

## Research Article

## Despotism, Corruption and Social Realism in Mapanje's The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prisons

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**Abstract:** This essay is a voyage into Mapanje's collection of poems titled "The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prisons". The paper examines the poetic vision and survivalist instincts of the poet through his lived experiences as a fallout of over three years detention without trial in Mikuyu prisons in the Central African landlocked country called Malawi. The main currents in the selected poems which include the despotism, corruption, failed state and infrastructural decay were explored. The poems were analysed alongside the poet's dream of an egalitarian society where government will not only be responsive but responsible to the people. Against the background of numerous awards won by the poet, the artistic vision and the mastery of words used by the poet, the paper recommends that the poems should be recommended as one of the poems to be used in public examinations like WAEC, NECO and UTME.

**Keywords:** poems, Mikuyu prisons, poet

### INTRODUCTION

The poems under review here were carefully selected to address the contents of the ongoing debates on African literature, its language, ideology, criticism and aesthetics. Four poems have been selected from Jack Mapanje's collection of poems titled "The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison." These four poems cut across the poet's political and artistic vision for which he was detained without trial for three years and sixteen days in a congested prison in Mikuyu. With clever use of figurative expression that allows for the poet to blend metaphor and simile on the one hand, and imagery and prosody on the other, the poet succeeds in creating harmony which helps his artistic vision and the ability to impress his complex ideas on the reader. From "Vigil for a Fellow Credulous Captive," "Out Of Bounds (or Our Maternity Asylum)," "Mikuyu Prison Visit Of Head Of Detainees)," "The Deluge After Our Gweru Prison Dreams," the poet has been able to use his prison experiences to remind African leaders to be proactive to the business of governance and more responsible to the people, and above all, for the triumph of art and poetic truth.

For the purpose of clarity, this work presents Malawi both historically and geographically, followed by the biography of the poet, the selected poems, the

synopsis of the poems under review, the main currents and Mapanje's poetic vision, his use of language, recommendations and conclusion.

### Synopsis of the Poems

"Vigil for a fellow credulous captive" is vintage Mapanje's political sensitivity to the plight of a political figure whose appearance forms the basis of the vigil not only by fellow compatriot like the poet but by the wife.

The poet writes a note of finally that the big short, Aneneji has ended up in the bowel of the sea whose bones shall be washed off shore by the ocean tie. Not only the bones but he sack in which the victim was thrown inside the ocean and the millstones tied around his legs that vibrant political stalwart, whose return is being earnestly await. The bones, the shredded sack sand the millstones are the sad reminder of a party card distributor whose return is the reason for the vigil kept by her wife at his fire place.

Aneneji can only be expected to return at eternity. There lies the psychological trauma since nobody knows the reason he has to die if he has died, no mound, no tombstone perhaps he will return someday.

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In out of bounds (or Our Maternity Asylum), the poet paints a sorry picture of dilapidation of social infrastructure that is not only inadequate but abandoned to rot away. He espouses a social condition where the number of people using medical facilities tripple the available obsolete facilities and ersonne. He sees the women who have to scramble for the few beds as not better than prisoner or inmates who have to sleep at opposite direction on a bed. At ratio to “inmates” to 30 beds sleeping “top and tail. Not only that, about ninety other women with infants struggle for space on the bare cold cracked cemented floor. A family at least would also sleep under each bed and most in between. All other parenting/nursing activities go on not minding the crowded in human condition they are. For instance, women will have to suckles their babies. The environment is not conducive, untidy and indecent for human labitation or sarcastically compares the hospital setting to asylum resulting from dessert war. They are victims of shrinking hospital and infrastructural decay where doctors and nurses “who toiled 24 hours” offered to extend the wing in order to accommodate more patients but alas, official clearance and bottleneck will not allow that to see the light of days. Apart from poor condition of service, the personel were not also motivated by good salary and not tools to work as what they have are” blunt needle,” made so from overuse and lack of drugs. He reminisced how in the past the hospitals wore new coat of paints as father Christmas visited as August visitors at the occasion of the authority putting smiles to faces. Things were done in orderly manner, neat lines which attracted praises for the authority. Window are glazed, beds are made available, even reinforced from nearby hospital so that father Christmas could “see one patient per bed.” Who will bell the cat? Because the poet who may want to project thus to the world the himself hospital is out of bound.”

