda’s regime. For example, Steve Chimombo deals with this theme in his poem ‘Napolo,’ especially in the section aptly titled, ‘The Message’ (2009: 3-4), where he talks about the fear that pervaded the country mainly as a result of political surveillance. In the fourth stanza of Moto’s poem under discussion, he writes about

...unending silence,
a silence so stifling
it stunts intellectual growth;
a silence so cruel
it clips off wings
of hope in its cradle (2009: 4).

The image of the personified silence clipping ‘off wings of hope in its cradle’ underlines the ruthlessness or oppressiveness of the silence perpetuated by the equally ruthless Banda regime, where hope was snuffed as soon as it was born, leading to a sense of hopelessness and despair among Malawians. In the poem, Moto makes no explicit reference to his country, but the subject and his manner of handling it are enough to make the reader who is familiar with his political context realise that he is talking about the political situation in Malawi during Banda’s reign where political surveillance, through spies and informants, was the norm.

We also see Moto’s allusion to surveillance in the poem ‘At Welcome’ (1994: 16). In the glossary, Moto tells us that ‘Welcome is a drinking place in the municipality of Zomba, southern Malawi’ (1994: 104). This place may have existed during the time the poem was composed but it is no longer there today. However, even if it had never existed, the irony that emerges from the contradiction between what ‘welcome’ evokes (hospitality) and the violence that ensues there would still remain relevant to the understanding of the poem. In the first stanza of the poem, Moto tells us:

Echoes of Bob Marley and the Wailers
hit green and blood stained walls
as men and women splattered
in warm sweat cling to bottles
of green, gold and brown (1994: 16).

Moto’s descriptions here allow us to imagine the revelry that is going on at Welcome. However, the fact that the walls are said to be ‘blood stained’ is evocative of the violence that often erupts in beer drinking joints. ‘Green, gold and brown’ are types of Carlsberg

beer, a popular brand of beer in Malawi. For a long time, the Danish owned Carlsberg Company was the only company producing beverages in Malawi. In the poem, Moto shows that Welcome was patronised by people from all walks of life, from ‘bald-headed professors,’ lecturers, secondary school boys and prostitutes to ‘Madmen in government hospital, striped gear [who wriggle] their waists out of step’ and ‘dark glassed men cocking their ears for tales unwelcome.’ The ‘dark glassed men’ are government spies, probably members of the Special Branch or Malawi Young Pioneers (MYP).

Banda’s reign of terror in Malawi was anchored by a number of agents such as the Malawi Young Pioneers, the police, the army, and members of the MCP Youth League and Women’s League. The MYP were a paramilitary wing of the Malawi Congress Party. The MYP’s intelligence networks, along with the Malawi Army intelligence, and the Police intelligence (called the Special Branch and later named Secret Intelligence Service [SIS]), virtually policed the life of every Malawian. The MYP intelligence and the Special Branch (a colonial inheritance modelled on the British Special Branch – an investigative unit dealing with national security matters) recruited informers and spies from people of all walks of life in the Malawian society (Mapanje, 1997: 75; Chirambo, 2011: 143, and 2004: 153). The ‘tales unwelcome’ in the poem are the stories the revellers share, which may be considered subversive. It is ironic, therefore, that a place named Welcome would have tales unwelcome, stories that would draw the attention of the surveillance systems in the country. This goes to show the levels of surveillance that made people prefer to share stories in whispers as we saw earlier.

Given the levels of surveillance and censorship in the Malawi of the day, only the insane were, ironically, the ones at liberty. Moto allusively touches on the theme of freedom in madness in the short poem ‘The Mad Man’ (1994: 12), which in its entirety reads:

In front of glaring
‘sane’ eyes he paraded
between the hospital
for the crazed and
the ptc downtown.

Leading the way
sixty kilometres
from the black felt pen
of censorship in Limbe,
it dangled from
its firm foundations
breathing the free air
of a Sunday afternoon
only allowed to the insane (199: 12).

