



'Taming untamed pests': Representing female sexualities in Tiyambe Zeleza's *Smouldering Charcoal* and James Ng'ombe's *Sugarcane with Salt*

**Author:**

Asante L. Mtenje

Affiliation:Department of English,
University of Stellenbosch,
South Africa**Corresponding author:**Asante Mtenje,
asantemtenje@yahoo.com**Dates:**

Received: 31 Aug. 2016

Accepted: 14 Feb. 2017

Published: 29 May 2017

How to cite this article:

Mtenje, A.L., 2017, "Taming untamed pests":

Representing female sexualities in Tiyambe Zeleza's *Smouldering Charcoal* and James Ng'ombe's *Sugarcane with Salt*, *Literator* 38(2), a1341. <https://doi.org/10.4102/lit.v38i2.1341>**Copyright:**© 2017. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

'Taming Untamed Pests': Die Voorstelling van Vroulike Seksualiteit in Tiyambe Zeleza se *Smouldering Charcoal* en James Ng'ombe se *Sugarcane with Salt*. In Afrika se diktatoriale regimes vervaag die grense tussen private en openbare ruimtes as gevolg van die beheer wat die staat uitoefen oor die subjektiwiteit van gewone burgers. In hierdie artikel verken ek 'n verskeidenheid van kruisings tussen die ideologies-materiële nalatenskap van 'n diktatoriale regime en uitbeeldings van vroulike seksualiteit in Malawiese fiksie. Ek is veral geïnteresseerd in die gebruik van literêre tekste om te ondersoek hoe fiksie-skrywers die ooreenkomste en teenstellings tussen volslae politieke diktatorskap en die impak daarvan op liggame en gedrag verken, asook hoe die staat instellings soos 'die familie' vervorm. Hierdie ondersoek sluit ook in diskoerse soos geslag, kultuur en godsdiens wat algemeen gebruik word in die diens van nasionale identiteit. Ek fokus op Tiyambe Zeleza se *Smouldering Charcoal* en James Ng'ombe se *Sugarcane with Salt*, en ondersoek hoe die skrywers se uitbeelding van vroulike seksualiteit gevestigde normatiewe 'waarhede' oor vroulike heteroseksualiteit voortsit en terselfdertyd bestry. Deur te fokus op vroulike seksuele agentskap, begeerte en plesier, ondersoek hierdie artikel ook klas-gebaseerde intergenerasionele verskille tussen vroue se konseptualiserings van vroulike heteroseksualiteite as 'n konstruksie wat beredeneer kan word.

In African dictatorial regimes, boundaries between private and public spaces become blurred as the state exercises control over ordinary citizens' subjectivities. In this article, I explore a range of intersections between the ideological-material legacies of a dictatorial regime and representations of female sexuality in Malawian fiction. I am particularly interested in using literary narratives to examine how fiction writers explore the congruencies and disjunctures amongst outright political dictatorship and the impact on bodies and behaviours of state-inflected institutions such as 'the family', along with discourses such as gender, culture and religion that are commonly mobilised in the service of national identity. Focusing on Tiyambe Zeleza's *Smouldering Charcoal* and James Ng'ombe's *Sugarcane with Salt*, I investigate how the authors' portrayal of female sexuality contest at the same time as they reproduce received, normative 'truths' about female sexualities. By focusing on female sexual agency, desire and pleasure, this article also examines class-inflected intergenerational differences between women's conceptualisations of female sexualities as a construct that can be negotiated.

Introduction

The representation of women in Malawian literary imaginaries has almost always existed within binaristic representations of the 'whore' living at the margins of society versus the 'Madonna', the ideal enduring wife and mother who would sacrifice anything for her family (Sagawa 1996). Commenting on Malawian literature, Francis Moto (2001) further adds that he has still to:

come across a story that treats a woman character as a whole person in her own right and not only as a tangential individual who cannot lead a free and independent life. (p. 10)

This article arises from my observation that, absent in the range of representations noted above, is a sense of the complex, ambiguous and heterogeneous ways in which women embody their gendered experiences, the diverse and multifaceted inflections of the sexualities conventionally designated female. Moreover, representation of sexualities, especially female, is often shrouded by a myriad of taboos and essentialisms as well as political and cultural objections as it is framed within cultural silences, which regard talking about issues of sexuality as taboo. Even in the broader picture of African literature, representations of sexualities have adopted all sorts of

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.



restrictions and taboos. As Gwynne and Poon (2012) observed:

sexuality is often perceived as shameful, for the dangers it potentially precipitates – rape, incest, exploitation, cruelty, and humiliation – often outweigh its pleasures. Essentialist arguments surrounding sexuality have historically cast the subject as taboo, and even within relationships where sex is sanctioned – namely heterosexual marital relationships – it is often a difficult subject to navigate and negotiate. (p. xi)

Indeed, this critical observation proves to be pertinent especially when interrogating how sexualities of Malawian citizens, emerging from the controls of a ‘thirty year contraption of totalitarian rule’ (Zeleza 1996:10), have been represented in works of literature considering the restrictions that were placed on the literary production of issues concerning sexualities. Hester Ross posits that ‘Malawian literature has been affected by the prevailing totalitarian power structures’ (1998:169) and further asserts that this is even reproduced in the representation of male–female relations in Malawian literature. As much as I agree with Ross, I posit that many critics of Malawian literature have focused more on representation of gender relations between men and women and how the latter are represented as tangential characters. Not many critics have examined how female sexuality is represented in Malawian fiction.

