

New Realism, Social Criticism and Prostitution Motif in Shadreck Chikoti's *Free Africa Flee!*

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Abstract: *The post-Banda Malawian poetry, like its precursor, has largely been marked by commitment to social and political issues. In taking on these subjects, the poets in Malawi tend to adopt critical stance reminiscent of the role of the traditional bard, who excoriates social misconducts and political malfeasances on the part of the common people and the elite. A contemporary Malawian poet, Shadreck Chikoti's debut collection, Free Africa Flee!, falls in this category. Despite its topicality and other strengths, the collection has suffered critical neglect. Against this backdrop, this article closely examines selected poems in the collection, and argues that Chikoti makes social criticism out of his poetry, using a singular motif across dissimilar issues, a feature that is quite unusual in a debut collection. The poet's criticism is located in the context of new realism, a writing convention which privileges 'hyperextreme sincerity' and pluralism in its representation of realities. The article concludes that the poet's thematic renderings preserve a strong link with Abiola Irele's notion of new realism in the post-independence sub-Saharan African novel.*

Keywords: Malawian poetry, Shadreck Chikoti, New realism in African literature, Social criticism in poetry

Introduction

Many critics have commented on the focus of African literature on society. For instance, Kunene (1982) observes that situating artistic vision within social experience is not only normal, it is also natural. Similarly observing that every kind of African literature has a social function, Ojaide (1996:2) gives the intimation that 'songs, prayers, praise chants, and abuse are placed at the service of the community'. He also adds that this utilitarian function, originally associated with orature, has been imbibed by modern African writers as well, which is another way of saying that African literature is socially and politically committed. This inclination to commitment has, however, made Eurocentric critics of African literature question the artistic merits of African writings. Ken Goodwin (1982), for example, claims that the commitment of later modern African poets to politics has adversely affected artistry in the poetry, compared to that of first generation poets like Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, John Pepper Clark, Kofi Awoonor, and Lenrie Peters. While this, indeed, may hold true to some poets of later generations,

there are many others who combine commitment with ingenious craftsmanship. This paper considers Chikoti as belonging to this class.

In fact, to say that Modern African poetry is a committed genre like its prose and drama siblings is to re-state the obvious. To also observe that they are often critical of their social milieu or contexts might also appear blatant enough. Yet, the degree of commitment, critical value and approach of the poets offers exciting varieties across generations, regions, nationalities and gender divides, making their works subjects of sustained critical interests.

Unfortunately, until they win literary recognition through awards or make a shortlist of prestigious competitions, many of them are ignored by critics in the academy. This has been the fate of Shadreck Chikoti, one of the twenty-first century Malawian poets and activists. Although Chikoti has courted better recognition as a short story writer, his poetry volume *Free Africa Flee!* deserves critical attention for its unique approach to the treatment of familiar social and political issues in the collection. In the article, I argue that the issues are largely explored, using prostitution in both literal and metaphorical senses, and deftly as a motif in the first half of the collection. This is informed by the fact that while some of the poems directly comment on the indignity of prostitution by women, the notion of prostitution also underlines the infidelity of political leaders who jump from one political party to another in pursuit of self-interest.

As noted by Syned Mthatiwa (2007), most Malawian poets are social critics. The poets mostly draw their poetic afflatus from the quotidian realities that straddle the social, the economic and political issues of their milieu. Interestingly, they tend to be critical of these quotidian muses, as they primarily see themselves in the image of the traditional African bard who the society recognises as its conscience. As writings rooted in social criticism are usually sublimated through the convention of realism, the extent to which the realist mode has helped Chikoti project the material evidence of the social world of Malawi is the objective of this paper.

A Brief Overview of Politics and Malawian Poetry of English Expression

Unlike most other Anglophone countries in Africa, poetry of Europhone expression in Malawi was slow to emerge. This slow emergence, according to Roscoe and Mpalive-Hangson (1992), is traceable to the neglect of international publishing houses. While one may wonder at this charge, it is nevertheless plausible because the multinational companies with which international publishing houses had shared provenance had invested heavily in other commercial interests in the country, ignoring the

intellectual and creative writing fields. The turn of serious critical attention to the emergent poetry was, again, slow. This was understandably so for possibly many reasons, but two of which are easily identifiable. First, the local political atmosphere surrounding the emergence of the poetry was not only tense, it must also have been frightful to potential local critics. The despotic government of the Late Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda, which paradoxically mid-wifed the delivery of the poetry, was generally impatient with whatever it considered politically incorrect, much of which the poetry is stuffed with. Second, it naturally takes time for new writings to win the attention and confidence of critics, especially with respect to its potential for being enduring work.

