

Poets and Prostitutes: Sexual Morality in Malawian Poetry

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Abstract

The social phenomenon of prostitution is to be found throughout the world. Malawi is no exception. Rather than reading it from a sociological perspective, however, this article examines the representation of the prostitute in Malawian poetry. This position is informed by the contention that literature has an illocutionary force that offers a novel view of social phenomena, in some instances permitting a closer, more intimate engagement with the human subjects at the centre of the text, with the aim of enabling fresh conceptions of that subject. In the past few decades, the figure of the female prostitute has arisen occasionally in the verse of several male Malawian poets. It is the opinion of this article that, in their representation of this individual, the poets seek to expose the prostitute's humanity, in opposition to the overriding denigration of her as a harbinger of disease and immorality. The exercise proceeds by examining eight poems written by well-known Malawian poets: Jack Mapanje, Steve Chimombo, David Rubadiri, Felix Mnthali, John Lwanda and Stanley Onjezani Kenani. In several of the poems, the writers address the women by specific names—Fiona, Tamara, Antonina—as an attempt to humanise them, to cleanse them of the appellation of monstrosity that has often been directed at the prostitute. It is an attempt to re-centre a figure that has existed on the margins of Malawian society, by according them agency and sympathy.

Keywords: Malawian literature; prostitution; African poetry; Malawian poetry; Steve Chimombo; Jack Mapanje; Felix Mnthali

Introduction

For a long time, prostitution has been regarded as one of the main sociological problems in Malawi. It is seen as an indicator of the sliding morality scale for the populace, and in more recent years, has been blamed for helping to spread HIV. The figure of the



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prostitute is therefore one that has been cast in scornful language. There are many studies of prostitution that have been carried out in Malawi, but they are predominantly from sociological and medical perspectives. What these studies reveal is that poverty is usually deemed the main cause of prostitution (although there are a few recorded cases where women confess to doing it for “fun”). Therefore, much as many women see the trade as an unworthy one, they sometimes find themselves without much choice. Significantly for this study, virtually nobody has sought to examine the portrayal of these individuals in Malawi in the literary form, even though such depictions exist. In fact, it has been observed that there is actually an “extraordinarily large amount of attention given to the prostitute in modern African fiction” (Petersen 1984, 40). Stratton (1990, 118) observes that this “prostitution metaphor,” commonly used by male African writers, “expresses the degradation of Africa.” Indeed, characters engaged in prostitution abound in novels, short stories and even in music produced by Malawians. In everyday discourse, however, what proliferate are the denigratory terms addressed towards prostitutes—“Night Queens,” *mahule*, *anamasupuni*, and homewreckers, for example. These terms carry with them connotations of indecency, corruption, infection and disease (Ngwira 2017, 107). It is in this light that the current study becomes important, offering a glimpse into the knowledge propagation about prostitution that is fomented in the literary form, specifically the poem, in Malawi.

In examining Malawian poetry that features the figure of the prostitute, it is helpful to recall the work that literature does in the depiction of marginalised others in society. Maria Pia Lara’s (1998) notion of the illocutionary force, posited in *Moral Textures: Feminist Narratives in the Public Sphere*, is specifically about this point, with regard to literature about women. Specifically, as she argues, literary texts can act as emancipatory narratives with “the ‘disclosive’ ability to envision normatively—that is, in a critical way—better ways of being in a world of ‘equality and distinction’” (1998, 6). In the present case, the subject of the poetry is a figure on the periphery of society, often harshly judged by that society. The poetry offers us a way to rethink this judgement.

