Lost in Narrative: Representations of Mental Disability in Selected Malawian Literary Texts

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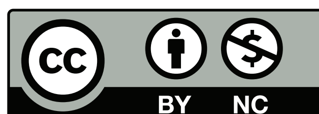
Abstract

This article examines the portrayal of mental disability in Malawian literature. Through a critical analysis of selected poetry, short stories, and plays, the article argues that in the Malawian literary imagination, mental disability is usually appropriated as a metaphor, for humour, and/or as a narrative strategy through which writers communicate their intended messages. As a result, the complex nature of mental disability and the subjectivities of the mentally disabled are traded off against their narrative usefulness. Such appropriation of mental illness, by using it as a metaphor, an object of humour, and as part of narrative style, perpetuates Malawian society's general (dis)regard of mental illness as a disease.

Keywords: disability studies, Malawian literature, mental disability, metaphor, representation



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Introduction

I would like to begin on an autobiographical note by recalling my childhood experience with a mentally disabled boy of about 10 years old named Yakhobe. He came from a very poor household and, his poverty being coupled with his mental illness, he became an object of ridicule and his name the most degrading jibe amongst the local young boys and girls. When you wanted to offend someone, you simply had to call them "Yakhobe" and they would erupt with rage. Yakhobe thus became a social pariah. His mother and father too were often derogatorily referred to as "*anyina/awiske chakufuntha*" ('mother/father of the lunatic'). In the end, Yakhobe's mental disability eclipsed his humanity. He was mainly identified in terms of his illness. Besides this, not many, if any at all, recognized Yakhobe's condition as a sickness requiring attention, a perception that is still prevalent in Malawi today. Mental disability is something that society makes fun of, a marker of ridiculousness, worthlessness, a lack, a negation of the normal or the sane, so to speak. Ultimately, mental disability has become part of society's vocabulary, whose narrative potency is often exploited both in daily conversations and artistic production. Using selected poems, short stories, and plays, this article discusses this attitude towards mental disability as reflected in Malawian literature. My article follows a similar study by Ken Junior Lipenga (2019) titled "Lunatics and Intellectuals: Madness in Malawian Poetry". Drawing on disability studies and Foucauldian postulations about madness, Lipenga (2019, 2) focuses on how some selected Malawian poets "portray mental disability, specifically the interaction between the disabled and society which often fails to recognise the humanity of the disabled and even their presence." He argues that the poets he focuses on "illustrate the Foucauldian identification of madness as a subversive feature that challenges assumptions of reason in society" (2019, 2). Lipenga goes on to conclude that the poems discussed in his article achieve "so much more than simply painting an image of madness"; that the poetry "attempts to give a voice to madness, in a world where people hardly want to listen to that voice" (2019, 12). My article is similar to Lipenga's in that I also focus on madness in Malawian literature. Some of the texts I discuss have also been analysed by Lipenga, but my article extends its textual coverage to include short fiction and drama. The most fundamental difference between Lipenga's study and mine, however, is that my argument is the opposite of Lipenga's. While Lipenga reads the poetry as recognizing and giving a voice to madness, I argue that the voice of the mentally disabled is rather exploited for metaphorical, jocular, and narrative ends, rendering the mad person not human in their own right but a vessel through which the writers mediate their messages. In other words, the mentally disabled are given a voice but one that is exploited as a means to an end. Our attention as readers of such portrayals of madness is drawn not necessarily to the mad person's subjectivity but to the messages they are burdened to convey. In the end, mentally disabled people and mental disability as a condition are blurred by their metaphorical, jocular, and narrative usefulness, which writers are keen to exploit at the expense of mentally ill personalities. To borrow Mitchell and Snyder's (2000, 55) words, "the reliance upon disability", in the texts discussed here, "rarely develops into a means of identifying people with disabilities as a disenfranchised cultural constituency". I show below that what is lacking in the narratives is the presentation of disability as a normality, so that "disabled characters are completely normalised and exist within the full range of human emotions, contradictions, hopes, fears, and vague ideas, just like any other character" (Quayson 2007, 51).