In this article, I explore a range of intersections between the ideological-material legacies of Kamuzu Banda’s dictatorial regime and representations of female sexuality in Malawian fiction. I am particularly interested in examining how writers explore the congruencies and disjunctures of political dictatorship and the impact on bodies and behaviours of state-inflected institutions such as ‘the family’, along with discourses such as gender, culture and religion that are often mobilised in the service of national identity. I focus on Tiyambe Zeleza’s *Smouldering Charcoal* (1992) and James Ng’ombe’s *Sugarcane with Salt* (2005),¹ both set in the period of Kamuzu Banda’s dictatorial rule. Zeleza is a Malawian historian, social critic, novelist and short story writer. He is widely recognised and respected as one of the leading scholars of African economic history. He has two collections of short stories titled *Night of Darkness and other stories* (1976) and *Joys of Exile* (1994). *Smouldering Charcoal*, which came out in 1992, was his first published novel. He has also published various books on African economic history. James Ng’ombe is a renowned Malawian novelist, poet and a short story writer. *Sugarcane with Salt*, his debut novel, was first published in 1989 and this was at the beginning of the end of Banda’s draconian regime. Since then he has published various short stories and two other novels titled *Madala’s Children* (1996) and *Madala’s Grandchildren* (2005). In the article, I investigate how the authors’ portrayals of female sexualities contest at the same time as they reproduce received, normative ‘truths’ about female sexualities. By focusing on female sexual agency, desire and pleasure, the article also examines class-inflected intergenerational

1.The novel was first published in 1989.

differences between women’s conceptualisations of female sexualities as a construct that can be negotiated.

Gender and sexuality in Banda’s Malawi

In most African dictatorial regimes, as politicians hold on to power through any means necessary, boundaries between private and public spaces become more and more blurred as the state exercises control over ordinary citizens’ subjectivities. Achille Mbembe argues that power in postcolonial Africa is so pervasive and ubiquitous that it invades even the most sacred domains of life, resulting in what he calls ‘the intimacy of power’ (1992:10). With the assumption of such levels of power, ‘even indisputably private and innocuous decisions such as the desire to wear a beard, or to exercise sartorial agency’ (Ochonu 2004:n.p) and how to express one’s sexuality could attract reprisal by the state. One example of such repressive regimes is that of Kamuzu Banda who ruled Malawi from 1964 (the year the country got its independence) to 1994.

Tiyambe Zeleza (1996) describes Banda’s Malawi as:

a contraption of totalitarian power [...] a land of pervasive fear where words were constantly monitored... a state of dull uniformity that criminalised difference, ambiguity, and creativity, an omniscient regime with a divine right to nationalise time. (p. 10)

Through a pervasive system of control that employed various state apparatus, Banda’s one party state:

censored memories, stories, and words that contested and mocked its hegemonic authority, thus rewriting history, banishing and imprisoning numerous opponents, real and imaginary, who questioned the legitimacy of the regime, hunting and murdering exiled ‘rebels’. (Zeleza 1996:10).

During Banda’s rule, the dominant political discourse was shaped by what Reuben Chirambo terms ‘Kamuzism’, an ideology ‘that produced a powerful myth of Banda’ (Chirambo 2007:80) as the ‘fount of all wisdom’ and a leader who ‘always knew what was best for the nation’ (Phiri 2000:n.p). Banda, who was the president of the powerful Malawi Congress Party (MCP), the only political party in the land, was presented and praised through songs and other artistic forms as ‘an individual who possessed supernatural or divine wisdom’ (Chirambo 2007:80), a gift from God, the messiah who had come to rescue Malawians from colonial bondage. These were the dominant political national discourses ‘that popularised and legitimised Banda’s dictatorship’ (Chirambo 2007:80).

In 1973, Banda’s regime enforced the decency in Dress Act and through it ‘a new script, steeped in the moralistic, anti-sexual and body shame acts, was inscribed on the bodies of women and with it an elaborate system of control’ (Tamale 2011:16). The Act made women’s wearing of trousers, miniskirts, skirts with slits and blouses which showed cleavage a criminal offence as it was perceived as inimical to the so called Malawian cultural values and contrary to national identity. The regime claimed that



these prohibited clothing items drew attention to a woman's thighs, breasts and buttocks, areas considered particularly erogenous in Malawi, as in many other parts of the continent. Banda was known for having very strict notions about sexuality and various elements of state machinery such as the censorship board were put into place to surveil the impropriety of displaying or even discussing anything that might be construed as sexually suggestive. Thus, various sexual practices such as homosexuality and oral sex were penalised and prohibited as they were categorised under 'unnatural' sexual acts. Even international songs of which the title and lyrics were perceived to be sexually explicit (e.g. Marvin Gaye's 'Sexual Healing' released in 1982) were banned from being played on Malawian airwaves. Banda's systematic control of bodies and sexualities was maintained and perpetuated through the indoctrination of the nation implemented through the regime's four cornerstone mottos, namely, unity, loyalty, obedience and discipline. Banda's attempts to discipline bodies within the nation illustrates Michel Foucault's (1980) argument that sexuality is a technology of power, a charged point of transfer for power, a site which is used to mark national belonging.