Mapanje recounts the visit to the Mikuyu prison by the head of detainees representing the interest of life president of the country not for any reprieve for the chief prisoner, Mapanje but to gauge his stamina to continue his opposition and resilience to the regime of hate and haughtier. He remembers with emotion laden voce the humiliation of his person by the life president’s agent provocateur in person of the Head of Detainees. He recognizes him immediately as the one that effected his arrest and detention without detention order.

The draconian regime violated citizens’ rights, turned justice on its head and detained with impurity. In fact, the poet was detained in September without detention order signed until October when the Head of Detainees. The poet wonders why they choose to come for a visit a day after Christmas – food, attention and family union? However he has summoned to meet the Head of Detainees sent by Inspector General to know if the poet has any problem. To him, it is like asking

whether a sick man is having a swell tie as the poet’s muted problems are uncountable. He however managed to ask two most salient which are why his wife and children are not allowed to see him and how to apologise since no charge is pressed against him. Seen to have been “beaten” to surrender, the apology letter is a form of humiliation. Quickly 500 reams of A4 paper and Biro were provided for the poet to write his letter of apology to the president through the Inspector General. The poet was humiliated into writing a letter of apology to resolve the humiliation the life president suffers by the ‘pen’ of the poet. And because the arrest and detention is without any particular reason, the apology is also of no particular purpose except for any embarrassment caused or to be caused by my detention!

The interpretation of the Gweru prison dreams for the poet is a case of appearance and reality. The prison life is full of aspiration of what’s to be done to right the wrongs. No wounded soul will not buy into any dream that will bring down regime that incarcerated it. Able men, furious and emotionally traumatized victims of unjust imprisonment and detention without trial dreamt dreams of how to execute the patriotic zeal to free their country from absolutism of a despot. However, such dreams are not better than delusion grandeur when put side by side the realities outside the walls of the prison. All promises and iron determination to see such dream come through thaw in the face of realities as “even the devil’s generosity must fire.”

However, there is a limit to human endurance, such that when the old men are weary fatigued, the youth with a lot of energy take the centre stage, “the arena.” The result is cataclysm that burst at its seams neither by dysfunctional orientation nor the indoctrination of freedom fighters such as Masauko Chimpembere, Jomo Chikwakwa or activists like Silombera or Kamada who could not be blamed for the riot that engulfed the entire streets of Kabula and beyond.

The riot is just accidental, unplanned and never a fallout of Gweru prison dreams. These dreams the poet says have been left within the four walls of the prison to fulfill themselves. Like the inmates in “Mikuyu afterwards that not even their Ayapala’s Deliria in D4 – that is not even the prison perfect could build ordinary pit latrine with the so called Gweru dreams not to talk of building a nation.

### **Despotism, Corruption and Mapanje’s Vision in the Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prisons**

The literature of any society is a function of the culture, tradition and the moore of the people. In it is the evolution, growth and development of the particular society. And since literature mirror the society, therefore the people’s language, social, political, economic and religious lives are preserved and kept alive by its literature. There is a sense in which

advancement in technology, reasoning, social life, health, education etc. is appropriated through the artistic production of the society. This no doubt, is the use to which Jack Mapanje has put his creative impulse to the effect that he only affects his immediate environment himself becomes transformed by it.

Mapanje unlike Ngugi Wa Thong'O in the same literary region, has chosen the poetic pathway demonstrate his artistic responsibility, the lack of which Achebe says the writer is not better than a man whose house is burning but busy pursuing a fleeing rat. Emil Hurtik and Robert Yarber (1972:1) says

Poetry is a literary genre in which ideas, experiences perceptions, and truths are expressed in a unique and powerful way. It is a synthesis, a strictly unified combination of a number of analysed must finally be considered not as separate and distinct entities but as integral parts of the poem as a whole.

Mapanje has therefore expressed through this collection of poems powerful ideas of lived experiences, the most traumatizing of which is his over three years imprisonment without trial in Mikuyu prison. There is no better way to have a feel of these ideas hidden in the labyrinth than to explore them through the poet's thematic thrusts.