Mental Disability in Literature

The relationship between mental disability and literature is an ancient one. Plato and Aristotle offer classical examples of creative imagination as a form of "divine madness" (Weineck 1998; Koh 2006, 214; Kaplan 2016; Boysen 2018). In *Phaedrus* (1973, 47), Plato, through the words of his teacher Socrates, talks about madness as "the gift of heaven" and as a "nobler thing" through which "we receive the greatest blessings". Such is the "madness of the Muse", the kind that is superior to sanity because it comes by "divine dispensation" (Plato 1973, 47–48). For Aristotle (1920, 61), "poetry demands a man with special gift for it, or else one with a touch of madness". These classic ideas about the relationship between literary creativity and madness are also prevalent in contemporary literary studies (Feder 1980; Thiher 1999; Felman 2003). For Feder (1980, 4), "portrayals of madness convey in symbolic form human beings' pre-occupation with their own mental functioning, with the enormous range of their psychic experience". Such literary depictions of madness also "constitute a history of explorations of the mind in relation to itself, or other human beings, and to social and political institutions" (Feder 1980, 4–5). Thiher (1999, 2) echoes Plato and Aristotle when he observes that "literary imagination has historically shared certain features with the insane imagination" and that "literature is a psychic activity that often overlaps with madness". For Felman (2003, 16, 15), "madness and literature have been made partners throughout history" and it is through literature that "the madness silenced by society has been given voice". It is assertions such as Felman's (echoed by studies like Lipenga's) about literature giving voice to madness that I problematize in this article by drawing attention to the fact that the proclaimed attempt to make the madman heard is undermined by the exploitation of the same voice that is purportedly being made audible. To do this, I turn to literary disability studies for appropriate conceptual tools.

Literary disability studies, an aspect of disability studies, deals with representations of people with disabilities in literature, with particular focus on "the fit and proper expression of complexities of disabled lives and experiences" (Murray 2012, 247). I mainly draw on three key texts: Thomson's *Extra-Ordinary Bodies* (1997), Mitchell and Snyder's *Narrative Prosthesis* (2000), and Quayson's *Aesthetic Nervousness* (2007). According to Mitchell and Snyder (2000, 61), "[l]iterature has dipped into the well of disability's meaning-laden depths throughout the development of the print record". As Murray (2012, 246) observes, "disability is always used to signal something other than itself, usually some idea of non-disabled human worth". Mental illness is one of the forms of disability that has been deployed in literature across the world, usually as "divine and insightful but also as aberrant and irrational" (Linder 2011, 291). In Western literature, Shakespeare's dramatic corpus is among readily available examples of literature that has appropriated madness mainly as "a symbolic mask" (Michailov 2008, 79). In African literature, madness has also been a subject of literary attention, as evidenced by studies such as Veit-Wild's *Writing Madness* (2006). Most of these studies discuss mental disability as a metaphor or narrative technique that different writers use. In a review of Veit-Wild's *Writing Madness,* Shaw (2001, 623) observes that in that study, "the trope of madness in African literature is synonymous not only with suffering but also with 'seeing' – heightened perception and creative production". Little or no attention is paid to how such literature depicts the mentally disabled subject as a person, let alone to how the literature stirs awareness of mental illness as a social problem. That is the problem I also observe in the selected Malawian literary texts analysed in this article. As I read the representation of mental disability in the selected texts, I constantly reflect on Mitchell and Snyder's pertinent question as to whether "literary/cultural studies have

anything to offer our apprehension of disability other than demeaning portraits of disabled people in history and the archive" (2000, 16). My reading also uses Quayson's (2007, 32) "typology of disability representation" as articulated in *Aesthetic Nervousness.* Quayson identifies nine categories of disability representation in literature, four of which I employ in this article, namely disability "as null set and/or moral test", as "the interface with otherness", as "signifier of ritual insight," and "as bearer of moral evil" (Quayson 2007, 36–53).

Poetry as/and Madness

My focus in this section is on how mental disability has been appropriated in Malawian poetry by Bright Molande ("The Wise One from the Asylum" (2010)), Francis Moto ("The Mad Man", "Conversation with a Lunatic", "The Idiot's Tale" (1994)), and Hudson Chamasowa ("Kalata ya ku Mental" (2012)). I illustrate how, in these poems, mental disability is exploited to the poets' creative advantage and not necessarily in the interest of the mentally disabled subjects featured therein. While Molande's and Moto's poems depict the mentally disabled as metaphors, Chamasowa portrays the mental ill person as a clown. The mentally ill person's physical appearance and/or mental unsoundness are emphasized not with the aim of raising awareness about mental disability as a condition but for their metaphorical and jocular value as the poets strive to make their intended points.

The appropriation of madness in Molande's and Moto's poems shows the influence on these two poets of the above noted classical relationships between poetry, creativity, and insanity. Both poets are academics by training, who at some point in their careers have probably encountered Plato's and Aristotle's views on madness and creativity. Molande and Moto depict mental disability as a metaphor, especially for wisdom or insight. To rehash Michailov's (2008, 79) words cited above, Molande and Moto use madness as "a symbolic mask" behind which they hide to mete out criticism to their society. Thus, in Molande's and Moto's poems, the mentally disabled person achieves the stature of the Foucauldian madman as "the harbinger of truth" (Foucault 2006, 15) or as "a disguised philosopher" (Felman 2003, 37), thereby blurring the boundary between sanity and insanity. In that sense, the mentally disabled person shows "the capacity for superior if inchoate insight about their social surroundings" (Quayson 2007, 34). The mentally disabled person, therefore, becomes a divinely inspired seer whose deep understanding of the world elevates them to the level of the mad genius. My contention is that the interest in such portrayals of madness is not to draw the reader into understanding mental disability, as it were, but to use the mentally disabled figure as a vehicle through which to mediate social criticism.

