

AMBIGUITY AND RESISTANCE IN JACK MAPANJE'S POETRY

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the nature of poetic language produced under a tyrannical political system. Jack Mapanje's poetry reflects the social and political life of Malawi under dictatorship. Since direct criticism was dangerous in such a repressive atmosphere, Mapanje developed an ambiguous and cryptic mode of poetic expression. This ambiguity enabled his poetry to reach its intended readers while escaping the control of censorship. His poems make frequent use of images from the world of nature, including mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles, and insects. These natural images are closely connected with human life, social behaviour, political fear, and moral conflict. Mapanje uses them to create a wide range of ideas related to justice, identity, belonging, power, and resistance. In this sense, his poetry also invites an ecocritical reading, since ecocriticism studies the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Mapanje's poetry becomes a direct response to social injustice, cultural humiliation, abuse of power, dictatorship, coercion, and the exploitation of people under Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda's rule in Malawi. His poetic voice records both the fear of repression and the courage of resistance. This study analyses how ambiguity functions as a literary strategy in Mapanje's poetry and how it allows the poet to speak against authority without making his protest immediately visible to oppressive power.

KEYWORDS: Ambiguity, metaphor, dictatorship, persecution, repression, ecocriticism.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Jack Mapanje occupies an important place in modern African poetry. His poems speak from a world of political repression, fear, censorship, and resistance. He writes about a society where language itself becomes dangerous because open criticism can lead to punishment. In such a situation, poetry cannot always speak directly. It has to hide, turn, suggest, and conceal. Mapanje's poetry grows from this difficult political atmosphere and develops a style that is rich in ambiguity, metaphor, irony, and coded meaning.

The present study examines Mapanje's use of ambiguity as a poetic and political strategy. His poetry does not merely describe the suffering of the people of Malawi. It also records the pressure placed upon writers under dictatorship. His poems are often cryptic, but this cryptic quality is not a weakness. It is a deliberate method of survival. Through ambiguity, Mapanje is able to criticize political power while appearing to speak about animals, nature, riddles, rituals, or ordinary incidents.

Mapanje's poetry also reflects the relationship between human society and the natural world. He frequently uses images of chameleons, squirrels, hammerheads, lambs, goats, wagtails, and other living beings. These images are not decorative. They carry political and moral meaning. The chameleon, for instance, suggests camouflage, fear, survival, and political disguise. Other animals also become figures through which Mapanje comments on corruption, obedience, violence, cowardice, and betrayal.

His poetry may be read as a record of Malawi under Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda. It shows how dictatorship changes the language of the poet and the imagination of the people. In a free society, poetry may speak openly. In a repressive society, poetry has to invent a second language. Mapanje's poems belong to this second language. They reveal the hidden connection between poetic form and political resistance.

2. Discussion

The best way to understand Jack Mapanje's poetry is to begin with his historical and political background. Mapanje lived and wrote in Malawi during the rule of Hastings Kamuzu Banda. After leading Malawi to independence, Banda created a one-party state and established himself as Life President. Like many dictators, he preserved power through fear, control, and punishment. Opposition to his rule was treated as rebellion. Any voice that questioned authority was closely watched and often silenced.

In this Malawian atmosphere, Mapanje found his poetic voice. As a poet, he could not risk free and direct expression. The government was extremely sensitive to criticism. James Gibbs, in his article "Singing in the Rain," explains the difficult position of the poet in Malawi. He observes that the poet in Malawi was not entirely free to express himself because the Malawi Congress Party had "ears in all angles of the country" (Gibbs 17). This statement shows the nature of surveillance under Banda's rule. The poet had to write in a country where even language could be suspected.

Banda also created a censorship board to examine publications before they reached the public. This board was influenced by systems of censorship connected with British colonial rule and apartheid South Africa. Under such conditions, writers had to find indirect ways of expression. Macaskill, in his study of Jeremy Cronin's poetry, observes that the poet under censorship is forced to create a style that can escape the notice of authority. A similar condition applies to Mapanje. He could not attack the regime openly. He had to develop a subtle poetic method.