As equally noted by Roscoe and Mpalive-Hangson (1992), Malawian poetry in English would not come alive and beckon to critics until the 1980s after many years of self-publications. With self-publishing, a sizeable body of creative writings of varying qualities had found markets in the hands of petit bourgeois, from among whom early local critics also emerged, particularly members of the academic staff at the Chancellor College, University of Malawi. After the surge in self-publications came international recognition in the early 1980s with a re-issue in 1981 of Felix Mnthali's *When Sunset Comes to Sapitwa*, originally published by Neczam of Zambia, then by Longmans, an international publishing house headquartered in London. This would later be followed by the publication of Jack Mapanje's *Of Chameleon and Gods* in the same year by Heinemann, the prestigious publishers of African Writers Series.

This achievement was made in spite of the highly charged political atmosphere and repression characterising the period. With the exile and gaoling of foremost poets of the era such as Jack Mapanje, David Rubadiri and Frank Chipasula, it is not surprising that the growth of modern African poetry in the country belies its potential. Interestingly, politics, which served both as inspiration and midwife of the Malawian poetry of the Banda era, is functioning in similar capacities in the post-Banda era. This is quite visible in Bright Molande's *Seasons* and Shadreck Chikoti's *Free Africa Flee!* (henceforth referred to as *Flee!*).

Some Conceptual Views on Realistic Mode of Representation

In the realm of temporal speculation, realism as a convention of writing could be said as dating to the Platonic and Aristotelian theory of mimesis. Though differing in terms of the mechanism or goal of imitation, both agree on the idea of art as imitation of reality (Melberg, 1995). Since the period of these philosophers, realism has continued to attract scholarly interests and generate new forms. In agreement with Taghizadeh (2014), realism in literature is indeed multi-faceted. For instance, there are social realism,

socialist realism, neo-realism, magical realism and new realism. To be certain, the emergence of variations of realism must have been driven by certain objections to the extant form by critics and writers.

As a central concept to most forms of writings, realism thrives on the assumption that there is correlation between what exists in the material world and the textual representations of same. Baldick (1990) describes realism as 'a mode of writing that gives the impression of recording or "reflecting" faithfully an actual way of life' (p.184). He further likens it to verisimilitude and emphasises its rejection of 'idealization, escapism and other extravagant qualities of romance in favor of recognizing soberly the actual problems of life' (p.184). It may well be this assumption that readers of realistic fiction bring to texts, make them suspend their disbeliefs and even occasionally accept the improbable. Because realist writers rely on imagination, some critics have picked bone with their mode of writing. For instance, Oripeloye accuses writers with realist intention of possible 'perspectival distortions' since they rely solely on their imaginative power. He insists that if what they have presented are subjected to proper scrutiny they 'cannot pass the test of truth value as they lack the grains of circumstantial evidence' (2017:172). To press his argument further, he draws on Louise Rosenblatt's (1995) view which, according to Oripeloye, 'provides an insight into the fallibility of imaginative reading in real life situation'. Rosenblatt had observed that:

in imagination we rehearse various possibilities of action in a given situation. We go through a process of imaginative trial and error, trying out different modes of behavior and working out their probable effects. When the situation arises in actual life, we are better prepared to act successfully. [...] Literature may thus offer us a means of carrying on some of the trial-and-error experimentation that might be disastrous in real life. (p.190)

The obvious fact, both from Oripeloye's and Rosenblatt's words, is that the latter is speaking of imaginative reading, not writing. Even if for argument's sake, Oripeloye's mis-reading is ignored, it is not expected that because realist writers' works lack 'grains of circumstantial evidence', they consequently lack 'truth value'. What is truth value, who determines it, and how is it determined? In so far as what is deemed 'truth value', like truth itself, is anchored in subjective and personal experiential reality, anything of 'truth value' for that matter is, *ab initio*, also indeterminate.