Molande's "The Wise One from The Asylum" (2010, 23) draws on two cultural worlds: the Christian tradition and Malawian folklore. Christian aspects in the poem are evoked by the phrase "the wise one" in the title and the reference later in the poem to the mentally disabled person as "son of man", which suggests a connection between the madman and Jesus. With regard to Malawian lore, the poem draws on the Chichewa proverb, *"Wamisala anaona nkhondo."* Loosely, the proverb translates as "the lunatic saw an impending war" and possibly warned others about the same. There is an old joke in Malawi that Zomba Mental Hospital (in Zomba District of southern Malawi) was deliberately built close to Cobbe Barracks of the Malawi Defence Forces so that when the "lunatics" at the asylum "see" an impending invasion of Zomba and the country, they can quickly alert the defence forces. What the proverb actually means, however, is that those considered ignorant in society can sometimes be the most perceptive with regard to life (Chakanza 2000, 334). The proverb evokes the image of the Shakespearean buffoon or "the fool of the court", who "helps the king see

around him, perceive the hidden but present structure of the world" (Michailov 2008, 80). To use Quayson's typology, mental disability in the proverb and in Molande's poem is depicted as a "signifier of ritual insight" (2007, 46) as it "provides superior insights into the phenomenal world" (2007, 47).

As noted above, the title of the poem recalls the biblical wise men from the East who visited the baby Jesus with expensive gifts and worship. Such an echo evokes the classical image of the mentally ill person as divinely anointed, a seer who can fathom that which the "sane" humans cannot. Like the Shakespearean buffoon, the "lunatic" in the poem shows great insight into the deplorable state of the academy in his country. To drive the point home, Molande draws attention to the lunatic's destitute condition:

> He stumbled forward and
> Planted himself in my doorway
> (What cheek! I thought.)
> But he composed himself and
> Waited for the stench to assail my innermost.
> He was tall and imposing.
> Except the genital package wrapped
> In some non-descript shorts,
> There was a thread of rags round his neck
> And that is all the son of man wore.
> His skin was charcoal black
> And solitary trails of wayward water
> Down his chest and belly wrote
> Of a man who never bathed for seasons.
> And, and – and there were two dry streams
> Of mango and papaya juice
> From the bush of his mouth
> That leapt and landed on the chest
> Before giving up the trail just above the navel (Molande 2010, 23).

In the stanza above, we have a picture of someone destitute whom the persona thinks has no business standing in their doorway. The university campus, let alone the academic's office, is no space for the lunatic to be found in. Already, the self-other, or rather the "sane-other" dichotomy is drawn here, probably also speaking to Quayson's idea of disability as a form of "interface with otherness" (2007, 37). The academic in the office is the sane self who is set apart from the lunatic even in terms of appearance and profession. The physical appearance of the lunatic makes both the persona and the reader appreciate with awe the wisdom that unexpectedly drips (as it were) from the "lunatic's" mouth later. Momentarily, the lecturer and the lunatic switch positions, as society's perceptive and learned seer is educated by a person considered by society to be insane. The "lunatic", a former university lecturer himself, tells the persona about some people in the university who are mere teachers and not academics, mere academics and not intellectuals. The madman's mysterious nature is underlined in the way the poem ends: the former university lecturer now teaches "winds and footpaths" (23), evoking what Foucault (2006, 9) describes as "an itinerant existence that [is] often the lot of the mad". While the interface between the lunatic and the academic presents a moment where the boundary between madness and sanity is blurred, my contention is that Molande's interest in the figure of the madman is largely for his own artistic purposes, rather than to draw us into awareness of the mad person as an afflicted individual.

In Molande's poem, the comparison of the madman to Jesus may suggest an attempt to humanize the mentally disabled. According to Lipenga (2019, 7), the comparison "is a deliberate, subversive move, one which subtly uplifts the madman – from irreverence to the highest level of veneration – seemingly suggesting the ambiguity between madness and holiness". While that may be the case, Molande's deployment of the madman in the poem remains at the metaphorical level. The poet's alleged attempt to humanize the madman is undermined by the fact that the intention is not necessarily to draw attention to the mad-

man but to the poet's criticism of the academy. In fact, earlier in his article, Lipenga (2019, 4) notes Molande's "constant return to *mental disability as a trope*" (emphasis added), suggesting that in Molande's poem, the mentally disabled features more as a literary device than as a subject in his own right. What is clear in the poem is that what would otherwise be regarded as Molande's efforts to make the madman visible are uncannily undermined by his exploitation of the mentally ill personality as an expressive tool. Mental illness becomes a backdrop against which wisdom is caricatured for maximum effect.