This political pressure gave rise to Mapanje's ambiguous style. His ambiguity is not meant to make meaning impossible. It is meant to protect meaning. The meaning is hidden so that sensitive readers can uncover it. The censor may see only a poem about animals or riddles. The intended reader may understand the political protest beneath the surface. This double movement gives Mapanje's poetry its power.

In his first collection, *Of Chameleons and Gods*, Mapanje explains the nature of his poetic method. He suggests that each poet develops a separate voice and a manner peculiar to himself. He also describes poetry as a form that may contain mystery, riddle, ritual, and coded convention. This description is important because it reveals the way his poems should be read. His poetry often asks the reader to listen carefully and decipher meaning.

Mapanje's title *Of Chameleons and Gods* itself carries great significance. The chameleon is a creature of disguise and survival. It changes colour according to its surroundings. In Mapanje's poetry, the chameleon becomes a political image. It suggests the behaviour of politicians, informers, opportunists, and frightened citizens. At the same time, it also suggests the poet's own method. Like the chameleon, the poem changes its appearance to survive in a dangerous world.

One of the important poems for this discussion is "We Wondered about the Mellow Peaches." This poem is characteristic of Mapanje's deliberately ambiguous style. On the surface, it appears to be a difficult and puzzling poem. But beneath its indirect language lies a strong political meaning. James Gibbs describes "Mellow Peaches" as the work of a poet trained in riddle-like methods (Gibbs 17). The poem refers to a turbulent period in Malawi's political history and to the internal violence within the political system.

The poem refers to Albert Muvelo Ngumayo, once Secretary General of the Malawi Congress Party. Ngumayo was suspected of involvement in ritual murders and political conspiracy. In the poem, Mapanje refers to him as "Alberto" and "Whiskers." The line "And your generous invitations Alberto" carries a tone of irony. The word "generous" is used sarcastically. It points to the promises made by political conspirators to those who support them. Such generosity is not moral kindness. It is part of a plan to capture power.

The "lambs brutally chopped" may be read as victims of political and ritual violence. They suggest innocent people sacrificed for the ambitions of those who seek power. The image of the lamb is important because it evokes harmlessness, vulnerability, and suffering. Mapanje's use of such imagery allows him to speak of murder and political cruelty without writing in a direct political language.

Gibbs reads many images in the poem as riddles. The "parochial squirrels" are small-minded and self-interested party functionaries. The "hammerheads," literally a type of bird, may be read as yes-men who support authority without moral judgment. The "squirrels and hammerheads" become figures of political servility. They act as intermediaries and flatterers within the system. Through them, Mapanje criticizes those who help sustain dictatorship by obedience, selfishness, and silence.

The poem also contains references to artists, rituals, and local traditions. These references widen the meaning of the poem. Mapanje does not present political violence as an isolated event. He connects it with culture, fear, superstition, and public silence. His method is to create a network of suggestive images. The reader has to move through these images slowly to understand the political world behind them.

The final movement of the poem brings the chameleon image into focus. Politicians and chameleons are both masters of camouflage. They wait, change colour, and strike when the moment is right. The chameleon's ability to hide becomes a metaphor for political deception. The conspirator loses control of his colours when his plot fails. Through this image, Mapanje turns natural behaviour into political commentary.

At first glance, "We Wondered about the Mellow Peaches" may appear to condemn Ngumayo and his associates alone. But its deeper meaning is wider. The poem criticizes the political structure that produces such figures. It is not merely about one conspirator. It is about a system that creates chameleons. This is where Mapanje's skill lies. He seems to attack one person, but he actually questions the larger culture of dictatorship under Banda's Malawi.