Language use and expressions allow us to appreciate the context of the poem and its subject matter. The poem is about a madman who freely walks naked, oblivious of the glaring eyes of supposedly normal people, from a mental hospital to downtown Zomba on a Sunday afternoon without being victimised by the stiff censorship laws of the country. During Banda's reign, women were not allowed to wear miniskirts and trousers, men were not allowed to wear bellbottoms and to keep long hair. But these apparent offences to public decency pale in significance when compared to parading naked on the street. Yet the madman in the poem does so. The expression, 'the hospital for the crazed' in the first stanza refers to the Zomba Mental Hospital, which is about two and half miles south of the People's Trading Centre(PTC) shop in downtown Zomba. In putting the word 'sane' in quotes in the poem, Moto seeks to show that madness is on a continuum, for insanity is a matter of degree. People considered sane may have some degree of insanity.

In the second stanza, Moto alludes to the madman's penis, which is personified and is referred to as the 'it' that 'dangled from its firm foundations' and breathed 'the free air of a Sunday afternoon.' Limbe, which is sixty kilometres away from Zomba, was the headquarters of the Malawi Censorship Board. The madman's penis, which the poet metaphorically compares to the felt pen of the censors, is said to lead the way as the man walks in the opposite direction from Limbe in the south to town. The poem reminds one of David Kerr's 'Bare Truths' (2003: 47; see also Mthatiwa, 2018) where a girl in Banda's oppressive era invents madness to escape into exile by

sprinting stark naked,
... clothes tied on a stick
brandished at pedestrians, terrifying cars
with feral eyes, before shimmering through
bushes like a duiker into the forest depths (2003: 47).

Like Kerr, Moto drives home the point that in an oppressive regime such as the one that obtained in Banda's Malawi, only the (supposedly) insane were allowed a semblance of freedom. This deconstructs the claims by the ruling elites of the time that under Banda Malawians enjoyed unprecedented freedom.

In the poems discussed above, we notice that in dealing with the subject of oppression and exploitation under Banda, Moto avoids explicit mention of the regime and instead uses imagery, word choice and expressions to allude to that historical period. This may be an indication of the time when the poems were written, a time when explicit criticism of the regime invited political reprisals. The decontextualisation of the poems, however, means those unfamiliar with Moto's context of writing would not fully appreciate the political messages in the poetry. It is the circumspection and subtlety (characteristics of Malawian poetry written from within the country during that Banda era (Roscoe 1977) that make the poems allusive and rich in meaning.

Imagery and Evocations of Change

Allusions and evocativeness through imagery, word use and expressions are also clear in poems where Moto celebrates political change in Malawi. In the poem, 'You Should Have Been Here My Friend' (1994: 18-19), which he dedicates to 'a dead poet,' Moto writes about the political change that is about to take place in the country, change that would have been unthinkable when the dead poet was still alive. In the first stanza, Moto writes:

Once upon a time
the ink of your poetic pen
would have frozen
at the mere thought that
I am writing this poem.
But you and I knew that
once upon a time, there
lived men in the land
of flames armed with a vision
to see beyond the season
of the silent songs (1994: 18).

The freezing of the addressee's poetic pen would have been a result of disbelief on the part of the poet who perhaps had given up hope that change would ever come. The expression 'land of flames' is a familiar reference to the country Malawi, given that the Chichewa word *Malawi* literally means flames.² The expression 'season of the silent songs' on the other hand, refers to the dictatorship era of Banda when silence was a sure way of avoiding political persecution. The paradoxical expression 'silent songs' here shows that the silence was deceptive as people somehow continued to sing of freedom, which was now just around the corner.

Writing about the change the country was witnessing as multiparty democracy approaches, Moto says in the second stanza:

The clouds have at last
helped us clap again
for men of vision,
another vision at least born
on the edges of a yellowing horizon (1994: 18).

We notice here that Moto eschews explicit reference to politics, preferring evocations and allusions. Here, the impending change is simply alluded to through reference to 'another vision,' that is, another political ideology of multipartyism. The clouds in the extract above are a metonymy for the heavens and refer to God who the poet-persona believes has made the approaching change possible. Further, the 'yellowing horizon' on whose edges the new vision is born is an allusion to the United Democratic Front (UDF)

² Chichewa is the country's national language.

party, one of the principal organisations that championed political change in Malawi in the early 1990s. Yellow is the colour of the UDF party, founded in 1992, whose presidential candidate Bakili Muluzi won the 1994 presidential election in Malawi, bringing to an end Dr Banda's 30 year totalitarian leadership. References to the colour yellow abound in the collection *Gazing at the Setting Sun* and in most cases, such references are to the UDF and celebrate the new political dispensation.