Mental disability as a trope also features in Moto's three poems, "The Mad Man", "Conversation with a Lunatic", and "The Idiot's Tale" (1994, 12, 14–15, 42–43). In these poems, mental disability forms the canvas on which Moto paints his social criticism regarding events in his society. As such, our attention as readers is not necessarily drawn to mental illness as a problem but to the messages that the mentally ill person is made to carry. The subject matter in the poems, especially "The Mad Man" and "Conversation with a Lunatic", strongly suggests that while the poems were published in 1994, after the end of Hastings Kamuzu Banda's dictatorship in Malawi, it is likely that they were written during that oppressive time but never published, for fear of Kamuzu Banda's heavy hand.

"The Mad Man" describes a mentally ill person encountered by the persona in the streets of Zomba city. In the first stanza of the poem, the reader's attention is drawn towards the madman walking from the mental hospital to town, "in front of glaring/sane eyes" (Moto 1994, 12). The sane-other contrast noted earlier in Molande's poem is encountered here too. Those considered sane find the madman quite a spectacle which, besides making them stare in awe, tends to confirm their sanity. The second and final stanza implicitly explains why the madman attracts such glares and stares: he walks the streets naked. The madman's dangling penis is then linked to "the black felt pen/of censorship in Limbe" (1994, 12). At this moment, the attention shifts from the plight of the naked mentally ill man to what Moto's reference to censorship evokes. The reference to the censor's pen hints at Malawi's strict censorship laws that muzzled many writers and artists during Kamuzu Banda's reign. While the madman enjoys his freedom, parading the streets naked, the sane, like the poet, are gagged by the censorship laws. Concern thus shifts from the plight of the naked mentally ill man roaming the streets, to the suffering of writers like Moto himself, who were repressed by draconian censorship laws.

In "Conversation with a Lunatic" Moto (1994, 14–15) also uses mental disability to veil criticism of his society. The poem is an encounter between a sane person and a lunatic begging for alms in the streets of Zomba. Throughout their conversation, the lunatic repeatedly proclaims his insanity by saying "I have a crazed mind". The lunatic has allegedly not eaten for days because the food at the mental hospital is bad. He mentions "stinking bananas/green flies/and rotten meat/with maggots" (1994, 14). The reference in the poem to "a strong man" at the mental asylum who "drinks people's blood" and who one day "raped a woman" (1994, 15) suggests a connection between Kamuzu Banda's regime, as noted above, and that of the strong man at the mental asylum. The mental asylum thus becomes a metaphor for Malawi as a country, and the lunatic a representation of suffering Malawians. I agree with Lipenga's (2019, 11) observation that "[t]he idea of a conversation with an insane character is itself deliberately subversive, since the common belief is that one cannot hold a sober conversation with an insane person". However, the idea that this is Moto's strategy to humanize the lunatic is undercut by the fact that Moto exploits the lunatic as a metaphor, a mere vessel through which he critiques Kamuzu Banda's oppression.

The mentally disabled as a metaphor for wisdom also features, more vividly this time, in "The Idiot's Tale". In this poem, Moto uses

the "lunatic" as a mask for the poet who is celebrating the end of an oppressive era that saw the muzzling of poetic voices. The persona proclaims his idiocy and insanity as "an idiot twice certified insane/by the wise men of the village" (Moto 1994, 42). Even though the persona is "twice certified insane", he is more visionary and perceptive than the so-called wise people of the village. In a schizophrenic fashion, the persona can "hear echoes/of joy and echoes of victory/from silent graves" and "hands clapping from the unmarked mounds" (Moto 1994, 42). Unlike ordinary people, the persona connects with the world of the dead, which is also celebrating the end of oppression. The persona claims he knew that change would eventually happen, long before everyone else did, and that he "had sung songs about it/in the wilderness of silence". Reference to "silent graves" and "the wilderness of silence" underscores how dissenting voices were often muted during Kamuzu Banda's reign. The idea of poetic genius as divine madness and that of the insightful buffoon converge in Moto's poem in a manner that draws our attention away from mental disability as a problem.

While Molande and Moto deploy mental disability as a trope or metaphor, Chamasowa exploits it as humour. In his poem titled *"Kalata ya ku Mental"*, ("Letter from the mental asylum"), the mentally ill person and their condition is an object of amusement. Appropriating some common jokes about mental disability in Malawi, the poem opens thus:

> *Kodi mukudziwa inu*
> *Ku Zombaku kuli chipatala cha amisala*
> *Odwala mudzawadziwa atasenza madzi muchidebe chobooka*
> ...
> *Mudzawaona akuonela kanema osayatsa nkumaombera mmanja*
> ...
> *Mukadzajambula nyumba pa bolodi ndikuwauza kuti akalowemo*
> *Azakanganilana bolodiyo kufuna kukhala oyambilila kulowa*
> *Koma mukadzawona mmodzi sakutekeseka ndinyumba yojambulayo*
> *Musadzaone ngati wachila*
> *Chifukwa mukadzamufunsa chifukwa chomwe wakhalira chete*
> *Adzakuyankhani ku anthuwo salowa mnyumbayo*
> *Chifukwa makiyi ali ndi iyeyo*
> (Chamasowa 2012, np).
>
> [Did you know?
> There is a facility for the mentally ill in Zomba
> You will recognize the patients fetching water in leaking buckets
> ...
> You will see them watching television that is switched off
> ...
> If you draw a house on the board and tell them to get in
> They will scramble to enter the house
> But when you see one of them aloof and unperturbed
> Think not that they are alright
> If you ask them why they are not scrambling to enter the house
> They will tell you that no one can enter the house
> Because they are keeping the keys (my translation)].

Highlighted in the above citation is the so-called ridiculousness of the mad person due to their incoherent thoughts and actions, like trying to draw water using a bucket with holes, laughing and talking to themselves, and watching TV that is switched off. All these play on the mental incapacitation of mentally disabled people, who, in Chamasowa's poem, are not portrayed in a way that arouses compassionate awareness and action, but rather ridicule and laughter. Take, for example, the issue of the patient towards the end of the stanza cited above. While his friends scramble to enter a house drawn on the blackboard, he stays put and when asked why he is not fighting to en-

ter the house, he answers confidently that his friends can scramble all they want but they will not get into the house because he has the keys. The only thing the patient's action does is to draw our attention to his own ludicrousness, which then leads to laughter. Such a serious disease is thus reduced to an object of amusement. When, later in the poem, the persona states that mental illness is a disease and therefore we must not laugh about it, his advice is at best insincere and only leads to more laughter.

As the title suggests, the poem is about an incoherent letter written by a mad person to be passed on to his brother. Again, the focus in the letter is on the humorous figure that a mad person cuts due to his lack of mental soundness. Part of the letter reads:

> *Wokondedwa iweyo achimwene*
> *Mu tchalitchi munali anthu ochepa*
> *Chifukwa masiku ano anthu ndi osaphunzila*
> ...
> *Kuno abusa anyanyala chifukwa mpila unalibe oyimbila*
> *Ndiye mukagula galu mundibweletsele malaya amodzi* (Chamasowa 2012, n.p.).
>
> [Dear brother
> There were a handful of people in church
> Because these days people are illiterate
> ...
> The pastor here has abandoned the sermon because the game had no referee
> So when you buy a dog, bring me one shirt (my translation)].

The persona's attitude towards the mentally ill person is one of disregard and when he reads the letter he is asked to deliver, it becomes a source of amusement. Evident in the poem, as is the case in Molande's and Moto's poems, is the depiction of the mentally disabled which, to use Thomson's (1997, 15) words, exploits "the rhetorical and metaphorical potential of the prototypical disabled figure." What is given prominence in the poems discussed above is mentally disabled personalities and bodies as sources of metaphorical expression and amusement.

Mental Illness as Narrative Strategy

In cases where the mentally disabled are not used as metaphors or objects of humour, they are deployed as a narrative strategy that helps the development of plot, theme, and characterization in a story. Drawing on Quayson's typology, this section focuses on mental disability in Mbano's short story "Zabeta" (1994) and Mthatiwa's short story "Meeting Kuitanda" (n.d.) within the frame of disability "as bearer of moral evil" where the disabled must shoulder "the burden of moral deficit and evil" (Quayson 2007, 41). Quayson further notes that such portrayals of disability also act "as a means by which to test the other characters with whom the disabled character interacts" (2007, 41). In the end, the mentally disabled person is left to lurk on the fringes of the narrative, appearing only to aid or distract the development (moral or otherwise) of the able-bodied characters. Thomson (1997, 9) argues that:

> Disabled literary characters usually remain on the margins of fiction as uncomplicated figures or exotic aliens whose bodily configurations operate as spectacles, eliciting responses from other characters or producing rhetorical effects that depend on disability's cultural resonance.

Zabeta, in Mbano's eponymously titled short story, and Kuitanda in Mthatiwa's "Meeting Kuitanda", are a perfect fit for what Thomson (1997) describes above. In Mbano's short story, the mentally disabled woman is a mere footnote to the larger events of the story. One

is reminded of the common association in literature between femininity and mental disability (see Garde 2006), although such a strand is not pursued in Mbano's story. That is also why I do not focus on the gendered configurations of mental disability in the story but, rather, on how Zabeta's mental disability has been deployed as part of the narrative technique of the short story. Her narrative finds its way into the text as one of the topics that passengers discuss as they travel by bus. The reader is introduced to two strands of Zabeta's story: one that connects her to the narrator as his former childhood love, the other that details two contending narratives about how Zabeta became mentally ill. As I show below, Mbano's short story barely goes beyond the narrative about how Zabeta got mad into the complexities and challenges of her sickness. Rather, Zabeta's illness is maintained as one of the topics that passengers discuss as a pastime on their slow and bumpy bus ride.