While agreeing with Jeyifo (2012) 'that language and literature can be made to truthfully and providentially reflect the world in which we live'(p.3), this

paper proceeds on the assumption that the realities reflected in Chikoti's debut collection of poems are, indeed, experiential, as well as preserve links with the post-Banda Malawian society. As hinted earlier on, the poet's capacity to imbricate prostitution with diverse subjects such as culture, politics, power, spirituality and economics, and turn it into a motif in the first part of the collection, invites this critical intervention. Consequently, the concept of 'the new realism' observed by Irele (2001) in post-independence African writings, is appropriated in a close reading of the poems from Chikoti's *Free Africa Flee!* The poems are 'Lost Child', 'Another Defection', 'The Honorable's Goddess', 'Democratised Prostitutes' and 'Dancer Woman'.

For its centrality to the interest of this article, a comment or two on 'new realism' is expedient in order to establish its conjuncture with 'African New Realism', as theorised by Irele (2001), and which actually undergirds our analysis. Basically, new realism moves beyond depicting life experiences in a text to textualising unusual, strange but plausible realities. According to Novikov, (2008) new realism is characterised by:

a deep felt attention to life, to all that is bright and dark in it; an enamored admiration of it; a fearless ease with it; an extreme and sometimes hyperextreme sincerity, the heavy burden of baring the soul, because only then will the bloody movements of the soul become interesting; empathy, pity, pain, sometimes through negation, but still with a final goal of eliciting the best feelings. (p.67)

What is striking about this characterisation is that new realism connotes a convention of writing that does not flinch from the bristly and horrid components of life. The African post-independence African novel may well be described in this light, and this probably informs Irele's observation about the emergence of new realism in African fiction in his reading of some African novels. In the African context, new realism, as observed by Irele (2001), 'relates essentially to a new attitude toward the African experience in the more recent literature, a new apprehension of events, social forces, and human character as they interact to create the sense of a moral universe impinging upon the writer's consciousness' (p.214). It is a realism that emphasises the writer's ability to objectively reflect the goings on in his or her society in a manner that contradicts the negritudist romanticisation of Africa's past, and one that rides on the mood of disillusionment which followed independence in many African countries in the 1970s and 80s.

According to Irele, the mood, in turn, incites a 'manner [that] relates to the deployment within the imaginative work of a particular scheme of symbols,

which register a negative apprehension of the African world' (p.214). By negative apprehension is implied that the interpretive reception of such writings is inescapably doomed to foreground the unpleasant realities of life, which is not only plausible but also well demonstrated in Irele's reading of selected African novels in the essay under review. However, this does not suggest that new realism is blind to the felicitous aspects of life, or that it cultivates dystopian vision.

In this paper, the post-Banda era in Malawi, marked by multiparty democracy and expectation of a better life for common Malawians, is conceived as parallel to what obtains in many African countries shortly after the euphoria of political independence, thereby spawning new realistic fiction. Less than a decade after Banda's exit from power and the euphoria of being rid of dictatorship, the old culture of political dancing, as well as political, cultural and economic prostitutions, has taken over the Malawian socio-political landscape, and consequently births new realistic writing.

Of Social Criticism and Prostitution

In the poem 'Lost Child', the poet-persona speaks of a young member of the community who is well cultivated in the ways and culture of the people until the advent of Westerners and their civilization. Seduced by this new civilization or way of life, the young man asks his elderly father to give him 'just a portion of his freedom' (*Flee!* p.5) so that he could go and join these new people. After much cry and pressure from the young man, the chief grants the request, noting that 'if a child cries for *nsatsi* horn/carve it for him, it will wither with/the scorching sun'. By this proverb, the chief hints at the futility of the young man's pursuit. Not only does the young man join the Westerners and their acolytes in eating and dining, 'he talked like them and laughed like them' (*Flee!* p.5), believing he is one of them. He also derides his ancestors and calls his people 'monkeys and idiots'. Efforts to make him see reason and have a change of mind are unheeded, constraining his people to declare him a persona non grata. Not long after, he returns to the village, collapses at his father's feet, and cries profusely. He had seen through his seducers' deception, arrogance and fraud. He now sees himself as a weakling and would not have his father call him a man, but a woman. The father, however, insists on calling him a man. In fact, he kills a pig and roasts it for his son, and gives him a leopard skin and a shield.