However, contrary to the regime's rhetoric that one of its main agendas was to empower women's lives, women were the ones who bore the brunt of the government's oppressive machinery. Traditionally, the role of the Malawian woman has been that of subservience to the man. Jubilee Tizifa, a leading sociologist in Malawi, argues that patriarchy inflects the way women are treated and that it is the underlying factor to female oppression. She asserts:

Malawian society is organised along the patriarchal ideology, an ideology which values men more than women, where men dominate women and what is masculine is valued more than what is feminine. (Tizifa 2003:1)

Modes of regulating and controlling female sexualities are embodied through various forms including cultural practices, religious and state institutions, and their role in socialising women and men. Female sexuality is perceived as subordinate to that of men, who are supposed to control women. Banda's regime took advantage of the already disempowered position of Malawian women to exploit them and to further place women's sexuality under men's control. Oppressive conditions under Banda's rule were perpetuated by the *Mbumba* culture in which every Malawian woman was forced to dance for Banda at every political event. It also exposed women to different forms of sexual exploitation carried out by politicians and political party agents. Although Banda insisted on sexual propriety in terms of dressing and behaviour exemplified through the dancing women's donning of long *zitenjes*,² the eroticised hip and thigh movements directed towards male politicians, notably Banda himself, presented an interesting paradox. The dance movements in interaction with the dress had a transformative effect on the message: from one of modesty to one of explicit

2. Chitenje is a traditional cloth worn by women around the waist and a marker of respect. Its plural is *zitenje*.

sensuality and sexuality but under Banda's control who always made sure that he had the optimum view of women's dancing bodies (Gilman 2009:66).

I discuss issues of gender and sexuality under Banda at length above because they provide a good context within which to read Zeleza's and Ng'ombe's texts and in which to frame my argument. Both Zeleza's *Smouldering Charcoal* and Ng'ombe's *Sugarcane with Salt* are set in Banda's authoritarian Malawi of the 1980s and portray and critique the injustices inflicted upon subjects. Zeleza who has lived outside Malawi since the 1970s is on record as saying that he wrote the manuscript in 1982. However, when the Malawi Special Branch Police got hold of the news of his intention to publish a novel critical of Banda's regime, they threatened his family relations in Malawi with harassment (Chirambo 1999:121). For fear of their lives, he held on to the manuscript until 1992 when Banda had begun to lose his grip on power. In the case of Ng'ombe, whose novel was published in 1989, he could probably write his novel with impunity because by the late 80s Banda had begun facing pressure from the international community on his laws and thus had begun to lose his power. Zeleza and Ng'ombe's novels offer excellent sites for my inquiry for 'fiction projects the diverse yet enduring patterns of thought, feeling and behaviour of the society from which it is drawn' (Kehinde & Mbipom 2011:62). At the same time, however, fiction may also "'trouble[]" and transform[] our thinking about sexuality', rather than merely reflecting the status quo (Watkins 2014) as the characters in these novels will show. Some efforts are made in their writing to disguise certain locations and names to avoid political persecution because writers who seemed to be critiquing Banda's authoritarian rule were detained without trial and even killed. However, the socio-political reality in the novels, for example, the portraits of the head of state hanging on the walls, the perversion of youth militia who demand party membership cards from local citizens, women forced to dance for the nameless leader all form part of the backdrop in the two novels, thus making it clear that the reference is Banda's Malawi. Fear of Banda's iron fist is felt in the novels as people are forced to obey the edicts of the land. Hester Ross notes that 'there is even an irrational "big brother" force in the country which rules by fear' (1998:181-182).

