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Kunapipi

Volume 11 | Issue 3 Article 9

1989

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Msiska, Mpalive-Hangson, Sexual Politics in Malawian Popular Fiction: The Case of Aubrey Kalitera's Why Father Why, *Kunapipi*, 11(3), 1989.
Available at:https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol11/iss3/9

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Abstract

Aubrey Kalitera is one of the most prolific writers of popular fiction in Malawi. He has published numerous novels and short stories. In 1976, his novel No Taste of Business was published by Heinemann East Africa. Since then, however, he has followed the example of David Maillu of Kenya by setting up on his own: writing, printing and distributing his own works. In 1987, Kalitera surprised Malawi by producing and direct-ing what is perhaps the first ever commercial film to be made locally.^ He is one of several writers within the country trying to provide a Malawian form of popular fiction for a huge local readership of western popular literature. Despite the effort of writers like Kalitera, there has been negligible critical attention paid to them largely on account of the overall neglect that popular literature has historically suffered in academe. The advent of Deconstmction has, to a large extent, changed the way we perceive relations of difference within the domain of Uter-ary inquiry. This critical approach has sensitized us to the way literary taxonomy is grounded in various discursive and material practices which are linked to broader political interests in society. In the Httle that has been published on African popular literature so far, there is no account of the manner in which such fiction manages the question of gender even though one might argue, it is popular literature more than high literature that is likely to give us a more accurate indication of existing gender ideologies since the former more than the latter, as Antonio Gramsci once observed, is intimately connected with traditional notions of power.

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MPALIVE-HANGSON MSISKA

Sexual Politics in Malawian Popular Fiction: The Case of Aubrey Kalitera's *Why Father Why*

Aubrey Kalitera is one of the most prolific writers of popular fiction in Malawi. He has published numerous novels and short stories. In 1976, his novel *No Taste of Business* was published by Heinemann East Africa. Since then, however, he has followed the example of David Maillu of Kenya by setting up on his own: writing, printing and distributing his own works. In 1987, Kalitera surprised Malawi by producing and directing what is perhaps the first ever commercial film to be made locally.[1] He is one of several writers within the country trying to provide a Malawian form of popular fiction for a huge local readership of western popular literature. Despite the effort of writers like Kalitera, there has been negligible critical attention paid to them largely on account of the overall neglect that popular literature has historically suffered in academe. The advent of Deconstruction has, to a large extent, changed the way we perceive relations of difference within the domain of literary inquiry. This critical approach has sensitized us to the way literary taxonomy is grounded in various discursive and material practices which are linked to broader political interests in society. In the little that has been published on African popular literature so far, there is no account of the manner in which such fiction manages the question of gender even though one might argue, it is popular literature more than high literature that is likely to give us a more accurate indication of existing gender ideologies since the former more than the latter, as Antonio Gramsci once observed, is intimately connected with traditional notions of power.[2]

Kalitera's *Why Father Why* sets out to condemn the practice of monogamy which it blames for the presence in society of countless children who have no fathers to look after them. However, though the novel puts forward a radical critique of the contemporary social formation in Malawi, it fails to utilise its radical potential as a consequence of siting the solution outside the domain of political economy. I further argue that the shifting of gender relations from the domain of political econ-

omy to that of patriarchal philanthropy is contrived, as throughout the novel it is the material base of gender relations that is presented as the arena in which the family crisis is produced and within which the solution must be sought. The solution that the text comes up with is revealed as an ideological alignment with a specific form of patriarchal discourse.

