

## Gathering seaweed: African prison writing

Mapanje J. *Gathering seaweed: African prison writing*. London: Heinemann African Writers' Series, 2002. 328 pages. ISBN 0435912119. Price: GBP 10.55.

Jack Mapanje, Malawi's best-known political detainee, who spent three and half years in detention without trial, introduces his book with a firm assertion that *Gathering seaweed* is not "another anthology calculated to negate Africa". In the current political atmosphere in Africa this is a highly debatable point. Prison writing is, after all, a yearning for the freedom taken away, the mere act of writing negates the "despot" who imposes the loss of freedom. Writing for oneself within prison can be a tool of mental survival, and later also be cathartic, therapeutic and reconciliative. This begs the questions about the ability to write: are prison texts therefore selective in favour of dissidents with literary talents? Does this anthology include writing by ordinary workers or citizens arrested for political reasons? From my knowledge of Southern Africa, I would have to say that it does not, a reflection of the marginalisation of incarcerated peasantry in literature. Most of Africa's political detainees are, as evidence from Zaire, South Africa, Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe and a host of other nations shows, ordinary citizens who may not be able to articulate their dehumanising suffering on paper.

Perhaps we are being prematurely unfair; *Gathering seaweed* is an anthology of prison writing conceived following a course that Mapanje taught at Leeds University entitled the

Literature of Incarceration. The texts are split into several periodised sections: origins (anti-colonial and nationalist); arrest, detention and trial; torture; survival; and release. The anthology does not pretend to be comprehensive; most of the material was "chosen by students" although we are not given the selection criteria.

The "Origins" section includes extracts by well-known nationalists such as Kenneth Kaunda, Augustinho Neto, Kwame Nkrumah, Jomo Kenyatta and Edison Zvobgo. But as we go through the subsequent sections, and decades, the number of politicians diminishes. A second problem arises: writing is about preserving experiences, memories, testimonies and thoughts in accessible and unalterable, rather than oral, forms. This preservation should facilitate learning and growth. One would – therefore – have liked to see the extracts of the politicians (then colonial victims) at the beginning balanced with their (own) present-day "victims" or their own post hoc reflections. What happened, for example, to Zvobgo's (Ian Smith's detainee who later became a powerful politician in Zimbabwe at the time of Mugabe's Matabele tyranny) "peace [and] gladness", Kenneth Kaunda's "my people should be treated with reasonable courtesy in their own country" (when he became responsible for detaining others) or indeed Sam Mpasu's (a present Malawi cabinet minister) "... if this cruel and beastly government could do that to its own cabinet minister, then how much more would it do to me, a humble civil servant?"? Included here, after all, are men who either served in govern-

ment and created (or helped to create) their own political prisoners or are now in power and at the centres of debates about future limitations on freedom, both physical and academic. One wonders why, for example, Mpasu, who for years fought Dr Banda's tyrannical regime, has remained silent as his present party, the United Democratic Front (UDF), attempts to return Malawi to another dictatorship. This attempted return comes complete with the resurgence of extra-judicial paramilitary "Young Democrats", who, as in the Banda era, dispense summary justice to political opponents of the ruling UDF party.

Then there is the irony about a book about prison writing arising from Leeds, where Mapanje settled, effectively in political exile, after leaving Malawi in 1991. The book, though in the Heinemann African Writers' Series, given current economic and, in cases, political strictures, will be hard to find in African universities. The editor concedes that the English students will find the study helpful in their careers, ranging from caring for asylum seekers to human rights and immigration work. Therefore, although meant as "an indelible record of the origins, growth and maturity of the struggle for the restitution of human dignity and integrity, justice and peace on the African continent", there is some ambiguity about its target audience. This is no mere academic question. The present generation of African politicians, many who are victims of previous despots, is fairly well acquainted with the writings of most African "prison graduates". It is, however, the current crop of African secondary school and university students who need to read books such as *Gathering seaweeds* if the culture of political violence, detentions and torture that characterise postcolonial Africa is to change. If the anthology is to be "waved as a warning banner to present and future African political leadership", it should have

been co-published in Africa with Heinemann's many sister publishing houses. Indeed, the New Partnership for African Development initiative should have emphasised the importance of a reading culture in promoting good governance. Otherwise these experiences will remain resource materials for those who enjoy freedoms rather than those whose educational systems need to address issues of basic civil freedoms.