The focus in the article is on the poetry’s depiction of girls at bars who are the targets of men, who offer to have sex with them for money. There are at least two categories of these girls, but they are often conflated into one category—prostitutes (*mahule*)—in the imagination of Malawians (Tavory and Poulin 2012, 215). The first are “bargirls.” Strictly speaking, these are “single girls and women employed by the bar owner to work in a bar, bottle store, or resthouse, and who live there” (van den Borne 2003, 6). This is the category that is presented in the poetry. They are significant because, in a lot of cases, “[t]o make ends meet, they barter sex with male customers” (van den Borne 2003, 6). The second group is that which van den Borne (2003, 6) calls “freelancers,” who do not work in the bars, but frequent them with the sole purpose of making money through sleeping with men. Whether they are working at the bars or not, Malawian society “looks down upon those women, stigmatizes them, and speaks of them as a homogenous group ... categoriz[ing] them among *anthu oyipitsitsa* (the worst people) for causing

conflicts in the communities, breaking up families, and killing people” (van den Borne 2003, 7). However, we find that this negative attitude is not necessarily replicated in the poetry, which seeks not only to complicate the one-dimensional image of the prostitute, but also to cast a critical eye towards her “clients.”

The figure of the prostitute is significant in Africa’s colonial history. In fact, in the colonial setup, Fanon (1963, 130) classes the prostitute among the *lumpenproletariat*, a class of people that basically “endangers the ‘security’ of the town, and is the sign of the irrevocable decay, the gangrene ever present at the heart of colonial domination.” According to Kenneth Little (1973, 81), becoming a prostitute was one out of three options available to the African woman during the colonial period. The other options were to become housewives or petty traders. Becoming a prostitute “was obviously disreputable, but it was the only option for women to decide their own destiny and improve their economic condition” (Petersen 1984, 39–40). We observe this point depicted in some works of African literature, such as Buchi Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood* and Ousmane Sembene’s *God’s Bits of Wood*. In a good number of works of literature by Africans (both male and female), we may observe how prostitution is recast from being merely a social ill to being recognised for the form of agency that it accords to females, indeed while simultaneously casting them as outcasts. It is in this regard that the notion of the illocutionary force becomes relevant. The poetry offers a way of bringing an “uncomfortable” subject into the public sphere. Narratives such as these “create new forms of power ... making institutional transformations possible” (Lara 1998, 5). Women’s contribution to the nationalist project has been recognised, that even though they have been cast as “the hopeless dregs of humanity” (Fanon 1963, 130), they have contributed to the awakening of nations.

When considering the Malawian poets who are writing about prostitution, we can observe a similar trend. Most of the poets historicise the prostitute. By this I mean that the figure of the prostitute is considered within Malawi’s socio-historico-political context. In this regard, we can cite poets like Mapanje, Lwanda and Kenani who recognise the economic pressure that perpetuates the trade. In this category is also Mnthali, in his consideration of the formation of bonds other than sexual between the woman and her clients. Also important are the poets’ attempts to trace the emotional baggage created out of men’s interactions with the women. Chimombo, surprisingly, takes a different approach, casting the prostitute as a villain, displaying a rhetoric that may resonate with much of the popular discourse about women in the country. In the following sections, I examine each poet in turn, discussing the ideas that emerge in their portrayal of the prostitute in their verse.

Mapanje: The Euphoria of Independent Malawi

For most of the poets, depictions of the women carry with them a sense of nostalgia. The reader detects a certain element of longing for a time gone past. This is evident in

Jack Mapanje's "The Cheerful Girls at Smiller's Bar, 1971." The poet (Mapanje 1981, 22) fondly recalls that

The prostitutes at Smiller's Bar beside the dusty road
Were only girls once in tremulous mini-skirts and oriental
Beads, cheerfully swigging Carlsbergs and bouncing to
Rusty simanje-manje and rumba booming in the juke-box.
They were striking virgins bored by our Presbyterian
Prudes until a true Presbyterian came one night. And like
To us all the girls offered him a seat on cheap planks
In the dark backyard room choked with diesel-oil clouds
From a tin-can lamp. Touched the official rolled his eyes
To one in style. She said no. Most girls only wanted
A husband to hook or the fruits of Independence to taste
But since then mini-skirts were banned and the girls
Of Smiller's Bar became "ugly prostitutes to boot!"