The punishment that is meted out to the father at the end of the novel is anticipated in the text by the overall portrayal of men. As the novel relentlessly seeks to construct the ideal father, in accordance with its moral trajectory, the narrator, who ultimately becomes the embodiment of the ideal father, is contrasted with his own father, and with Jack Lupembe, the hotel manager who callously abandons the narrator's childhood sweetheart, and Joe Phanga, the editor who makes the narrator's South African-born girlfriend, whom the narrator himself has temporarily abandoned, pregnant. Out of the three feckless fathers, the hero's father is depicted as the epitome of depraved fatherhood. He is perhaps the most important narrative device in the novel as both the narrative structure and the plot revolve around the hero's quest to find him, as he is the 'absence' that constitutes the object of desire, *the demonised Other* who must be found and punished. In this way, the father comes to embody that *Otherness* which in the terms set up by the novel represents a conservative sexual politics. He has no redeeming features in a first-person narrative that precludes the opportunity of hearing his side of the story. According to the version that the son pieces together from the deserted mother, the father is the kind of man who does not take his paternal responsibilities seriously. Thus the father and the mother occupy the opposite poles of the moral and ideological landscape of the novel.

It is important to underline the fact that much as the surface structure of the text suggests that villainy is a personality attribute which the father shares with all the other members of his gender except the hero, the manner in which the notion of villainy is represented in relation to the opposition between the mother and the father rather reveals the extent to which the gender discursive formation which informs the narrative is interlaced with the discourse of capitalism. It is not the father's sheer absence from the mother that the son laments, nor the absence of a husband that the mother is concerned with, but rather it is his absence construed as the absence of what Pierre Bourdieu has termed *material capital* that they are protesting against.[3] Indeed, the very basis of the relationship between the father and the mother, right from the start, is grounded on her material and his sexual needs, as the following passage demonstrates: '"The people at home knew that the girl had fallen in love the moment she got there. She had more meat, fish

and groceries than the money they had given her could have paid for'" (p. 10). The juxtaposition of love and marriage, on the one hand, and goods such as groceries, on the other, firmly points to an exchange economy in which the fiction of marriage is denied the rarefied value of love as one of its properties, but is, instead and bluntly, shown to be invested with the value of commodity exchange which is predicated on the law of supply and demand. According to this law, the mother's value is reduced when she announces the news of her pregnancy; indeed she can be described as having suddenly become a liability to Supuni as the child was not part of the bargain. Furthermore, within the colonial capitalist discursive formation, the arrival of the child threatens to expose the father's *imaginary subject position*: his role as a provider of a 'white standard' of life, which wins him the affections of the peasant woman can no longer, with the arrival of the child, be adequately sustained without difficulty. It is significant that the narrator's father does not run away to another woman, but rather to another job and a better one. He follows the path travelled by many of the men Landeg White interviewed in Magomero, the path that leads to an El Dorado: the Rhodesian farms and the South African mines.[4]

However, in a narcissistic gesture, the son transfers the sense of victimisation wholly onto himself, almost casting his mother's suffering to the margins. Essentially, he sees himself as an economic victim, the son who has been denied his right to the father's wealth. In a way, it is a quest of a dispossessed son for a legitimation of his identity which will, presumably, give him the right of access to his father's property. The son has been socialised to represent the concept of 'mother' as a signification of material deficiency, a presence that is essentially an absence of wealth. The mother is, in essence, alienated from entering the domain of meaningful relations of production; she is *non-labour* in relation to the new capitalist dispensation which has so radically transformed the notion of labour that woman's labour which had an important role in the traditional social formation is hereby pushed to the margins of significant social relations of production. The mother's attitude to herself and to her labour does also reflect a defeatist position. The penetration of society by money-based values is never questioned; what the mother represents is a *subjectivity*, that merely reflects the values of a dominant ideology. She has come to attribute the unequal access to wealth between men and women to innate differences, thus leaving very little room for her own intervention in the existing discourse of gender.[5] The mother is thus articulating and reproducing a gender ideology which firmly places the responsibility of meeting the material needs of the family on the male members of the household. Her collusion with an ideology that undermines her freedom is indicative of that ideological

practice that Louis Althusser, in a broader theoretical context, has termed the *interpellation of the subject by authority*, that is, the way in which social institutions such as the family or school inculcate in us ideas and beliefs which represent our subject positions as aspects of timeless structures outside history and social manipulation.[6]