Another poem that reveals Mapanje's use of ambiguity is "On Being Asked to Write a Poem for 1979." On the surface, this poem may appear to speak about the cruelty and ignorance of the adult world towards children. But Mapanje's poetry often demands a reading beyond the surface. The poem begins with a line that echoes oral praise poetry: "Without kings and warriors occasional verse fails." This line can be read

in more than one way. It may suggest that poetry traditionally depends on rulers and heroes. It may also suggest the failure of public praise in a society where rulers have become oppressive.

The poem questions the purpose of writing under political pressure. When a poet is asked to write for a public occasion, he is expected to praise the nation, the leader, or the moment. But in a dictatorship, such praise becomes morally difficult. The poet is caught between expectation and conscience. Mapanje's ambiguity allows him to resist forced celebration. He does not openly refuse. Instead, he transforms the occasional poem into a space of discomfort and hidden criticism.

Mapanje's poetry also has an ecocritical dimension because he repeatedly turns to the natural world to speak about human society. His use of animals, birds, insects, and reptiles creates a poetic ecology of political life. Nature becomes a field of signs. The chameleon suggests disguise. The lamb suggests innocence. The squirrel suggests smallness and self-interest. Birds suggest repetition, obedience, or warning. These images show that the natural world in Mapanje's poetry is not separate from politics. It becomes a language through which politics can be understood.

Ecocriticism studies the relationship between literature and the physical environment. In Mapanje's case, this relationship is also political. He uses the physical world to comment on moral and social realities. His poems show how natural images can carry human meanings. The world of nature becomes a shelter for forbidden speech. It gives the poet a way to speak when direct language is unsafe.

Mapanje's ambiguous language should not be mistaken for confusion. It is a disciplined poetic strategy. He writes in riddles because the political world around him forces language into secrecy. His poetry carries both concealment and revelation. It hides its protest from the censor and reveals it to the attentive reader. This makes his work an important example of literature written under repression.

His poetry also shows the courage of the writer. Even when he hides meaning, he does not abandon resistance. He continues to write against humiliation, abuse of power, dictatorship, coercion, and exploitation. His imprisonment and later forced departure from Malawi show the risk involved in such writing. The state may not always understand every image in a poem, but it often understands the danger of a poet who refuses silence.

Mapanje's poetry is therefore both artistic and political. Its metaphors are not mere ornaments. Its ambiguity is not a decorative technique. Its animal images are not simple references to nature. All these features work together to create a poetry of survival and resistance. The poet adapts his style to the political climate, just as the chameleon adapts itself to its surroundings. But adaptation does not mean surrender. In Mapanje's poetry, adaptation becomes a form of defiance.

3. Conclusion

Jack Mapanje's poetry arises from an atmosphere of fear, censorship, and political repression. His work shows how a poet can respond to tyranny without always speaking in direct political language. The ambiguity in his poetry is not accidental. It is a necessary strategy. It allows him to protect his meaning, reach his intended readers, and avoid the immediate force of censorship.

This study has shown that Mapanje's poetic style is deeply influenced by the Malawian political climate under Hastings Kamuzu Banda. His poems use riddles, metaphors, irony, and natural imagery to speak about dictatorship, violence, betrayal, and resistance. The repeated use of animals and other living beings gives his poetry an ecocritical dimension. Nature becomes a coded language through which human fear, corruption, and survival can be expressed.

Mapanje's poetry reveals that literature produced under tyranny often changes its form. It cannot always speak plainly. It must learn to disguise itself. Like the chameleon, it survives by changing colour. Yet beneath this disguise, the poem continues to resist. Mapanje's work stands as an example of how poetry can remain faithful to truth even when truth has to travel through secrecy, metaphor, and ambiguity.

His poetry finally reminds us that literature is a manifestation of society. When society is free, literature may speak freely. When society is repressive, literature finds other paths. Mapanje's poems follow those hidden paths. They show how poetic language can carry protest, memory, and moral courage even in the shadow of dictatorship.

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