Today the girls still giggle about what came through
The megaphones: the preservation of our traditional
Et cetera...

In the poem, the prostitutes are presented with a certain kind of deliberate innocence, as "striking virgins" who frequent the bars simply to drink and dance, which is unexpected given the prevailing lore about prostitutes in the country as women of loose sexual habits. One interpretation is of the girls as representative of the nation of Malawi as a whole, especially one that is still in the early period of its independence (Mukhuba 2017, 32). The euphoria that is felt by the populace also therefore extends to the girls who frequent the bar, who also nurture dreams of bright futures in the new Malawi, with hopes of finding "a husband to hook or the fruits of independence to taste" (Mapanje 1981, 22). However, as most African writers of Mapanje's generation do, he critiques the existing government authorities, who are quick to thwart people's hopes at the dawn of independence. In this case, the prostitute becomes a metaphor for the vulnerable state of the Malawian populace at the turn of independence. Due to her innocence and her enduring self-respect (the girls in the poem are firm in their refusal to sleep with the men, as seen in their rejection of the government official's advances), she is cast as the victim.

One is reminded of Kirsten Holst Petersen's (1984, 42) observation about Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*, where, she argues, the prostitute "becomes the symbol of the victims of neo-colonial oppression." Mapanje's poem has been described as one that "encapsulated the hypocrisy of the one-party era where MPs said one thing by day and did the opposite at night" (Chanika, Lwanda, and Muula 2013, 96). As Mukhuba (2017, 32) similarly argues, Mapanje "reveals that forced patterns of societal behaviour that favour only the few usually precipitate dangerously distorted perceptions in society." In this case, people have preconceived ideas about the girls at the bar, expecting them to

express assent to non-vocalised demands for sexual fulfilment. The lustful men in this case are the newly empowered officials, and they are the ones who “decree against girls who wear mini-skirts and have the guts to say no to the public officials” (Ojaide 2015, 169). The prostitute therefore appears in this poem in order to permit Mapanje to criticise the greedy public officials, ironically represented in the poem as the “true Presbyterians” (1981, 22). In fact, the truest Presbyterian in this case is President Kamuzu Banda, “because he came to Malawi as a Messiah, a liberator” (Mukhuba 2017, 33). It is commonly held that Banda’s regime attempted to impose a set of prudish norms that did not work in the local context. It is in this light that John Lwanda (2003, 116) reads the poem, especially the awkward placement of the Presbyterian among the prostitutes, as representing “[a] rather professed puritanical western sexuality [that] sat uncomfortably with the actuality of the culturally determined rural modes of sexuality, public or private, of the majority.” The Christian connotation is therefore deliberate as it highlights the hypocrisy of political authority, which claims to act on behalf of the people but instead seeks to rape the land.

Mnthali: Of Academic Dons, Drinking and Detention

Another of the most established poets in Malawi is Felix Mnthali, and he too makes some slight commentary on the political context in which both the prostitute and her clients operate. Among his poems, there are two about a bargirl, Tamara, which are not that well known. In both poems the persona speaks of the bargirl as an individual who offers much needed company or emotional refuge to men who are beset with the troubles of the nation. The poet’s picture of the woman here is unsurprising, given the fact that in Malawi “bargirls are expected to flirt and engage in conversation with clients in order to promote sales” (Tavory and Poulin 2012, 220). In “Tamara at the Country Club,” the bar is identified as the space where the bargirl exists, allegedly in her efforts to ensnare married men. In Malawi, the notion of the “bargirl” has connotations of immorality, disease and depravity, such that in the eyes of many, she is no different from a prostitute. As in Mapanje’s poem, there is a sense of nostalgia that runs through Mnthali’s verse, captured in the persona’s memory of Tamara, posited as a figure of attraction for men drinking their beer. She appears as the typical bargirl who has to endure the lustful and lewd comments of men steadily becoming inebriated (Mnthali 1980b, 49), uttering

Growling monosyllables [that]
Fly across the bar stools
Like animated gestures
In outer-space cartoons.