As a social critic and literary activist, Mapanje chooses the instrumentality of the poetic verse to espouse the hard reality of failed state not only Malawi but in Africa generally. It is obvious with his deployment of imagery and sarcasm, that the poet's expectation of an egalitarian society falls short of his ideal state. While explaining the appalling state of the "maternity asylum" in "Out of Bounds," the poets decries a situation where the doctors and nurses compete in using their meager income to extend a government hospital because of its crowdedness. He says:

And I gather  
The doctors & nurses who toil  
twenty-four hours  
( with blunt needles, without  
drugs, on a small wage)  
Offered to extend this wing: there  
was  
The usual hiccup about official  
clearance (p.38 – 39)

The irresponsibility of government is further complicated by administrative bottleneck that will not allow even the patriotic personnel to use their meager salary to extend the hospital wing. This is a case of failed state which is one of the thematic concerns of the

creative outputs of most African writers. Infrastructural decay as a corollary of failed state finds expression in Mapanje's poems. Characteristic of third world countries of Africa, collapse of infrastructure is a common denominator. The Malawian hospital is not only crowded and inadequate, but are not maintained. They are obsolete and out of use. Old supplies run out as the hospital, for instance run without drugs. In fact, the whole building is covered with dust while doctors and nurses use and re-use needles until they are blunt. He says:

...Iron roots crumble under  
Rotting mlombwa leaves, green  
pain trust  
To two decades of dead dust,  
windows  
are covered in shreds of matting  
...Inside some sixty inmates of  
spagming women top & tail  
On thirty beds; ninety others with  
infants  
Scramble over the cracked cold  
cement floor  
A family under each bed, most in  
between ...p.38

The picture that comes to mind here is appalling and disheartening in sovereign state and not in a refugee camp, where people seen to be in asylum.

The issue of injustice which the poet laments pre-occupies his thematic concerns especially in "Mikuyu Prison Visit of Head of Detainees" where state apparatus become instrument of oppression, incarceration and death. The poet paints a scenario where victims, especially the poet, is arrested without warrant of arrest and detained or imprisoned without signing of detention order until after a month in the gulag. He says:

He returned here in October "For  
Security  
Reasons" to get me sign my  
Detention  
Order, "sign here".. p.59

Rights are violated with impunity, justice stood on its head and detainees kept incommunicado. When given unsolicited gesture by the Head of Detainees, Mapanje wonders why his wife and children were not allowed to see him, and why he was neither charged nor tried. He says:

I don't understand why  
My wife and children are not  
allowed to  
See me here, two, I want to  
apologise  
But since I was neither charged  
nor tried,

How does one go about  
apologizing?

The poet is eventually humiliated to apologise for an offence he is not aware of. He says "...You must apologise/About something, for somebody's sake, man! He writes the letter to the life president through the Inspector General

"For any embarrassment caused  
Or to be caused by my detention.  
...I do sincerely hope  
Your Honourable office kindly set  
my  
Case reconsidered. Your obedient  
servant.

Despotism and sit-tight syndrome is one of the major problems bedeviling African political system presently. The likes of Joseph Nyere of Tanzania, Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire, Abacha Sani of Nigeria held their countries hostage for many years even when they outlived their usefulness in government. Such despotism catches the attention of Mapanje in this collection, especially "Mikuyu Prison Visit of Head of Detainees." In his letter he says:

I do apologise, from the bottom  
Of my heart, to His Excellency the  
life  
President, his government, his  
university  
Authorities...p.61

Mapanje first incurred the wrath of the government that jailed him for over three years, because of his work titled *Of Chameleon and the Gods* which gave birth to this collection where government highhandedness leads to violence, political upheavals, anomy and social dislocation. Dedicated to Anenengi, the poem titled "Vigil for a Fellow Credulous Captive" captures government's use of weapon of death to silence opposition. The poet laments the murder of a political figure known to believe in non-corrupt, just and free society. An eminent figure whose hard work the poet captures in the following captivating lines:

Only then will it probably  
Dawn on as to cast our mask and  
gather those frosty  
Mornings he spent picking tea for  
a weekly handful  
Of cheerless, foggy tickies: those  
blistering afternoons  
He clambered up distant craggy  
hills to sell party cards p.15

The poet further identifies the wife who has kept hope alive about the eventual return of her husband. She remains the solitary mourner by the

husband's fireside keeping vigil until his possible return, He says:

But today a mute wife before a  
crushed paraffin  
Tincan lamp keeps vigil over  
Anenengi's fire place; alone p.15