This narrative easily parallels that of the prodigal son in the Bible. The biblical prodigal had requested his inheritance from his father, got it and spent it extravagantly, and later returns to his father, regretful and penitent. The father forgives him and accepts him back into the family fold. Whether this allusion is designed or fortuitous, its import is unmistakable. While the young are enticed and excited by the superficial, the elderly are guided by

the profound. However, using metaphorical optics, it is not the shallowness of thought or the profligacy of the young man in question here that the poet is trying to expose, it is that of the younger generation of Africans who have been to Western schools or exposed to Western civilization that the poet is concerned with.

This is easily betrayed in the poet's observation that the young man abandons his people and joined those who 'called us monkeys and idiots' (*Flee!* p.5). Because of their Western education or exposure to occidental civilisation, they treat their own people's values and culture with derision. They embrace foreign ways like a prostitute embraces another man simply on asking. However, while the prostitution observed here is not sexual but cultural, it does not happen just on asking; it is one facilitated through subtlety. This is clearly underscored by the poet's choice of the words 'seduced' and 'delicate heart', each of which belongs in the register of flirtation and sex, and used twice for emphasis.

Party politics tends to be seen as a means of personal economic advancement by some politicians. Therefore, when a politician's self interest or economic interest is threatened in his party, he does not vacillate a bit before jumping to another party. This is the subject taken on in the poem 'Another Defection'. The poet-persona observes that 'Parties are not anthills/on which you ascend and descend/and ascend and descend' (*Flee!* p.7). The return of multi-party democracy to Malawi, after about three decades of one party dictatorship of the late Kamuzu Banda, was expected to turn things around politically, and to enthrone and nurture political pluralism. Sadly, this is only so on paper, rather than in practice. Politicians, upon losing election or feeling politically threatened, gravitate towards the ruling party, and thereby further emasculate the hitherto weak opposition parties. This practice is what Englund (2002: 12) refers to when he says 'Malawians have been exposed to several bewildering shifts in their leaders' identities and allegiances' in his introduction to *A Democracy of Chameleons*.

If the bewildering shifts implied here refer to moving from one party to another, then Englund is unduly charitable by describing what is clearly a prostitution as 'allegiances'. Although party politics involves alliances, alignments and realignments, to change parties like one changes clothes or to change parties based on whims and greed is to enact political prostitution. As he observes in the title of the book, as well as the subtitle of its introduction, 'The Culture of Chameleon Politics', the metaphor of chameleon is more objective and apt, for the politicians change their identities rather too frequently. For Chikoti, political defection is a 'wicked game' which causes him and many others pain. He believes it would not help in nurturing democratic ideals, and wonders:

Tell me
Is it money you look for?
Is it honey you run for?
I assure you:
 You don't know your self
 You only know but self (*Flee!* p.7)

Obviously directed at politicians, this extract inscribes the poet-persona's perplexity about the motivation for Malawian politician's partiality for political prostitution. Whether motivated by money or other gleams of life, the poet attributes the tendency to selfishness. He feels betrayed and disappointed that those he had thought they belong in the same party together do not actually subscribe to the party in principle. The extent of his disappointment can only be imagined by the repetitive use of the word 'pains' in the poem, which is repeated nine times in a poem of twenty four lines. In support of the probability that money or access to wealth is 'the long and short of it', Englund (2002) recalls how John Tembo revealed in the National Assembly how he was able to buy the support of the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) Area Chairman in his Dedza South constituency with a lot more than the K7,000 the man was offered by officials of National Democratic Alliance (NDA). Tembo was a strong member and former president of Malawi Congress Party.

In 'The Honorable's Goddess', members of the political class also constitute the object of Chikoti's poetic salvo. Apparently using the Honorable as representative of the class, the poet explores the supernatural and cultic proclivity of political power mongers in Malawi. A number of African leaders, including the late Malawian president, The Late Hastings Kamuzu Banda, have been rumoured to rely on magic or voodoo to perpetuate their hegemonic rule over their countries. Even in post-Banda Malawi, the issue of abduction and killing of people with albinism has been linked to powerful politicians. In a report by Chakuchanya Harawa of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the United Nations is credited with the observation that attacks on albinos increase around election time 'because of the false beliefs that their body parts can bring good luck and political power when used in witchcraft related rituals'. This spate of killings and the dread it inspires are probably what Tembo (2014) has in mind when he speaks of the 'dis-ease that Malawians went through during the reign of Bakili Muluzi' (p.51).