Not here
No, not here
That choking laughter
Along the Mulunguzi River
Where nimble feet hop from boulder to boulder
And the glimmer in your eye

Provokes a whirlwind—
Not here!

In this case, we notice that it is the men who are associated with a certain kind of animality, a grossness of behaviour that the bargirl has to put up with, even as “the glimmer in [her] eye / provokes a whirlwind” (Mnthali 1980b, 49) among the imbibers. The woman’s individuality is again asserted by the poet’s statement that “a mere nod / and a smile / will convince [them] that she care[s]” for these men “drinking themselves to imbecility” (Mnthali 1980b, 50).

We see the persona as one of those men who grew to admire Tamara’s resilience, the hardy personality that allows her to perform her job and endure the shame associated with it. Despite the slurs that are commonly slung at bargirls, Tamara comes across as an independent personality that, while serving the drinking men, still manages to convince them that “[she] too want[s] to feel accepted / though remaining uniquely [herself]” (Mnthali 1980b, 49). These lines from Mnthali further emphasise the bargirl as an individual, not as a mere tool or plaything for the men. He reads her as a lonely figure, whose complexity is perhaps not recognised by society, which leads her to utter a paraphrased line from Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*: “I ain’t nobody but meself” (Mnthali 1980b, 49). The persona, and indeed the other drinkers, recognise this uniqueness. That explains the persona’s advice (Mnthali 1980b, 49) to the woman to remain resilient:

Change not yourself
Though growling monosyllables
Fly across your stool
And men in their prime
Drink themselves to senility.

The sympathy from the drinkers is also captured in the grief which overpowers them when she dies, an emotion captured in “Tears for Tamara,” where the persona expresses grief over the woman. People never sing praises of prostitutes or bargirls in public. In fact, this is a category of people whose humanity is rarely appreciated. However, in the poetry, writers such as Mnthali, Kenani and Mapanje choose to highlight the humanity behind the stereotypically reviled image, challenging the assumption that such women are often “portrayed virtually as automata” (Little 1980, 92). Their poetry challenges the ascription of devilry to these women, the naming of them as *anamasupuni*, for example. Drawing from Lara (1998), we observe how the poetry allows a novel look at the figure of the prostitute, permitting recognition of her individuality and her humanity. In “Tears for Tamara,” the poet (Mnthali 1980c, 51) addresses the soul of the departed woman, informing her:

A thousand telephones
Screamed the hour of your loss
And a thousand more

Giggled and ululated at your second coming
For a thousand sirens
Had sniffed the trail to nowhere
With the greyness of khaki
Lurking behind innocent shadows.

We can imagine that these grieving voices are those of the men who would enjoy a smile and a nod from Tamara. This expression of grief is in turn a display of recognition for the other who is often dismissed as a bearer of disease and an exemplar of immorality. However, there are yet others who express joy at her passing. These would probably be the married women whose husbands visit the bars, self-professed paragons of moral integrity, who often blame prostitutes “for disrespecting their cultural moral values and the teachings of the elders ... destroying life, and ruining Malawi” (van den Borne 2003, 21). In general, within most African societies, the prostitute is “scorned and condemned, both because of the source of her income and because of the threat she represents to the established sexual organization of the society” (Petersen 1984, 39). Ironically, the persona also notes that these voices celebrate Tamara’s “second coming” (Mnthali 1980c, 51). It is nigh blasphemous for Mnthali to employ this phrasing, as it casts the bargirl as a Christ-like figure, who somehow defeats death. In some fashion, the fact that Mnthali devotes two poems to this figure indeed somehow cements her immortality, and ensures her reawakening in recitations of the poetry.