Zabeta first appears in the story as "a face that looked vaguely familiar" to the narrator but which he could not carefully "examine [...] for fear of inviting trouble should she notice" (Mbano 1994, 206). Thus, from the onset, Zabeta is framed as what Thomson (1997, 10, 15) would describe as a "freakish spectacle" who acts as "a lightning rod for the pity, fear, discomfort, guilt or sense of normalcy of the reader or a more significant character". From this moment on, the narrator's mind is troubled by this uncanny feeling about "the inscrutable face that kept coming" (Mbano 1994, 207). Besides being an uncanny presence that haunts the narrator, Zabeta comes up as a topic of discussion in the bus as the passengers converse and argue about life. Opinions fly around as characters try to explain how Zabeta became mentally ill. For some, Zabeta's sickness is a manifestation of human evil in the world. In fact, the explanation of the village folk, as told in the short story by a character called Nyirenda, is that Zabeta was bewitched because her husband's church became so popular and attracted a lot of members from rival churches. According to Nyirenda,

> This brought so much jealousy that one evening a zombie was sent to spread evil magic around the house and die in one of the rooms. It was added that before the zombie came, Zabeta had seen a long black snake smoking a cigarette. Immediately after the encounter with the zombie, Zabeta became mad (Mbano 1994, 217).

What we have above is one of the most typical explanations for the cause of mental illness among Malawians. Mental illness is usually associated with and foretold by some supernatural occurrence, believed to be orchestrated by people with evil intentions. In Zabeta's case, someone sent a zombie to die in her house, an event that is foreshadowed by Zabeta's encounter with a snake puffing a cigarette. Mbano tries to balance the local people's explanation of the cause of Zabeta's illness through a parallel narrative that dwells on the psychology of the character. In that parallel narrative, Zabeta's illness is said to emanate from her guilt after a man she had refused to feed, earlier in the day, was mysteriously found dead in one of the rooms in her house. Zabeta's haunted self is presented in the form of a poem that forms a refrain around which the story is organized.

A point to note here is Mbano's effort to present a society struggling to explain and come to terms with mental illness, a society in which mental illness is, to borrow from Mitchell and Snyder, "a sign of divine disfavour and superstition" (2000, 66). Zabeta's mental condition is presented as unfathomable, such that even Zomba Mental Hospital could not cure her illness. While the village folk plan to take her to a traditional healer, the church "dragged her into the house, held her onto the sofa, and started a long session of prayers" (Mbano 1994, 220). Beyond this, Zabeta as a mentally ill personality is lost in the narrative, becoming one of several topics for discussion on the

bus. Evidenced by the recurrence of the song that Zabeta sings and presented as a refrain throughout the story, she becomes a mere narrative device that propels the story forward. Mbano's discussion of the possible causes of mental illness in the story is helpful only in terms of highlighting some of the beliefs associated with mental illness in Malawian society. The story, however, does not challenge, as one would expect, such (mis)conceptions about mental illness, nor the wrong remedies such (mis)conceptions lead to – remedies which often victimize and stigmatize the patient.

Mthatiwa's "Meeting Kuitanda" is another interesting short story where the mentally disabled person becomes part of the narrative technique that aids the development of theme and characterization. It is a story about two former schoolmates, one who adheres to "good" morals and excels in school, the other who deviates, begins smoking weed, and eventually goes mad. As already noted above, Kuitanda's mental disability becomes symbolic of moral evil. To borrow Longmore's words, in this story we see a clear manifestation of "disability as punishment for evil" (cited in Mitchell and Snyder 2000, 18), since Kuitanda's mental disability seems to follow directly from his immoral behaviour. To borrow from Quayson (2007, 36), besides being symbolic of moral vice, mental disability in Mthatiwa's story is depicted as "null set and/or moral test", where disability "acts as some form of ethical background to the actions of other characters, or as a means of resisting or enhancing their moral standing". Conforming further to Quayson's line of argument, Mthatiwa's portrayal of Kuitanda thus shows mental disability as carrying "the burden of moral deficient and evil", with Kuitanda becoming the "metaphorical encapsulation of the moral problematic" (Quayson 2007, 41).