Having been made to see himself as the victim of his father's withdrawal of economic privilege, the son sets out to redress the situation through economic vengeance. The hero comes to see the father as the *persecutor* who must be tracked down and punished. However, in the course of pursuing the *persecutor*, the *victim* himself turns into a *persecutor* and the *persecutor* into a *victim*. In addition to being a *persecutor*, the hero is a *rescuer*. His vengeance against the father is not just for himself, but also for the deserted mother, for in the masculine frame of the text only the son can avenge the mother's plight. The object of the mission thus becomes double edged: it is personal as much as it is public. At every point in the novel, the hero's role as a defender of women is emphasised, and the means by which he manages to defend them are essentially economic. He needs to be financially better than the men who have victimised women in order to fight back successfully. The hero pursues his victim to South Africa and once there, he sets about equipping himself for the denouement, the moment when the son will confront the father, not from a position of weakness, that of victim, but rather from a position of strength. It becomes clear that the site of the contest is going to be the financial difference between the two characters: "'If he returned home thinking that he was going to a rich son, he would really be hurt if, on arrival, I told him that on account of what he had done to mother and I - especially mother - we had to say goodbye'" (p. 414).

The final confrontation between father and son at the airport lays bare the underlying power relations which constitute both femininity and masculinity in the novel. One can observe three discourses at work: that of class, that of gender and that of family. The father who has just been released from prison represents the precarious nature of the Malawian proletariat whose wealth is dependent on the continued availability of work; it is a class whose members have got to keep fighting against falling back into peasantry, the lowest socio-economic stratum. As Landeg White shows, it is a constant battle that is more often lost than won.[7] In a perceptive statement, the father unknowingly deflates the son's attempt to offer polygamy as a solution to the problem of fatherlessness. Placing the question of polygamy in the domain of the political economy, the father innocently remarks that the son has married two wives because he is rich: "'Yes, you're very rich, son. My own blood. Yes you deserve more than one wife'" (p. 432). Obviously, the

poor father cannot imagine a man of his economic class proudly indulging in polygamy. It seems clear that Kalitera's proposition is not one that everyone can participate in as it is very expensive. It is not surprising therefore that the hero has had to wait till he became rich in order to indulge in polygamy. For poor people, as Landeg White notes, it is not easy to support two wives, let alone to feed and dress and pay school fees for children, much as they might find the idea of polygamy attractive.[8] Even in the rural areas of the country, where one would expect people to keep the practice as a matter of tradition, it is increasingly declining, largely due to the fact that the new cash economy cannot allow poor people to be polygamous as they are, even without the burden of a second or third wife, caught up in what Landeg White has referred to as 'a poverty trap'.[9] What the father's statement does is to underscore the link between specific discursive practices and modes of economic production. On the other hand, the son has joined the new African elite of Blantyre, the new 'white' people whose economic security allows and grants them the privilege of indulging in cultural nostalgia. The frequent reference in the text to wealth as an attribute of a white skin is revealing of the transformation of identity that the new elite has undergone. The hero takes great pride in talking to the South African whites on equal terms because of the confidence that money and social status have brought him. However, what little self-confidence he has acquired is undermined by his insatiable need to compare himself with the South African whites who are not as well off as he is. The desire to be acknowledged as doing better than the white *Other* betrays a form of subjectivity firmly caught up in the colonial and racial modes of symbolising and valorization.

In terms of the discourse of family, the son becomes the head of the household on account of his wealth as well as of the fact that the father has forfeited his status as a result of having failed to live up to the gender ideal of his social formation. Significantly, in the choice of the punishment to be administered to the father, the mother is not consulted. She is not allowed to make her own decision as to whether or not she wants to accept her errant husband back. Clearly, the ascendancy of the son to a position of power within the nuclear family is not accompanied by an egalitarian ethos. The hero's treatment of the weak, within the family, undermines the text's attempt to present him as the source and agent of moral renewal. Yet, on the other hand, one can understand the conditions which produce the hero's attitude to power. If the power relations within the family are part of a wider discourse of authority which links the distribution of power to the control of wealth, it is not surprising that the son behaves in the way he does. If the contrast between the father and the son presents the nuclear family

as the field of contestation between the manifest patriarchal discourse and that which discloses the material base of gendered and patriarchal subjectivity, the binary oppositions between the hero and the men who impregnate the women the hero marries at the end of the novel take the same argument further into the broader sphere of public life.