Mnthali seems to have indeed been enraptured, if not enamoured, with the women working in the bars. Above all the other poets, he succeeds most in giving us a look at the human side of the woman. She offers a listening voice to men beset with various domestic, political and economic problems, and as we saw in the previous poem, is a grievable body, if we adopt Butlerian terminology. The individuality of the prostitute is more explicitly captured in Mnthali’s (1980a, 118) verse about “Antonina”:

Red, green, yellow, pink—
The bars along the road to Liwonde
Go dizzy
With the footwork of possessed dancers;
On the tall stools and in “reserved” chambers
Man-eating idols sniff the tenderised bodies
Of warm Mona Lisas from village cradles.

There is a hint of sympathy from the poet as he refers to the prostitutes as “tenderised bodies / of warm Mona Lisas from village cradles” (Mnthali 1980a, 118). The term “tenderised” is at once evocative of the sexual desirability and the youthful innocence that is to be found in these women, with a natural, unadorned beauty—hence the reference to da Vinci’s painting—that is only to be found in the rural spaces, where the women do not have the luxury of expensive cosmetics. Their vulnerability is further suggested by Mnthali’s mocking of the lustful men as “Man-eating idols” (Mnthali 1980a, 118), which firmly casts the women as the victims in this scenario. Additionally,

the mention of the village evokes the poverty that leads the women to prostitution. Of course, being a Malawian poet, references to Banda's oppressive regime are never far away. He brings up the oppressive political atmosphere as a blight on the carousing of the citizens, as "shadows ... spreading a pall over drinking sprees" (Mnthali 1980a, 118). With this background, Antonina's humanity emerges. This is done through the poet's (Mnthali 1980a, 118) recalling of

... the wail of Antonina
Mourning her lovers
Who have been looked for
And reported "taken"
Dreaming of plays they had written
Of monographs on literature and culture
Of research on the Viphya Plateau
While all around them
Men lie squeezed in fives and sixes
A paltry sacrifice
To the parody of dawn.

In these lines, Mnthali brings up the issue of detained Malawians, thereby complicating the scene where, previously, only the prostitutes were the identified victims. He refers to various men, including academics "dreaming of plays they had written / of monographs on literature and culture" (Mnthali 1980a, 118) who were detained by the Malawian government of the time, for penning writings that were thought to be subversive. There are many Malawians who were detained in prisons, the most famous example probably being the academic, Jack Mapanje, who was detained at Mikuyu Maximum Security Prison for three years, seven months, and 16 days.

Shame and Seduction: Rubadiri's Nameless Woman

David Rubadiri, another one of Malawi's well-known poets, also lends his verse to the discussion of the prostitute, in a poem simply entitled "The Prostitute." This is not the first time he has treated the topic. Prostitution is also a key feature in his single novel, *No Bride Price*. What he does in his poem, however, is to capture both the allure of the woman as well as the sense of shame that the "client" feels after the sexual encounter. The depiction of the woman in this case is of a femme fatale who "seduces men, bringing them momentary happiness, then suffering and sorrow" (Nwahunanya 2011, 343). As in the other poems mentioned in this article, the persona encounters the woman at a place of entertainment, perhaps a bar (Rubadiri 2004, 42), and at that moment he

... desired her
Truly, like all men
In the dark cascades
of the Suzana desire beautiful
and seductive women.

The persona is rendered helpless upon the encounter with the prostitute, and blames it on his human nature as a man. Added to this are the kinaesthetic and sexually arousing movements of the woman in this space: “the Congo beat / rippled through her / shimmering / along a bottom / down to her feet” (Rubadiri 2004, 42). One can sense the lust with which the persona regards the woman, the reason why he eventually has sex with her, during which he describes her as being “almost a goddess” (Rubadiri 2004, 42). However, once she collects her pay, he finds himself transfixed, unable to stir out of his home.

The poem captures the personal element, much as Mnthali and others do. It shows the sexual encounter with the prostitute as a fleeting moment of pleasure that leaves one paralysed afterwards. To his credit, Rubadiri (2004, 42) does not cast any blame on the woman, but rather highlights the shame of the man that “in the light of another morning” finds the spell of attraction broken, and himself a few pennies poorer (Rubadiri 2004, 42):

The morning of the night
burst through my thighs
in a longing of fire—
she
almost a goddess
lit
in clever cascades
of light.
But in the light of another morning,
After the jingle of pennies
How could I move
To stir the glue-pot?