In Zeleza's *Smouldering Charcoal*, which is set in the fictional town of Njala, Banda is simply referred to as 'the leader' and he has eyes and ears everywhere embodied through 'vigilant party women, fanatical youth leaguers, chairmen, ministers and other informers who work either as house helps, secretaries or university lecturers' (Ogbeide 2014:78). Reuben Chirambo describes these party agents as 'untamed pests', a horde of fanatics or political loyalists who 'have chosen to serve the party either in a position in its hierarchy or as undercover agents in clandestine activities' (1999:9). Although the leader does not appear anywhere in the novel, his presence is still powerfully felt through the party, which is the only one allowed to exist in the country. Nobody is safe from the panoptic eyes of the state. The novel focuses on two



groups of people from different social classes as they try to negotiate through life under a dictatorship. One group is that of intellectuals represented by a journalist called Chola, whose writing and worldview are influenced by Marxist ideas and his live-in fiancée Catherine, who is a university student about to graduate. The other group consists of the men and women of Njala, who live in a shanty village at the edge of the town and whose lives are 'characterised by poverty, prostitution and infidelity, a typical third world squalor' (Chirambo 1999:122). This group is mainly represented by Mchere, a poor factory worker and an irresponsible drunkard and husband, who is later arrested for getting involved in a strike action at the baking factory, and his wife Nambe, a housewife who tries to make ends meet by brewing and selling local beer. The two families of Chola and Mchere are drawn together by a labour strike which subsequently has a profound effect on their familial relationships, self-identities and national politics. The story focuses on the lives of Mchere and Chola and the events before and after the strike. Plans to set up a full-fledged strike are curtailed by betrayals amongst the workers, and the strikers including Mchere are imprisoned without trial. Chola too, who, as a journalist, had taken a keen interest in covering the strike, is imprisoned without trial. Prior to his arrest, he had been part of an underground movement aimed to topple the leader's regime. Chola and Mchere meet in prison where they share a cell but Chola is later killed in prison while Mchere is released after some time. Meanwhile, their spouses, Nambe and Catherine, are left to fend for themselves. Catherine is expelled from university because of her association with Chola and Nambe and her children are evicted out of her house because she does not have money to pay rent. Catherine and Nambe meet when the wives of the imprisoned workers boycott independence celebration dances to go and visit their imprisoned husbands. When the authorities get hold of this, they are all banished from the city and exiled to their respective villages.

In *Sugarcane with Salt*, the Malawian characters are also subjected to the operations of totalitarian power and its effect on the subjectivities of the citizens. The novel is centred on a young medical doctor called Khumbo Dala, who comes back to Malawi after his studies in England only to find his family in a state of disintegration brought about by the divorce between his parents. In addition, the country is in a tragic state as it is 'sagging under the yoke of betrayal, moral failure, corruption, drug peddling, disillusionment and stock suffering' (Tembo 2013:113). Days after his arrival in Malawi from England, he goes to see his father at their village to learn more about his divorce from his mother and it is there that he meets Grace, a primary school teacher whom he has a short affair with. He also learns that his estranged mother and brother are trafficking drugs and that his ex-girlfriend is now married to his brother. He is forced to reconcile his feelings of resentment and anger for the good of his family.

Similar to other biased literary representations of women in most Malawian fiction, such as David Rubadiri's *Bride Price*, Zeleza and Ng'ombe also depict their women characters as

occupying very marginal positions in the society, their significance mainly framed in relation to the major characters that are male. The women characters are subjects 'defined and differentiated with reference to man' (De Beauvoir 1993:xliv). The socio-political landscape, which is oppressive to the citizens, becomes unbearable and, therefore, provides the impetus for men who 'find it reasonably expedient to descend on the womenfolk as a way of letting off steam' (Tembo 2013:114). It is, therefore, a case of double oppression for the women as they experience injustices inflicted on them by the state as well as in the domestic space. Despite this representation of women, I am nevertheless interested in the different degrees of co-optation and coercion, containment and escape exemplified by these female characters in the face of totalitarian power structures, socio-cultural, patriarchal values and norms which mediate the agency of female sexualities as represented by the two authors. As Foucault reminds us, power is a multiplicity of force relations which paradoxically offer spaces for reverse, opposing discourses (1980:20).

My analysis focuses on four marginal characters who in my opinion exemplify the various ways in which women resist and negotiate cultural and political constraints on their bodies and sexualities. In *Smouldering Charcoal*, the characters are Catherine, who is expelled from university after Chola's arrest and later becomes a political activist in exile after Chola's death in prison and Nambe, Mchere's wife and mother of his five children who is exiled from the town of Njala to live in the village after Mchere's arrest. In *Sugarcane with Salt*, I focus on the characters of Grace, a primary school teacher who has a temporary sexual relationship with Khumbo and Mai Nabanda, Khumbo's mother who runs a motel and is later arrested for her involvement in drug trafficking with her other son. Drawing on Foucault's ideas about sexuality and power as not being limited to one entity, I examine how the 'self' is to a certain extent a product of particular knowledge (re)produced by dominant discourses. I, therefore, consider how the embodied self's relationship to societal modes of respectability, values and aesthetics 'continue to play roles in how people negotiate place and power, and inform how we traverse the terrain of sexualisation' and that 'rather than being a mere tool, then, the body acts as both the site and language through which positioning is negotiated' (Gqola 2005:3).