Incidentally, although Mapanje hopes that "... more anthologies of this sort would eventually be compiled" to document events in the decade 1991-2001 (a decade politically dominated by some former prison writers included here and the "transitions to democracy"), outside of South Africa, few initiatives in this direction are apparent.

Having cleared these hurdles, we come to the texts themselves. We have already noted the fact that most of the texts are by "elite" political prisoners and literati. One would question the omission of criminal writers; one measure of the brutality of a society is how it treats its criminals. If freedoms and civil liberties are indivisible, the experiences of criminal prisoners, who often receive different treatments from their political counterparts, would be of interest. The selection for future anthologies will need to be revised to address this issue.

Critiquing prison texts can run the risk of devaluing, minimising or even justifying the prison experience of the text writer. This is not, for me, a problem here because most of the writers, as already stated, are – in their own genres – excellent writers: Kaunda, Neto, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Felix Mnthali, Denis Brutus, Wole Soyinka, Edison Mpina, Koigi wa Wamwere, Jack Mapanje himself, Nelson Mandela, Breyten Breytenbach, Jeremy Cronin, Ngugi wa Thiongo ...

Most people familiar with African literature will recognise the writing and medita-

tions of the imprisoned literary elite (Mapanje, Ngugi, Mnthali, Brutus, etc.), those of ordinary people, some famous in another artistic milieu, who are attempting to put their experiences in writing (Winnie Mandela, Fela Kuti), interviews (Pitika Ntuli), translations (Nawal el Sa'adawi) and so on. Each calls for a different standard of textual analysis. If all writing is to be judged on one level, writing itself becomes a prison tool, excluding and imprisoning those less gifted on the outside. Prison writing, as often occurs on the outside, includes the intellectual and the visceral. Here obviously these texts, interviews, prose and poetry are of different literary standards, varying from excellent to functional. They speak for themselves. But perhaps future anthologies should differentiate between "professional writers in prison" and the writings of ordinary people once incarcerated, as Fanon (*The wretched of the earth*. Penguin, 1963:179) put it:

"... great many men and women who up till then would never have thought of producing a literary work, now that they find themselves [in prison], or on the eve of their execution – feel the need to speak to their nation, to compose the sentence which expresses the heart of the people, and to become the mouth-piece of a new reality in action".

Thus, while the personal is often emphasised, there is an element in which prison writing is a discourse of national or communal aspirations; it can never be analysed outside the contexts of the socio-politico-economic circumstances placing the writer in prison. Fanon (181) adds:

"The artist who has decided to illustrate the truths of the nation turns paradoxically towards the past and away from actual events ... the native intellectual who wishes to cre-

ate an authentic work of art must realize that the truths of the nation are in the first place its realities".

Published prison writing, in one aspect, is a form of truthfully excavating painful realities. These painful realities infect our contemporary political culture, and, while a historical perspective is essential, it is the here and now that determines if in fact the anthology engages with its presumed target audience.

Like medical doctors, we can describe pain as mild, gnawing, severe, colic, horrendous or even exquisite; but this is a functional categorisation and classification: pain is pain. These painful testimonies speak for themselves, whether in Kofi Awoonor's:

"delirium was his refuge from pain"

or the chill of Soyinka's:

"The man died' he said"

And like the varieties of pain describable, the texts offer various intellectual and emotional challenges.

However, as in growing, from pain arises learning. For a reviewer familiar with the pain of despotism now current in Central and Southern Africa, I am disappointed at the lack of inclusion of contemporary, i.e. post-1994 texts, that would have counter-balanced some of the earlier nationalist "origins". These newer texts would also sensitise the younger generation to the brutalities within their "democratic" political cultures. Apart from Christine Anyanwu's 1998 testimony, there is nothing post-apartheid or post-multi-party. Even the closing poem by Mzwake Mbuli is from the early 1990s. Given Mbuli's current debatable incarceration in a South African prison, and the state of Africa in general, a more appropriate poem might have been one from his "Born free,

always in chains” album, for example the “Three Bs”. Large parts of Africa are currently gripped by forms of injustice, conflict and famine, leading to the most horrific human mental and physical torture. I would have liked more of this reflected in the anthology, especially one intended for future NGO (non-governmental organisation) policy makers.

Despite these reservations, this volume is a welcome addition to prison and freedom discourses.

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