The question-form ending of the poem provokes reflexivity in the reader. According to Lara (1998), this is a key ingredient of the illocutionary force in literature. It is this which enables the “[reformulation] of ‘values’, ‘beliefs’, ‘self-images’, ‘boundaries’ and ‘frontiers’” (Lara 1998, 7). Although nameless, the effect of the prostitute on the man is clear. When we read this poem, we are reminded of the suggestion that the prostitute metaphor highlights “men’s degradation under some non-preferred socio-political system” (Stratton 1990, 124). On the one hand, it highlights the economic exchange, the fact that he has to pay the woman before she leaves. On the other, Rubadiri is suggesting a degeneration of morality that leads the man to seek sexual succour in the arms of the prostitute. But it is unclear if we should blame the man or the woman, or if we should cast blame at all. The poet leaves the reader to make the final verdict. As long as he has created this reflexivity within the reader, the poetry has achieved its aim.

Lwanda: Return to Smiller's Bar

The newer poets include people like John Lwanda who, in his verse, paints various pictures of Malawian society, and displays awareness of other works that have been written before him. His poem "Lilongwe Hotel" is in response to Jack Mapanje's "The Cheerful Girls at Smiller's Bar, 1971." Lwanda continues the portrayal of the girls as citizens who have not been spared the changes in the country's politics. Whereas Mapanje situated the prostitutes at the optimistic moment of the country's independence, Lwanda drifts forward in time, to another period of political transition—the change of government to democracy. His tone is similarly one of disillusionment, as he observes that the prostitutes are among citizens who have not been spared the changing economic climate. The title of the poem—"Lilongwe Hotel"—is significant, reflecting this new economic climate (which nevertheless remains the same as poverty endures). The girls have moved from the clientele at bars besides dusty roads (in Mapanje's poem), to venturing into plush hotels in Malawi's capital city, an obvious step up on the social ladder. Significantly, Lilongwe also happens to be the town that houses most of the country's government officials. Despite this change in location, poverty remains the key cause for prostitution. At the opening of the poem, the persona addresses the older poet (Lwanda 2007, 66):

They no longer gather at Smiler's Bar, Jack.
Inflation, unfettered *kwacha* and the need to
Personally alleviate poverty brings them here
In their lovely rich droves.

In the new dispensation management is liberal
And pragmatic beyond reproach!
Gone is the reactionary cry about standards and
Morals; these angels of the personal services
Industry do no harm except to their clients and
Concubines as they exchange those precious
Viral spirits.

As we shall see in Stanley Kenani's poem, one notices the continued presence of men who fuel the fires of prostitution, as it were. These are the men who, in choosing the women to sleep with, "select / from the / Tallest, fattest, shortest, prettiest and / Healthiest of the land" (Lwanda 2007, 66). In this case, therefore, we have an explicit identification of the men as a class that engages in the commodification of the female body. The language is evocative of the slave stocks, where human bodies would be regarded merely as meat for breeding. In the case of the men at the hotel, the selection of the bodies is for commercial sex, an act that Lwanda condemns as leading to the exchange of "viral spirits" between the women and "their clients," a subtle reference to the spread of HIV. An important difference to note here, between Mapanje and Lwanda, is the latter's introduction of the HIV scourge. It is an indication of Lwanda's writing at a time when prostitution and disease are often conjoined in popular discourse. This

reference here suggests a continuation of a troubling rhetoric in Malawi of the woman's body as the source of infection (Ngwira 2017, 96). The prostitute, in particular, does not escape this accusation.