Female agencies in *Smouldering Charcoal* and *Sugarcane with Salt*

Although Catherine and Nambe are minor characters in *Smouldering Charcoal* and mainly framed in relation to Zeleza's male characters, I show in the discussion below how these women still negotiate spaces for themselves despite circumstances which aim to oppress them because of their gender. Catherine is one of the interesting characters in Zeleza's novel because she challenges societal expectations of how a respectable female ought to behave sexually. She is a university student and Zeleza describes her as a beautiful,



intelligent woman who is in charge of her mind and body, one who realises that her sexuality is hers to own and control. Refusing to conform to patriarchal edicts that subordinate her to male authority, she is determined that when she gets married 'she would not be reduced to a carbon copy of Chola, a faceless wallflower' (1992:55) just like other married women. Being a carbon copy of Chola and a faceless wallflower means putting her career and personal ambitions on the shelf, disappearing into the obscurity of marriage by placing herself at the service of Chola's needs as his wife in the same manner as other objects in the house. Her determination to not be like other women who have allowed marriage to efface their self-identities marks her claim for autonomy. Even though she faces objection from different corners because of her relationship with Chola, she chooses to be in a fulfilling sexual relationship with him, often 'cuddl[ing] up to each other' with 'soft music playing in the background' while making passionate love (1992:55). The narrator explains:

They had been going together for two years now. They had been engaged and living together for the past six months despite the objection of her parents and some of her friends. They both felt there was nothing wrong with living together since they intended to get married anyway soon after the completion of her studies. They had agreed that there was an advantage in knowing each other before taking the final plunge in order to find out whether they were really compatible. (p. 55)

Catherine's decision to ignore her parents and her friends' objections of their living together illustrates her defiance against notions that equate female respectability with 'sexual purity' and which are moulded within cultural narratives that require heterosexual marriage to be the basis for living together because that is the normalised space for legitimate sex, 'divine and sacrosanct...the most appropriate place to be in terms of conducting sexual activity and or the procreation of future generations' (Mvududu & McFadden 2001:63). At the expense of negative societal perceptions, she takes the personal initiative to test her compatibility with Chola by living with him instead of quickly and blindly committing herself to marriage. Her relationship with Chola, which is seen as a transgression of the moral codes controlling female sexuality, therefore subjects her to different forms of ridicule and shaming, including from her own peers who call her a prostitute who is interested in getting money out of her 'sugar daddy' Chola who is a number of years older than her and has a good job. I argue that Catherine's actions position her as a locus of resistance against hegemonic codes. They further illustrate that certain behaviours of femaleness are deliberately premised within the supposedly 'unrespectable' in order to subvert the limits placed on female bodies.

In the novel, Zeleza further depicts how Banda's male state agents and political party leaders use sexuality as a tool to exploit and punish women who do not subscribe to the laws of the regime or whose husbands or male relatives are suspected to be anti-Banda. Thus, here we are able to identify 'a conflation of power and sexuality' (Lewis 2008:106) and

that in authoritarian contexts, 'far from being disassociated from any realm that we could call "instinctive", sexuality is constantly defined through and within violence and the assertion of power' (Lewis 2008:106). Critiquing the hypocrisy of Banda's regime, Emily Mkamanga argues that despite the regime's insistence that they were interested in protecting and promoting women, they were, however, 'vulnerable [...] in [the] dictatorship which downgraded [their] status to second class citizens' (2000:6) and that the regime 'left no woman untouched' (2000:11). As the narrator in *Smouldering Charcoal* explains about those who did not possess a party membership card: 'Others were beaten to death, their houses burnt, or women raped and children barred from school, if they did not possess the almighty card' (1992:18). Mkamanga further argues that even though public prudery was at its height during Banda's regime, it was undermined by the MCP itself with its perverse sexual exploitation of women.

Zeleza portrays this aspect through the character of Catherine who is almost sexually assaulted by government agents. Her firm belief that a woman should not be used as an object of sexual pleasure for men enables her to fight off two attempted rapes when she is at her most vulnerable. The first attempt is by a government official who had arrested Chola for covering anti-government activities. He promises to give Catherine favours whenever she wants to visit Chola in exchange for her body. Refusing to have her sexual rights violated, she violently fights off the official:

'Get away from me, you swine! Get away...' she screamed. What was at stake was the very essence of her being: it was a struggle to prevent herself from sinking into the final ignominy of an object. (1992:144)

Catherine's use of animal imagery to refer to the man, in this case, a pig which delights in immersing itself in dirt, underscores her disgust towards the despicable and degrading behaviour of the government official. It also equates the man's inhumane actions to animal-like behaviour which disregards human life by stripping a person of their human dignity and reducing them to an object of another person's selfish pleasures. Later on, Catherine is also almost sexually assaulted by Dr. Bakha, her professor, who wants to take advantage of her vulnerable situation when she is expelled from university. In both instances, she could have used her sexuality to secure certain benefits because without Chola who provided most of the material benefits she would suffer financially as she had no other stable source of income. However, she refuses to be objectified by these men and asserts ownership of her sexuality by resisting and violently warding off these sexual advances.