Moto's celebration of political change in his poetry is not without caution. In the sixth stanza of the poem, 'You Should Have Been Here My Friend' (1994: 18-19) he uses images and metaphors to show that the impending change is facing threats from the MCP which is opposed to it. We read in the stanza:

Michiru, Ndirande and Soche Hills have
witnessed the birth of yellow daffodils.
Be warned, nevertheless;
The season is not yet over.
The pre-puberty dance is still
punctuated by chilling steel bracelets
at the field of metal birds (1994: 19).

The three hills mentioned are in Blantyre, one of the cities in Malawi where some of the struggles for political change or 'the May riots of 1992' took place (Nazombe, 1994/95: 106). The flower imagery in the expression 'yellow daffodils' here is another evocation of the UDF. The 'chilling steel bracelets' are handcuffs and 'the field of metal birds' is an airport, as the metal birds are a metaphor for aeroplanes. Through these expressions, images, and metaphors, Moto alludes to the arrest of Chakufwa Chihana in 1992.³ Although hopeful, the poet here is cautioning against unguarded celebration as elements of oppression and efforts to muffle dissenting voices are still evident.

Hope is the defining mood for the poem 'The Child Chilungamo Will Be Born' (1994, : 47-50) in which Moto exploits the metaphor of pregnancy and birth of a child. The Chichewa word '*chilungamo*' means justice and in the poem, it is evocative of the justice Malawians expected in the new political dispensation. In the poem, whose composition in the glossary is indicated as February 1993, four months before the referendum of June 14, the poet expresses hope that change is coming to Malawi. The image of a child is usually an evocation of new beginning, of innocence and of rebirth and regeneration. All these are things Malawians expected the country to experience after the death of the one party system. The dominant metaphor in the poem is that of pregnancy where an expectant woman (a metaphor for the country) will soon deliver a baby named Chilungamo. The ecstatic father in the poem addresses his wife:

³ Chakufwa Chihana was a trade unionist and Secretary General of the Southern African Trades Union Coordination Council [SATUC]. He was arrested and detained on arrival at Kamuzu International Airport on 6 April 1992, on his return from Lusaka, Zambia, where he attended a seminar on 'Prospects for Democracy in Malawi' (Newell, 1994). Chihana returned to Malawi to confront Banda and his cabal, accusing them of human rights violations and challenging them to introduce real democracy in the country.

Now you tell me, mother of Chilungamo,
that your days are due.
My heart is working extra hard
as it waits for the news
of the coming of the boy Chilungamo
or will it be the girl Chilungamo?
For what does it matter, a boy or girl?
Chilungamo will still be the child's name (1994: 49).

The lines above capture the excitement of a would-be father and underline the joy and excitement of Malawians as they waited for democratisation. The reference to gender in the question 'For what does it matter, a boy or girl?' is suggestive of the patriarchal nature of the society where a boy child would be valued more than a girl. But in the context of the poem, the child's gender (that is, the nature of the anticipated change) does not matter. This highlights the poet-persona's desperation for change. The excitement and anticipation of the husband (read Malawians) continues when we hear him confess to his wife:

I cannot wait to listen to the first cry
of the child Chilungamo.
And I cannot wait to set my eyes upon
the little soft feet and feel the soft skin.
And I hope I will still be there
when the child takes its first steps
of cyclic motion (1994: 50).

The lines, 'And I hope I will still be there When the child takes its first steps of cyclic motion,' introduce a hint that the father might die and miss the stages of the child's development. The allusion to death here, especially through the reference to 'cyclic motion'—that is, birth and death—as a defining aspect of life, shows the poet-persona's awareness that even the child Chilungamo might not live forever. There is an implicit caution here that Chilungamo (read justice), whose impending birth fills the father (Malawians) with hope and excitement, might not endure forever. True to this assumption is the fact that the multiparty era in Malawi has been beset with problems which range from corruption, abuse of power, and growing poverty, among others. Moto's hope in the poem, therefore, is tinged by a sense of fear and uncertainty.