In his quest for power, and/or its consolidation, the Honorable goes from one spiritualist to another. He visits the priestess of a certain goddess, spends 'seven days in the python's belly, naked/covered with mucus,

stinking, sickening' and comes out 'on the eighth day, a zombie/frightening' (*Flee!* p.9). Clearly a disgusting and degrading act, the poet deploys this scatological imagery to invite opprobrium unto the politicians in the country. If prospective, *de facto* or *de jure* leaders could bring themselves to this abject situation because they want power, what they would do to retain the power can only be left to imagination. The emergence of the Honorable on the eighth day as 'a zombie frightening' must therefore be received with little consternation. A zombie is a lifeless and completely unresponsive person; or, in voodoo practice, a dead body brought back to life but devoid of soul. Metaphorically interpreted, a leader produced through a ritual like this is a zombified leader, which invariably explains why the poet describes the development as frightening, in the sense of being disastrous.

Unsatisfied, the Honorable resorts to the junior priest of the goddess, spends 'two days in a pot, baked, boiled/seven days under an anthill, naked/flesh torn by red ants, hissing and groaning/in total darkness' (*Flee!* p.9). On the eighth day, he emerges 'a monster, so dirty'. This patronage of another priest is meant for greater fortification, the result of which testifies to same. Now, rather than have a zombified leader, Malawians would become 'blessed' with a dirty monster as leader. Physically ugly, psychologically terrifying and innately evil, the metaphor of monster in this context is further modified with dirtiness, which suggests another negative attribute, more like recklessness in the exercise of power. If, as suggested by Kalua (2016), the works that dominated Banda era can be described as 'a storm of protest' against Banda narcissism and dictatorship, Chikoti clearly sustains this tradition of protest in the post-Banda era in his collection.

To acquire more spiritual rampart, the Honorable approaches the priest of the goddess, spends 'nine days in the air, meeting kings/and queens, dancing, singing, vowing' and returns on the tenth day 'so weak/and wicked'. While the weakness here easily and logically suggests tiredness following from the exertion of singing and dancing, in the political context where the Honorable is expected to operate, weakness here signifies lacking in resolve. Combining this with wickedness will, no doubt, spell disaster for the people, the poet implies. In what may be regarded as the peak of his spiritual prostitution, the Honorable goes to the goddess herself, spends 'nine days under the waters eating human meat/drinking human blood/sipping human urine/partying with horrifying/creatures' (*Flee!* p.9). This evokes a frightening image of cannibalism, which, in turn, suggests that Malawian political leaders prey on their followers to consolidate their power. Now satisfied, the Honorable is confident that no bullet can harm, no magic can harm him, nobody can jail him and he is going to be loved by all. He is going to have fame, life and glory. Unfortunately, all these are

without consequences. He would become a slave to the goddess, offer blood sacrifice, mumble incantations, observe many do's and don't's, and keep some talisman and an idol.

By the foregoing inscriptions, Chikoti exposes the underbelly of Malawian and, by extension, African politicians who shop for spiritual charms and magic of luck in order to achieve their political aspirations. In desperation, they go from one spiritualist to the other, or join one occult group today and to move to another tomorrow. Sadly, the consequences of their fetish ways rub off gravely on the people they rule over. In the last stanza of the poem, Chikoti, like the traditional African bard, waxes philosophical and didactic. While observing that the Honorable forgets rather quickly the fate of former powerful leaders, he reminds us all:

Mbona was purer than him
Makewana was holier than him
Zwangendaba was mightier than him
Hastings was more descent than him
but no Mbona, no Makewana, no Zwangedaba,
no Hastings lives for ever (*Flee!* p.10)

Here, allusions are made to the widely acknowledged powerful gods and leaders. Mbona is a deity in Malawi, a rain god who is also invoked on occasions of locust plagues, floods, epidemic diseases, and other serious threats to the productive and reproductive capacities of the land and its people. Makewana is also a rainmaker. Both were regarded as powerful, highly influential and generally good. Zwangedaba was a mighty and powerful leader of a section of the Ngoni people, who ravaged many countries he crossed on his way from the southern part of the continent to the tropical north in Central/East Africa. Hastings was the powerful and dictatorial president of Malawi from independence until 1994. For the poet, in spite of the power of these deities and individuals, for good or for bad, they did not live forever. In other words, all the desperation and machinations to get or hold on to power would avail nothing everlasting. Life and all its allures are ephemeral.