The poet's argument is that the new democratic dispensation has not done much to stem prostitution as an immoral practice. In the one-party regime, at the time of Independence, there were cries about morality, captured in the four cornerstones (unity, loyalty, discipline, obedience) of the then ruling party, the Malawi Congress Party. In the new dispensation, the disillusionment is captured in the statement, "gone is the reactionary cry about standards and / Morals" (Lwanda 2007, 66). The hypocrisy of the officials means that they merely pretend to be a party of the new, progressive world, which recognises women's right to political participation. For them, the women can exercise participation in national politics as long as they remain "suitably supine" (Lwanda 2007, 66), a reference to the continued regard for the limited options of the female subject.

Victim or Villain: Kenani's Problematising of the Stereotype

Stanley Kenani emerges as yet another figure in the new generation of Malawian writers, those who have produced works in the democratic dispensation. As a result, his works do not dwell on the evils of the Banda regime, compared to the poetry of many other established poets. The poem under discussion, "About Fiona, a Girl I Saw at Los Amigos," is a case in point in presenting the club as a site of vice, a space where the prostitute lives to prey on men. Los Amigos was a nightclub that operated in the early 2000s in the Mpemba area, on the outskirts of Blantyre, a city in Malawi. Just as is the case with most nightclubs in Malawi, it attracted a fair share of prostitutes. In the poem, from the start, we notice the sympathy that the persona holds for the woman. The first impression is that she is a physically captivating individual (Kenani 2005, 41), to the extent that

Even Blake, Shakespeare or Mapanje
Malunga, Rubadiri or Chipasula
In their poetic wisdom
Armed with an arsenal of adjectives
Would not describe [her] beauty.

In this opening stanza, much as the attention is on Fiona's beauty, the poet also attempts some subtle intertextuality, by referencing English (William Blake, William Shakespeare) and Malawian poets (Jack Mapanje, Okomaatani Ben Malunga, David Rubadiri, Frank Chipasula) of note, who have written love poems before. The ranking of these poets is therefore a direct commentary on the beauty of the woman. This is captured in the second stanza, which is structured in the courtly love tradition, but also subtly echoes metaphysical poet Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress," as Kenani

writes that he will devote various poems to praise different parts of the woman's anatomy (Kenani 2005, 41):

Ten poems centred on your beauty
one about your nose, just your nose
another about the dimples, those wonderful dimples
or about the immaculate dental formula
one about your sweet, angelic voice
the colour of your skin, the shape of your body
even the lips: sweet and tender
the catwalk gait, the eyes
clothes tailored to pronounce your beauty:
the poems would sweep international awards.

This emphasis, which is very much on the woman's physicality, may end up doing more harm than good, in so far as the poet attempts to highlight her subjectivity. It betrays the lust that the persona also bears towards Fiona, through the memory of her "catwalk gait, the eyes / clothes tailored to pronounce [her] beauty" (Kenani 2005, 41).

However, the overriding message is one which mixes sympathy for Fiona with a warning about prostitution. Indeed, the persona holds that she is "a bundle of contradictions" (Kenani 2005, 41). He believes she deserves a normal life, not a "cloud of darkness / nor abuse by lustful maniacs" (Kenani 2005, 41). Instead, what he wishes for her is "a life-long soulmate / and love deep-rooted and wanted" (Kenani 2005, 41). Nevertheless, the persona is wary of the deceitful nature of the prostitute (Kenani 2005, 41):

you wear the night from day to day
you smile with teeth and not with heart
you smile to stalk prey and bite
you smile to lead Lust to your bed.

The emphasis here is on the duality that the woman exhibits. On the one hand, she displays dishonesty. On the other hand, as the poet notes, she can also be regarded as a victim. In Kenani's verse, the sympathy is evocative of the wish by some artists to depict "the prostitute as a woman, realizing the real reasons for what could be called her aberrant behaviour, and seeing her relevance in contemporary society" (Nwahunanya 2011, 350–51). These reasons, the poet suggests, are economic, and the woman has to dull her senses with alcohol and narcotics in order to perform her job. Kenani (2005, 41) sees the woman's presence at the club as "a waste of already meagre resources," firm in the belief that she could be in another role, contributing to the country in a different way.