There is a note of fear, hopelessness and disillusionment as the poet gives no hope of his possible return to his once vibrant life:

No dead bones, however, tough,  
ever take on flesh  
Again, outside myths. No, someday,  
Aneneyi will surface as bones, mere bones  
brittly washed up

The Makokola Beach scattered by  
the morning breaker  
And the rough sack they shoved  
Him in will drift along in  
shreds.....the heavy millstone  
Once on his  
Legs having broken free. P.15

The continued social dislocation and bad governance can only lead to social unrest and bitterness. No wonder he asks rhetorically:

Which piqued goat won't  
feverishly nurse  
His tics, stunned by the  
inexplicable  
Directions of these anti-despot  
missiles? p.96

The bottled emotion caused by "the strain of time and despot desires" will as a matter of time burst on the street of Kabula in spontaneous reaction to a lost hope in a dream Mikuyu prison so weak to "Dig anybody's pittance of pit latrine" let alone build a nation. P.98

Style and Language of the Poet

Mapanje's use of language is complex and deep. He uses complex and sometime ambiguous words, capable of different interpretations. It can however be argued that it is not the design of the poet but due to the general nature of poetry as a genre that involves description. In description, "analogies, contrasts and comparisons are the best means to describe people, objects, feelings and needs." Mapanje's figurative expression is not only descriptive it is fresh, and excitingly imaginative. The readers are carried along even as he describes lived experiences because he described familiar ideas, object and state of things. For instance, his description of the process of his arrest is vivid:

The wooden bench cracks to my nerves

I recognize the thin man. He ransacked

My life last September, scattering books,

Papers, records, violently, quarrelling

With mother and my six-year anger-chocking

Son...p.59

His 24 stanzas of three lines per stanza is unique in "Mikuyu Prison Visit of Head of Detainees." This style allows for Caesarea or run-on lines where ideas in preceding stanza run effortlessly to the next and the next. The examples abound in lines 2 -3, 3 -4, 4 -5, 5 -6, 6 -7 etc.

Rhetorical devices are employed where questions are asked without demand for answer but for emphasis. For examples he queries: How does one go about apologizing? p.60, who's never had dreams in these daily prisons? p.98

Mapanje's use of local coloration gives the poems their indigenous outlook, the blend of Africanness and freshness. Words like *mlombwa*, which means a tough tree, *nypala*, a kind of "prefect" in a cell' help the imageries to be more picturesque. The poet's sense of imagery is very sharp and pointed. The imageries created do not only create mental pictures but help readers understand state of mind. Imagery that gives details of a sense of experience is usually direct or descriptive, and when it is figurative, it expresses sensory information by comparison or analogy in "form of metaphor or simile." For instance, he uses simile and metaphor in lines 2 and 3 respectively in "Vigil for a Fellow Credulous Capture":

Someday perhaps he too will come back home

Not like a lion avenging his muzzle once shattered

Nor a cheetah stalking his long awaited prey

Above all, Mapanje masterfully blends all these figurative expressions to create unity and cohesion in his creative output. He succeeds in his creative and inseparable blend of content and form on the one hand, and technique and subject on the other.

These interdependence and harmony Emil Hurtik and Robert Yarber (1972) say, give poem its;

Conciseness, its singleness of focus, its tightness of structure p.1

This explains the cohesion and unity in terms of subject matter, language, rhythm, metrical patterns, tone mood, sound and symbolism despite the fact that the poems are randomly selected. Indeed, this is Mapanje's poetic vision that makes him relevant both among African and non-African readers.

### Recommendations

The poems were analysed alongside the poet's dream of an egalitarian society where government will not only be responsive but responsible to the people. Against the background of numerous awards won by the poets, the artistic vision and the mastery of words used by the poet, the paper recommends that the poems should be recommended as one of the poems to be used in public examinations like WAEC, NECO and UTME.

### CONCLUSION

Mapanje's vision of a society free of oppression, harassment, political assassination, inordinate ambition, despotism and sit-tight syndrome find expressions in the poems. His choice of words were deliberate in order to capture personal experiences and the rot of corruption that has eaten deep into the fabric of the society. The poet's commitment to his country is not in doubt. Mapanje writes with the passion of a patriotic citizen of a country plagued by despotism, political haughtiness and leaders given to political corruption.

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