As suggested in the title of the poem 'Democratised Prostitutes', the poem has political characterisation as its backdrop, while its subject is steeped in prostitution of the carnal form. Using two major political figures of World War II, Winston Churchill and Adolph Hitler, as metaphors of good and bad leaderships, Chikoti comments on how both are nevertheless implicated in the indiscretions of promiscuity and prostitution. In the words of the poet, these leaders

watered their scorched throats here
once thirsty once wicked
here they met unknowingly
at this well they met
ever giving ever wanting
at this well they met
but in nudity (*Flee!* p.13)

The leaders said to be 'thirsty' here are not in need of water, as the first line and the fourth line of the extract suggest. Their thirst actually implies a lust for coitus, which may be gratified peaceably or violently, depending on the circumstances of their situation. The idea of well, rather than refer to a hole dug into the ground to obtain water, is a euphemistic reference to vagina which, according to the poet, is 'ever giving and wanting'. To be sure, this kind of reference suggests that the poet is sexist, if not misogynistic.

Partly overcoming the inhibition often imposed by the culture of restraint or reticence about sex or sex anatomy in African social discourses, Chikoti removes any doubt about his subject of discussion with his reference to nudity. In the nudity of the 'well' and the 'throat', a conversation ensues where the 'well' expresses her love for the 'throat's' money and the 'throat' feigns surprise. Seeing the surprise, she promptly claims to have said she loves the 'throat's' party. Following this is:

intimate silence. Legs stretching from
Dzalanayama to Misuku hills
stomachs singing un holy songs
demons beating *mpanje* drums
the fire burning the brains
the body wet as in rains
fingers deeped into the innocent
tax payers money after that day's work (*Flee!* p.13)

If the images evoked in the first six lines of the extract here tell of the coital relation between a leader and his mistress, the last two lines tell of what else goes into the bargain. Not only does the leader pay the mistress, the money used is drawn from the state's treasury. Consequently, she is able to drive 'a Toyota XV/wears Pierre Cardin dresses/and shouts on cell phones' (*Flee!* p.14). All of these indicate the prevalence of corruption, extravagance and profligacy of the leaders. However, while this seems to be the poet's intention, the following stanza raises questions as to whether he finds them blameworthy. He laments:

BUT
these thighs dear!
these skirts friend!
these so called beauties!
pollute our men *shuwa!*
pollute our government *shuwa!* (*Flee!* p.14)

The impression one gets from these lines is that women given to prostituting their natural sexual endowments are actually responsible for the corruption of men political leaders. The impression is created that men in leadership positions are deliberately corrupted by some women through their sexually infelicitous relation with them, hence their mis-governance or inept leadership. Except we choose to impute some spiritual or supernatural agency into the matter, this is clearly in dissonance with known rules of logic. Rather than condemn the leaders for their lack of sexual discipline, wasteful spending and misappropriation of the people's patrimony, he transfers the blame to women, leaving the reader to wonder whether the said 'thighs' and 'skirts' rape the men in power or government. This clearly confirms the poet as chauvinistic and sexist.

In another poem, 'Dancer Woman', the poet not only confirms his sexist and chauvinistic dispositions to women, he inscribes a misogynist tendency. Like in the immediate poem above, he imprints some link between the male political class and women prostitutes in 'Dancer Woman'. The poem is addressed to a dancer woman, ostensibly a professional dancer who is usually hired to entertain people at political rallies. However, the dancer may well symbolise 'party women' who are often used as 'entertainers' during electioneering and campaign rallies by African politicians. In the case of Malawi, Gilman (2009) has indeed noted that successive post-independence regimes exploit dancing women for political gains.

Chikoti details what he apparently considers disapproving about the dancer - provocative and seductive dressing, laissez faire parenting style, dealing in illicit liquor, nocturnal trading in the flesh pot zone, and dancing at political rallies. While all of these are parts of the social ills being criticized by the poet, the last two are of greater interest to the analysis at hand. However, for the information that she also deals in liquor, the dancer is depicted more like a professional sex worker in the fifth stanza:

You penetrate the solid night
you go to those undertones
like a wild hyena, fearing not
your heart panting for their reed beds

reaping joy where you never sow
for a penny! a penny! Just a mere penny?
To buy a soap you say?