Chimombo: Moral Judgement

Prostitutes have also featured occasionally in Steve Chimombo's work, most notably in his play, *Wachiona Ndani*. For the current discussion, however, it is his presentation of the prostitute in poetry that is significant. Chimombo's "Just Before One for the Road" is unapologetic in its scathing portrayal of the prostitute. With this poem, he joins the league of African poets who have condemned the prostitute (Fonchingong 2006, 142) as a blight on the continent's moral fabric. In this poem, just like in Kenani's verse, she appears as a hunter, with men as her prey. A few stanzas from the poem (Chimombo 2009, 123) illustrate this point:

Disco music pummels eardrums
Leaden decibels cave them in
No mosquito dare float in
For fear of being ricocheted back
Through the vibrating burglar bars.

The stomps on your toes are signs
That you are not alone on earth.
The prostitutes' distress signals
Are lost in a swirl of thoughts
Perhaps, if her thigh keeps on pressing
Something will give way—perhaps.

A prospective customer replaces
A glass with another, afraid of refills
Potential airborne viruses park
On unsuspecting but willing victims.
The prostitutes' freewheeling feelers
Reach their mark and settle insistently.

Fluorescent lights spark glittering passion
Between slinking yielding flesh embracing
Before heading out for a sleazy quickie.

In an examination of prostitution in Meja Mwangi and David Rubadiri's fiction, Little (1980, 92) makes an observation that fits Chimombo's poem perfectly: "stress is laid on the association with easy-going dance-halls and bars, and the stench of drunkenness. Juke boxes blare away ... and the women and girls are there to provide the social scene with a sexual atmosphere." There is a merging of the environment and the women who populate it, ostensibly in search of men. These unfortunate men are the ones enraptured by "the prostitutes' distress signals" (Chimombo 2009, 123), which are basically subtle signs of attraction to the drinkers. The setting is a bar, and within this space, the women become like nocturnal insects, with "freewheeling feelers" (Chimombo 2009, 123) seeking their targets, the hapless men.

The insectoid imagery fits the overriding sense of the woman as a harbinger of disease, as she manages to coax the man away for a “sleazy quickie” (Chimombo 2009, 123). The choice of adjectives in the poem is telling of the contempt in which the poet holds the trade of prostitution. The bar is populated by “airborne viruses,” individuals with “bleary” looks, “guffaws” for laughs, and the atmosphere seems generally chaotic, as “Disco music pummels eardrums / Leaden decibels cave them in” (Chimombo 2009, 123). This is where Chimombo situates the prostitute plying her trade. Much as the men are pictured as “willing victims,” one cannot ignore the predatory element that surrounds the woman in the poem.

Conclusion

One thing we may note among some of these poems is the fact that focusing on the prostitute allows them the chance to comment on society as a whole, on hypocrisy, corruption and the vain attempt to weave a national code of sexual ethics. In talking about the illocutionary force of literature, Lara (1998, 152) stresses that these narratives are not just about telling the stories of marginalised individuals—they also have the capability “to affect and change individuals, and to intervene in other cultural practices.” This statement stresses the potential of literature, especially in examining how it may force a shift in perspectives about the marginalised subjects. These examples of poetry are indeed revelatory that “[t]he prostitute becomes a figure for subtly examining postcolonial African societies with a view to assessing them in terms of their declared goals and overall achievements so far” (Nwahunanya 2011, 350). As the paper has indicated, most of these poets recognise the prostitute not as a representation of female immorality, but as an individual who shares the same oppressive atmosphere that the rest of the people also witness. As a result, she grieves when her lovers are imprisoned. In a way, the poems invite the reader to imagine the myriad relationships that are broken or disrupted by the oppressive government. Additionally, the prostitutes are subject to the same economic stresses that affect the rest of the populace. It is the poverty that forces them to continue their trade, despite the slurs often thrown at them from various corners of the society.

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