Moto also uses imagery to evoke hope and uncertainty over the approaching new political dispensation in the title of the collection of the poem, *Gazing at the Setting Sun* (1994: 51-52). The setting sun here, which indicates the end of day, is a reference to the end of the MCP era. In the poem, the poet-persona sits on the beach gazing at the sun setting in the distance. He also observes what is happening around him and reflects on what this end of day (an era) represents. One thing he observes is a new purpose for life in those around him, as he tells us through the use of sexual imagery:

By the sands on the beach I sat
gazing at the setting sun
Old men with faded passions jealously eyed
the women whose waists
had been oiled by the coming of the new day.
The old men watched as the village women wriggled
their waists with a new rhythm in frenzied mockery
to the village boys with warm loins (1994: 52).

The first line alludes to Psalm 137: 1: 'By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion,' except in the poem the poet-person is not saddened by the memories the setting sun is carrying. In fact, he is happy the sun is setting, that is, the MCP era is coming to an end. The repetition of the word 'new' in the stanza underlines the transformation that is taking place in the country's politics. Political transformation is also underscored by the sense of rejuvenation in the lives of the people as 'Old men with faded passions jealously eyed [...]women whose waists had been oiled by the coming of the new day.' The women themselves wriggle 'their waists with a new rhythm in frenzied mockery to the village boys with warm loins.' But, although change is coming, the poet-persona is unsure of whether to celebrate the development. We read:

As I sat on the sands on the beach
gazing at the setting sun,
I felt a strange feeling,
a feeling that the calabash of silent times
was receding to the lower levels of the season.
I felt that it was time to begin planning
for the celebrations.
Or was it? (1994: 52).

The metaphor of the 'calabash of silent times' again refers to the MCP era and its surveillance and censorship as discussed above. The reference to season in the stanza also highlights change, as one season often gives way to another. But even as change looms, the poet-protagonist is unsure of whether it 'was time to begin planning for the celebrations.' The rhetorical expression 'Or was it?' at the end of the poem demonstrates the poet-protagonist's cautious view of what is happening and his fear that his plans to celebrate might be premature.

The poem titled, 'The Day the Strange Rain Fell' (1994: 58-59) is another example of poems where allusions and evocative imagery in relation to political change in Malawi are used to good effect. In the poem, the political changes taking place in Malawi are compared to rain that brings rebirth and regeneration. The rain is said to be strange perhaps because it comes late and is accompanied by fearful thunder and lightning. In literature, rain or water is associated with life, renewal, cleansing, and rebirth and regeneration, among other things. In Ngugi wa Thiong'o's novel *A Grain of Wheat*, for example, Mugo's walk

in the rain symbolises his need for cleansing from his guilt for betraying the legendary hero, Kihika. Further, the persistent drizzle on the day of Uhuru signals renewal, rebirth and a new beginning. In the poem, the regenerative rain brings a new meaning to life as we are told:

As the wind swept the strange rain from the skies,
I saw the hills, the plains and valley break
into dance for the strange rain
that awoke grandmother coiled into two.
The children of the village replied by singing
songs about the birth of a new dawn
and pleaded with the spirits to protect it.
During the night bonfires chased the cruel darkness (1994: 59).

The ‘grandmother coiled into two’ could be a reference to hope that had almost disappeared during the dark years of Banda and his MCP’s oppression, while the number two could be an allusion to the forthcoming Second Republic. It is Banda’s regime that is characterised as ‘cruel darkness’ that is chased by the night bonfires. There is an allusion to the symbolism used during the referendum of 1993 in Malawi here. During the referendum, multipartyism was represented or symbolised by a hurricane lamp, while the one party system (MCP) was represented by a black cock, which many jokingly said symbolised death and darkness. The bonfires in the poem then metaphorise the light of the hurricane lamp which supposedly chased the dark era of the MCP regime during the referendum. Thus, in the poems discussed in this section, Moto’s use of imagery, his word choice and expressions enable him to evoke political change and hope for a brighter tomorrow in the poetry.

Conclusion

The preceding discussion has illustrated that allusions to and evocations of dictatorship and political change through imagery, choice of words and expressions contribute to the maturity of some of Moto’s poems in *Gazing at the Setting Sun* while also suggesting the poet’s competence and creative imagination. Moto’s imagery and use of words and expressions in these poems enable us to imagine the context of the poems and appreciate the style and themes. Further, the allusiveness of the poetry is responsible for the calm and quieter tone, for the subtly and circumspection as well as for the poet’s restraint in some of the poems, especially those dealing with dictatorship. Harnessing and exploiting these aspects of style, especially in short poems, would sharpen Moto’s poetic craft and greatly improve the quality of his poetry.

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