Mental disability as evil is hinted at quite early in the story. The narrator's "reunion" with his old friend is foretold by an encounter with an owl which, in Malawian lore, is considered a sign of evil and witchcraft. The protagonist then remembers a childhood incident where, together with his friend Kuitanda, they once killed an owl and were later admonished by his aunt for dragging into the compound "a dirty and dangerous bird" used by witches "to conduct their filthy business" (Mthatiwa n.d, n.p). Such a bird foretells the protagonist's encounter with his mentally ill old friend, whom he cannot recognize at first sight. Interestingly, the encounter between these old-time friends happens as the protagonist walks past a graveyard. In Malawi, graveyards are not only places where the dead rest. They are also considered playgrounds or even "airports" for witches and their nocturnal planes. Graveyards are also closely associated with owls. Owls are attracted to graveyards because most graveyards in Malawi are substantially wooded, with natural forests, and therefore provide attractive nesting and hunting spots not just for owls, but also for a number of other birds and animals of prey. However, the explanation in Malawian lore links the presence of owls in graveyards to witchcraft. Thus, a connection is created here between the owl, the graveyard, and Kuitanda as a mentally disabled person. Standing before the protagonist, Kuitanda becomes a "spectacle" that the protagonist must take in. The description of Kuitanda's physical appearance, which is somehow identical with that of the lunatic in Molande's poem above, is given prominence:

> He appeared not to have taken a bath for a year and had a thick, bushy beard which bore all signs of abandonment. His eyes were wild and restless. With his left hand he securely held the remains of a rather big denim pair of shorts around his waist. The shorts miserably failed to cover the nakedness they were meant to hide. He had no shirt on. In his right hand he held a rusty metal bar. Bits and pieces of food taken possibly throughout the week decorated the edges of his beard-covered mouth. A yellowish substance, probably mango or pawpaw juice, formed a trail

> from his lower lip through his beard onto his chest. *Now I knew that the encounter with the owl was a precursor to the more dreadful encounter with a lunatic* (Mthatiwa n.d, n.p.; italics added).

The narrator's somewhat prejudiced stance distances the mentally ill Kuitanda as the Other. We know Kuitanda only in relation to the success of the protagonist-narrator, who completed his education and got a job in town. He lives a somewhat comfortable life in that he can afford to spare an old suit for his "lunatic" friend. When Kuitanda is found dead, the protagonist-narrator contemplates a befitting epitaph for his old friend. The seeming solidarity and sympathy that the narrator shows towards Kuitanda is largely undermined by the erroneous association between mental illness and evil, thereby perpetuating a belief that has seen many mentally ill people being treated with contempt in Malawi.

Some underlying blame is placed on Kuitanda for his condition. The protagonist-narrator, assuming a lofty, almost self-righteous position, tells us that while in secondary school, Kuitanda started to favour the company of big boys who taught him to smoke weed. The protagonist-narrator's self-righteousness shows when he cuts the figure of a good and obedient student who obeyed their health education teacher, who "stressed that smoking was a bad habit" (Mthatiwa n.d., n.p.). Both Kuitanda and the protagonist were admitted to the same secondary school, from where Kuitanda was later expelled for bullying and drinking. Kuitanda's drinking got worse at home until his parents disowned him, apparently because he became an embarrassment to them. Kuitanda's parents' concern was thus not about their son's drinking problem but their reputation. When Kuitanda began to show signs of madness, the village's reaction was a detached one: they "shook their heads in sorrow when he started speaking to himself, pointing at things he himself alone could see and running for no purpose" (Mthatiwa n.d., n.p.). That the village does not care for the mentally ill Kuitanda is evident in the fact that when he vanishes from the village nobody knows where he has gone to and nobody bothers to find out. The protagonist's choice of action after meeting his old friend is also telling. Feeling sad for his friend, whom he describes as "no less ghostly than a ghost" (Mthatiwa n.d., n.p.), the first thing the protagonist thinks of is to donate his old suit to "nutty Kuitanda". When Kuitanda dies before this benevolent act can be fulfilled, all the protagonist can think of is a suitable poetic epitaph for Kuitanda's tombstone. While in Mbano's short story mental disability is used to explain human evil projected onto others, in Mthatiwa's short story, mental illness results from a character's immoral acts, for which mental illness comes as a punishment. In both texts, the mentally ill become a background against which moral lessons are inscribed. The characters or their illnesses serve as either symbolic of or as a result of moral evil.

Mental Disability and the Dramatic

The use of mental illness in Malawian drama shows the same pattern discussed above. In this section, I focus on the use of madness in plays by Innocent Banda, who wrote during the oppressive times of Kamuzu Banda to critique the then dictator's draconian rule. To evade Kamuzu Banda's censorship board, referred to earlier in the discussion of Moto's poems, many Malawian writers turned to cryptic ways of writing, and especially to the use of oral traditions such as myths and legends (Nazombe 1983, 1996; Roscoe and Msiska 1992; Chirambo 2001). According to Chirambo (2001, 209), oral traditions provided "a poetic licence to criticise" and at the same time "elude censorship". For Banda, madness became a ready-made veil behind which to hide as he wrote to oppose Kamuzu Banda's rule. Penfold (2017, 1054–1055) notes that there are two ways in which mental disability is depicted in oppres-

sive regimes: as "a means of othering and discussing those who challenge the hegemonic project of any particular time" and as a "tool of resistance" against oppression. The latter is prevalent in Banda's plays. Writing about one of Banda's plays, "Mad Like a Prophet", Magalasi (2007, 72) underlines the centrality of madness in the play as "a cynical celebration of critics whom Kamuzu Banda saw as 'insane', and yet the term also expressed how most of the people in the country felt about him". Magalasi further notes that in terms of characterization, "the mad prophet is a *representative* of people who opposed Kamuzu Banda, and were not welcome in independent Malawi" (2007, 72; italics added). Thus the relevance of the mad person in the play lies largely in their symbolic value as a medium through which to confront Kamuzu Banda's oppression.