This brings an absolutely commercial and economic angle into the prostitution equation in the collection. The woman goes out in the night to trade her body for 'a penny' not just because she needs the money to buy soap, but also for sensual gratification, clearly suggested by the observation that she carelessly but fearlessly runs to flesh pots, and by the notion of her heart panting for 'reed beds'. Yet, while the poet finds this appalling, it is the idea of exchanging this sensual and emotionally therapeutic contact for material gratification that attracts his ire. In what is clearly a hyperbolic rendering, he degrades the dancer by accusing her of trading her body for 'Just a mere penny' (*Flee!* p.15). At a political rally, the dancer is also seen singing and dancing, actions reminiscent of the role of women during Banda era (Semu, 2002). We learn that she 'danced money' and 'danced men', implying that she makes money through dancing and through men.

The poet's proclivity for sexism and chauvinism is further inscribed in the poem, as he devotes its last fifteen lines to blackmailing the dancer woman for polluting the leaders. The leaders are said to be polluted by the woman 'with cheap cosmetics, over done make ups, fake Pierre Cardins', whereas they

are the waters supposed to quench the fire
are those whose words become sweeter
even after many rainy seasons
are the female dog
that never scratches itself for
no apparent reason (*Flee!* p.16)

Water is used to quench fire when the fire is destructive or of no use. A person's words become sweeter after many years if the words are memorably pleasant to recall. A female dog only scratches itself with good reasons. With these depictions, the impression is created that the leaders are a benevolent lot who do not deserve to be polluted. If the depictions are meant to attract opprobrium to the dancer woman or attribute some kind of innocence to the leaders, it is quite successful. However, the depictions contradict the realities that obtain in the political spaces in African countries, with Malawi being an apt example. The late President Kamuzu Banda of Malawi, rather than get married, kept a mistress as his official first lady for the better part of his leadership of the country. With his unmarried status, the probability of being 'polluted' from many other sources could only have been very high. Sadly, the above seems not to be the case when

we consider the last two stanzas of the poem, where the poet-persona declaims accusingly:

Dancer woman these leaders
you dance their brains out
their spirit down

in light you dance your legs and hands
at night you dance your buttocks your hips your breasts
you dance them whole, them fully
you dance them money, them American dollars. (*Flee!* p.16)

In these stanzas, the poet-persona again vilifies the dancer woman as a bad influence on leaders, and as nothing but prostitute. These lines not only obviate the ironic possibility observed earlier, they further corroborate the misogynistic tendency of their author. As typical of sexual prostitution, the sex provider feels no inhibition returning to a partner once patronised. Except for the feeling of regret, little difference exists between sexual and cultural prostitutions depicted in the collection. While those involved in the latter regret their conduct, the former are indifferent. It is this indifference which makes the vision of the poet, especially about political leadership in Malawi, quite troubling, revolting and gloomy; a picture similar to Adebisi's (2015) observation about military leadership in Nigeria.

Conclusion

In this paper, Chikoti's profile as a social critic is established, while his imaginative prowess as a new realist writer is foregrounded. However, it is his ability to comment on diverse social and political issues bedeviling his 'liberated' country through a conflation his views in a single motif - prostitution- that he comes across as a consummate artist, who also doubles as the 'conscience' of his society. From metaphorical deployment of prostitution in poems such as 'Lost Child', 'Another Defection' and 'The Honorable's Goddess', to its partly metaphoric, partly literal rendering in 'Democratized Prostitutes', and fully literal rendering in 'Dancer Woman', the poet offers his readers, especially his compatriots, a lot to chew on. If what he has offered is tasteful, it is because he wants his readers to masticate and 'savour' it for a while. On the other hand, if it is distasteful, it is because that is in the character of new realism. Although Irele's concept of new realism is connected to the tonality of disillusionment in sub-Saharan African novels, the reading of Chikoti's *Free Africa Flee!* is done here against the backdrop of post-Banda Malawi era, where unpleasant realities have come to saturate this era in the country's history.

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