Similarly, when placed in a very vulnerable situation, Nambe, another female character in Zeleza's novel, refuses to be the object of political party men's perverse pleasures and manipulates the same system that is used to sexually exploit women. As I mentioned earlier, Nambe and her husband Mchere live in dire poverty and she is forced to resort to



brewing local beer (*kachasu*) to provide for her family. However, in order for the business to be allowed in the area, she has to obtain permission from party officials who also use their ability to grant permission as leverage to get sexual gratification from the local women. The narrator reveals:

When Nambe was approached by one of the party officials after she had started her business and was asked whether she had obtained the necessary permission, she replied affirmatively. Little did she know what was meant by permission. When the party official made himself clear, Nambe was utterly shaken. What a price! She could not allow it.... But she did not want to stop brewing *kachasu* either. Surely there had to be a way out. Yes, how about promising him that next time would do because at present she was not in the right condition? He bought her story. When he came back a few days later she took a gamble: well, how unfortunate he was, she said, he had come rather late, for none other than the Party chairman himself had been to see her and had told her to keep herself only for him. He could go and ask for the chairman's permission if he still wanted her. (1992:73)

Being a seller of *kachasu*, Nambe is already perceived as transgressing the codes of female respectability for women who brewed *kachasu* were reputed to be 'aggressive and disobedient to their husbands and morally loose' (1992:73). However, she disregards such perceptions by going ahead with her business in order to be financially empowered. Power wielding by Banda's party officials further extends to using female bodies for their own sexual gratification, knowing well that the women cannot overtly challenge their advances. The party official approaches Nambe with the assumption that she is morally loose because of *kachasu* brewers' reputations. However, Nambe refuses to conform to the stereotype by wittingly rejecting his demands. As a resistance strategy, Nambe uses the same discourse which objectifies women's bodies and constructs female sexuality as open for male consumption to manipulate and resist the party official's sexual advances. At first, she uses menstruation, a biological female process as an excuse to escape the politicians' advances. However, she is aware that the menstruation lie can only hold for so long for the official would definitely return days later to demand to sleep with her. As a way of protecting her bodily integrity, she performs the role of a licentious *kachasu* brewer by lying to the official that she is already sleeping with the party chairman who is obviously much more powerful politically and socially than he is. That calculated lie exempts her from the official's further plans to exploit her body.

In *Sugarcane with Salt*, Ng'ombe too portrays socio-cultural patriarchal values that subordinate and commodify women's sexuality as working in conjunction with authoritarian power structures in the mediation of female sexuality. Of interest to me is the treatment of Grace, a primary school teacher who teaches with Pempho, Khumbo Dala's former primary school classmate who happens to be the headmaster of the school. In contrast to the traditional and backward town where she resides, Grace is presented as a modern young educated woman who does not fit in the town. Khumbo, who has travelled to Salima to see his father, is immediately drawn to

Grace's independence and her assertiveness which are further mediated by the sensual way in which she carries her body as well as the way in which she interacts with people of the opposite sex. Her difference in demeanour and behaviour singles her out amongst the other women in the community who insist on maintaining acceptable modes of female decorum. Moreover, the fact that she is an unmarried woman makes her a target for the community's sharp eyes and wagging tongues which monitor her every move and thus keep her entrapped within her house. This is done especially by her fellow women who assume that she is going to go after their men. In this context, at her age, to be single is considered to be receptive to any sexual advances and to be of loose morals. Furthermore, her singlehood renders her sexuality subject to being commodified by the headmaster who operates within patriarchal thinking that a woman's sexuality ought to be under men's control and authority. Her agency which is exercised in her decision to remain sexually unattached is however perceived negatively as men 'have all tried' (2005:44) and failed to get into her bed. Abusing his position as her work superior, Pempho, therefore, takes it upon himself to break her stubbornness by unashamedly bringing all types of men to her house at night in order to hook her up with them. Grace reveals to Khumbo who is brought to her house and conveniently left there by Pempho:

'This is not the first time he has done this to me', she replied. 'That's the price you have to pay for being single in a small town like this. Everyone makes passes at you' [...] 'The visitors I have had from Pempho have always come at Pempho's instigation'. She hesitated before proceeding. 'It's as if he wants to see my breaking point'. (2005:47)

There are a number of points to be noted about the way female sexuality is framed within this context. Firstly, the fact that Grace is single is an anomaly which needs to be corrected as patriarchy dictates that a woman should be attached to a man in order to gain validation. Female autonomy and self-determination exemplified by women who decide not to be male appendages, therefore, destabilise societal gender roles and expectations. Hence, she is subjected to numerous sexual advances from men who perceive her as a prize to be claimed. Secondly, the fact that Pempho decides to use his position as Grace's work superior to turn her body and sexuality into a commodity through which his friends can achieve some gratification shows how little he respects her and how he reduces her body to that of a sexual object. Her resistance against being reduced to a sex object is however not applauded, but rather viewed by Pempho and society as stubbornness which needs to be dealt with.