Another of Banda's plays, "Cracks" (1987), features an eponymously named mad beggar whose relationship with a rich man known as Master dramatizes the exploitative relationship between Kamuzu Banda and Malawi(ans). Master takes advantage of Cracks' mental condition to exploit him. To emphasize the exploiter-exploited relationship, Banda gives a detailed description of Cracks and his living conditions. As the play opens, Cracks "holds almost hugs a tattered, almost spherical bag" and is wearing "a torn heavy coat and almost brand new but dirty shorts with one patch between the legs" (Banda 1987, 146). His living conditions are no better: he lives in a filthy garage which he shares with ants and rats. Cracks' life is symbolic of that of many Malawians during Kamuzu Banda's time, despite the leader's claims that he had improved the lives of his people.

Master, like Kamuzu Banda, creates a situation where Cracks is dependent on and indebted to him. He also makes sure to remind Cracks about his helplessness at every possible opportunity, in a manner that evokes Kamuzu Banda's rhetoric about how he "liberated" Malawians from poverty and primitiveness. Despite his oppressive environment, Cracks has his moments through his madness. One such instance, which also shows Banda's play with metaphor, is when Cracks lashes out at mosquitoes, which turns out to be criticism directed towards the Master:

> Go away, I don't want your lullaby. Just go some other place. Go suck the master. He has more blood than me. I don't want to hear your songs any more. "Sleep well. There is a brighter day tomorrow." And yet while I sleep you suck my blood. Go away mosquito. I don't want to quarrel with you and please don't let me lose my temper. Just go away, I have a meal to finish (Banda 1987, 150).

Here, the madman becomes an appropriate metaphor for Banda to express his criticism. The mosquitoes that Cracks is angry at represent Kamuzu Banda's oppressive and exploitative regime, which siphoned wealth from poor Malawians through the extortion of gifts. During his rallies Kamuzu Banda was usually presented with gifts from his "loyal" subjects. From young kids in primary school to jobless village folk, everyone was required to give a token of thanks whenever Kamuzu Banda visited their area. Cracks' protest above, therefore, is Banda's criticism of Kamuzu Banda's exploitative leadership.

What is clear in the play is that the mentally disabled person is largely a metaphor through which Banda expresses his criticism against Kamuzu Banda. Cracks' mental condition becomes a handy weapon with which the writer delivers his criticism of an oppressive regime. This is emphasized by Magalasi (2007, 70), who points out that:

> Innocent Banda's obsession with madness ... seems to indicate the writer's attempt to use a form that enables him to fully articulate the status quo in a stylized manner, which afforded the performance an opportunity to directly address

the audience, through poetry and prose.

The enabling form referred to by Magalasi above is mental disability. In both "Cracks" and "Mad Like a Prophet", Banda veils wisdom in insanity in a manner that dramatizes the earlier quoted Chichewa proverb: *Wamisala anaona nkhondo* ("the lunatic saw an impending war"). Thus, mental disability is reduced to a means of expression that allows that writer to deliver his message in full. The mad person becomes a vessel through which the writer dramatizes his criticism of an oppressive regime. In the process, however, the plays do what the other texts analysed above do: appropriate the subjectivity of the mentally disabled and the complexities of their suffering for artistic purposes.

Conclusion

This article has shown that in the texts analysed the mentally disabled come through only as vessels that carry or help to mediate the writers' messages. As seen through the reading of poetry (particularly Molande's and Moto's) and Banda's plays, mental illness is largely used as a metaphor through which the writers mediate their social criticism. In Chamasowa's poem, mental illness is portrayed as a laughing matter, rendering cosmetic the poet's uninspired advice about mental illness being a serious disease. Besides featuring mentally disabled characters as a narrative strategy, Mbano's and Mthatiwa's stories tend to perpetuate attitudes towards mental illness, particularly those that associate mental illness with evil, a tendency that often leads to the stigmatization of people with mental disabilities. Like Yakhobe in the anecdote with which I opened this article, the mentally disabled persons in the texts analysed are Othered as their bodies and condition are deployed largely for narrative purposes. Thus, any attempt to humanize mentally ill persons in the narratives is undermined by the very fact that such persons have been used as a means to an end.

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