Interestingly, unbeknownst to Pempho and others, Grace does have a boyfriend called Dan Kapena who lives in the city. Even though Grace is faithful to him, staying indoors and refusing to interact with men on anything other than professional grounds, her boyfriend is not committed to her. Thus, how Grace is perceived by the community with regard to her sexual availability is not her reality for she is a faithful girlfriend to her long distance boyfriend. The presence of Khumbo whom she is mutually attracted to, however, offers



her the chance to temporarily explore her sexuality by having a sexual affair with him although she is aware of the transient nature of the affair since he is engaged to a white woman called Sue. Thus, transgressing the moral codes of proper sexual conduct by women, Grace exercises her agency to pursue sexual pleasure at the expense of her reputation in the face of society. However, even though Grace exhibits a considerable level of independence, challenging patriarchal norms of respectable female sexuality, it is interesting to note that when she suspects that she is pregnant she becomes conscious of the shame that is associated with pregnancy out of wedlock, thus conforming to conventional expectations regarding respectable womanhood.

'I think I am going to have a baby', she whispered evasively, and a tear or two landed on Khumbo's hand.

'Are you certain?' he gasped, helpless.

'I am hoping that Dan won't find out'. She whispered [...] 'I need a father for my baby', she [...] cried openly. 'I'll just have to accept his proposal'. (2005:107)

Thus, to cover the shame of having a child out of wedlock, whose father was already involved with someone else, she decides to pin the responsibility of fatherhood on Dan in order to save face. Ng'ombe's representation here corresponds well with Rachel Spronk's argument that although modern women express the desire to challenge conventional modes of femininities, 'they also internalise certain constructions of femininity that are at odds with change' (2014:172). Spronk (2014) further argues:

[T]heir experiences and their wishes relate to conventional discourses that discourage particular expressions of their sexuality, as well as with those more liberal discourses that encourage them to explore sexuality. As a result, women often express an ambiguous attitude, so as to conform to conventional notions of femininity, while actually undermining these conventions by being or representing the 'modern woman'. (p. 141)

Indeed, Grace's actions present a paradox. On one hand, she defies cultural restraints on female sexuality by having sexual relations with a man she has just met and whom she is not in a relationship with when she sleeps with Khumbo. On the other hand, internalising social conventions that vilify women who have children outside wedlock as loose, Grace decides to marry and pin fatherhood on a man she does not really have feelings for, just for the sake of maintaining respectability.

Another woman who defies cultural expectations of female sexuality in Ng'ombe's novel is Mai Nabanda, Khumbo's mother who is uneducated. Khumbo is shocked to hear of his parents' divorce upon his arrival from overseas where he studied medicine for 8 years. Khumbo, who had only heard from Baba his father's side of the story of how his mother, after many years of marriage with his father, cheated on him by having an affair with a rich white man whom she bore a son with, is angry at his mother and refuses to talk to her. But Mai Nabanda, who now runs a successful motel business which has been given to her by the white man, refuses to apologise and to be judged for her actions by telling her son

that she did what she had to in order to escape from Baba's autocratic, patriarchal control. Once a subservient wife who could not question her husband's authority, Mai Nabanda's dreams and ambitions were brought to a halt by Baba, himself a primary school teacher, who refused to wait until she too finished her education because she was just a woman, thus reducing her subjectivity to that of being a submissive wife and mother for his children. She reveals to Khumbo:

I had ambition like your father, like everybody else. I wanted to be a nurse. But your father wouldn't let me. He couldn't wait and I had to quit school. For years I lived in his house and suffered any humiliation you can think of. Time came when I had to find out an outlet. I just had to breathe and live again. (2005:87)

Mai Nabanda breaks free from the abusive Baba's control and her life as a submissive wife to live her life without any restrictions. Exercising her agency to experience sexual pleasure and to gain back her self-esteem which had been gradually and systematically stripped off her, she has an affair with a white man from Britain. As Spronk (2014) posits:

sex is a medium for a variety of feelings, emotions and needs. People have sex for fun, to fulfill a desire for intimacy, for a physical thrill, to procreate, to exert power, to humiliate and so much more. (p. 7)

Mai Nabanda gets validation of her worth as a desirable woman from the affair which results in a pregnancy. Assuming that the baby is his, Baba only discovers Mai Nabanda's betrayal when the baby is born with mixed race features. Angry and humiliated, Baba chases her out of their marital home which drives her into the arms of the white man who takes care of her. Although it seems as if the jobless Mai Nabanda shifts from one form of patriarchal control to another by being the financial beneficiary of the white man, she is able to negotiate some form of autonomy by taking over the management of the motel which the white man entrusts to her in order to support herself and the baby.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Zeleza's *Smouldering Charcoal* and Ng'ombe's *Sugarcane with Salt* depict how female bodies in Banda's autocratic regime were subjected to different kinds of sexual abuses and control which collaborated with socio-cultural patriarchal values, hence limiting women's mobilities and sexualities. Despite these constraints on female bodies and sexualities in Banda's Malawi in these novels, the female characters examined in this article depict the agencies available to and exercised by women to resist and negotiate restrictive sexual discourses. In as much as the female characters in the novel illustrate considerable levels of sexual agency in the manner in which they prioritise their sexual desires and pleasures, at the same time the two authors' representation of female sexual agency highlights the problematics of women's open expression of sexual desire and pleasure in a context where such freedom is perceived as transgressing the norms. It must also be conceded that the representation of female sexual agency in the two books is to a certain degree framed within



paradoxical, normative expectations of gender and female sexuality, as exemplified by Grace in *Sugarcane with Salt* when she chooses to get married to a man she does not have feelings for in order to avoid the shame of having a child out of wedlock.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that she has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced her in writing this article.

References

- Chirambo, R., 1999, 'Untamed pest, night storms, *Smouldering charcoal* and prospects for democracy in Africa: Tiyaambe Zeleza's *Smouldering Charcoal*', *Journal of Social Development in Africa* 14(1), 121–132.
- Chirambo, R., 2007, 'Orality and subversion in Jack Mapanje's of chameleons and Gods', *The International Fiction Review* 34, 79–91.
- De Beauvoir, S., 1993, *The second sex*, David Campbell, London.
- Foucault, M., 1980, *The history of sexuality*, vol. 1, Pantheon, New York.
- Gilman, L., 2009, *The dance of politics: Gender, performance, and democratisation in Malawi*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, PA.
- Gqola, P.D., 2005, 'Yindaba kaban' u'ba ndilahl' umlenze? Sexuality and body image', *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity* 19(63), 3–9.
- Gwynne, J. & Poon, A. (eds.), 2012, *Sexuality and contemporary literature*, Cambria Press, Amherst, MA.
- Kehinde, A. & Mbipom, J., 2011, 'Discovery, assertion and self-realisation in recent Nigerian migrant feminist fiction: The example of Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*', *African Nebula* 3, 62–77.
- Lewis, D., 2008, 'Rethinking nationalism in relation to Foucault's *History of Sexuality* and Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence"', *Sexualities* 11(1/2), 104–109. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13634607080110010306>
- Mbembe, A., 1992, 'Provisional notes on the postcolony', *Africa* 62(1), 3–37. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1160062>
- Mkamanga, E., 2000, *Suffering in silence: Malawi's 30-year dance with Dr. Banda*, Dudu Nsomba, Glasgow.
- Moto, F., 2001, *Trends in Malawian literature*, Chancellor College, Zomba.
- Mvududu, S. & McFadden, P., 2001, *Re-conceptualising the family in a changing southern Africa environment, women and law in southern Africa*, Research Trust, Harare.
- Ng'ombe, J., 2005, *Sugarcane with salt*, Jhango Publishing Company, Blantyre.
- Ochonu, M.E., 2004, 'Democracy and the performance of power: Observations from Nigeria', *Gefame Journal of African Studies* 1(1), n.p., viewed 02 November 2015, from <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/g/gefame/4761563.0001>
- Ogbeide, O.V., 2014, 'Raping the dreams and subverting the aspirations: Post independence disillusionment in Zeleza's *Smouldering Charcoal*', *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature (IJSELL)* 2(7), 76–83.
- Phiri, K., 2000, 'A case of revolutionary change in contemporary Malawi: The Malawi army and the disarming of the Malawi young pioneers', *Journal of Peace, Conflict and Military Studies* 1(1), n.p., viewed 10 December 2015, from <http://malawi.freehosting.net/article3.html>
- Ross, H., 1998, "'All men do is love, love..." context, power and women in some recent Malawian writing', in K. Phiri & K.R. Ross (eds.), *Democratization in Malawi: A stock-taking*, pp. 168–194, CLAIM, Blantyre.
- Sagawa, J., 1996, 'Archetype or stereotype? Three images of women in the Malawian novel', paper presented at an International Conference on Malawian Literature, Blantyre, Malawi, October 10–12.
- Spronk, R., 2014, 'Sexuality and subjectivity: Erotic practices and the question of bodily sensations', *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 22(1), 3–21. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.12055>
- Tamale, S. (ed.), 2011, *African sexualities: A reader*, Pambazuka Press, Cape Town.
- Tembo, N.M., 2013, 'Politics and stylistics of female (re)presentation in James Ng'ombe's *Sugarcane with salt*', in R.M. Chirambo & J.K.S. Makokha (eds.), *Reading contemporary Africa literature: Critical perspectives*, pp. 109–126, Rodopi, Amsterdam.
- Tizifa, J., 2003, 'Women and socio-economic freedom: What impedes women?' *The Nation Newspaper*, 01 March, pp. 2–3, viewed 15 September 2015, from <http://www.nationmw.net/>
- Watkins, S., 2014, 'Review: Sexuality and contemporary literature', viewed 10 October 2016, from <http://www.cambriapress.com/cambriapress.cfm?template=5&bid=529>
- Zeleza, T., 1992, *Smouldering charcoal*, Heinemann, Essex.
- Zeleza, T.P., 1996, 'Banishing words and stories: Censorship in Banda's Malawi', *CODESRIA Bulletin* 1, 10–15.