Principally, the two characters, Jack Lupembe and Joe Phanga, are narrative devices which create the conditions necessary for the major event in the novel, that is, the hero's marriage to two women. If the hero is to have an opportunity to assert the social value of polygamy by intervening on behalf of fatherless children, the narrative needs some evil men who abandon women and leave children fatherless. Thus, Jack Lupembe is portrayed as someone who is interested in women so long as they do not get pregnant, but as soon as they do, he shows them the door. Writing to the hero, while he is still in South Africa, Mag reveals Lupembe's cruelty by describing how he has thrown her out of the house. As in the opposition between the father and the son, Lupembe's evil nature is depicted as a personality flaw rather than as a product of the social construction of gender and family relations in a historically determinate social formation.

The relationship between Jack Lupembe and Mag is essentially underpinned by economic values which ultimately determine the distribution of power between the two partners. When Jack Lupembe first meets the hero with Mag at Zomba plateau, he uses the fact that he has a car to great advantage. Attracted to Mag, he offers the two a lift to Mulunguzi dam and against their will he insists on offering them a lift back home. They have literally to run away from him, even hide from him. Even so, George Supuni is very impressed by the Manager's manner of dress. It would appear that it is not Supuni alone that Lupembe has made an impression on, but Mag as well. Furthermore, when Mag is at secondary school in Lilongwe, Supuni's conspicuous consumption is once again used as a means of enticing her.

It would be wrong to represent Mag simply as a victim of male guile. Mag is shown throughout the novel as having understood the language of gender relations used in this particular social formation. She sees herself as a helpless victim of male cunning and accepts her fate as part of a natural order of things in relation to Lupembe but behaves differently towards George Supuni. In contrast to her role in her relationship with Jack Lupembe, in her relationship with George Supuni, Mag is presented as the more aggressive and daring of the partners. She is even the one who proposes marriage to the hero, contrary to tradition. One can surmise, following the paramount role capital is shown to play, in the text, in privileging one partner over another within matrimonial and romantic relationships, that perhaps in Mag's 'manly' attitude to-

wards the hero, we have an instance of male attributes being given to a woman because of the economic advantage she has over the male partner. Mag comes from a family that is financially better off than the hero's and as a result she helps the hero by providing him with blankets and pocket money. It is possible that the economic advantage she has over the hero shapes her attitude to him and gives her a space in which she can act out the masculine role. On the other hand, confronted with a man who is a class above her such as Jack Lupembe, she must play the traditional role of a woman. Indeed, it can be argued that the reason the hero has to wait to marry Mag till he is rich and Mag is with child by another man is to regain the power over her which he has lost as a teenage sweetheart. In a sense, when the hero finally marries Mag, he becomes a Jack Lupembe, imposing his will on those over whom he wields economic power, on those who have no other means of social mobility except by identifying themselves with those who have the means to power.

It may also be argued that the representation of Mag as aggressive and George Supuni as passive contributes towards the narcissistic representation of the hero's *masculine mystique*: he, unlike Jack Lupembe, does not need to work hard at attracting women. The only form of labour the hero is allowed is the redemption of women and their fatherless children from men who have failed to live up to the privileged gender ideal. Thus both Mag's autonomy in her relationship with George and her complicity with the dominant discourse of gender in her relationship with Jack Lupembe are instruments of the ideological project of the novel which presents polygamy as the incontestable solution to gender difference and social inequality.

Philanthropy as a guise for exploitation becomes an important factor in the relationship between Sue and Joe Phanga, a relationship which, like that between Jack Lupembe and Mag, is meant to be taken as a contrast with the hero's supposedly good treatment of women. Joe Phanga, like Jack Lupembe, uses economic privilege in his relationship with women. He is meant to represent the apotheosis of callous cunning. To begin with Joe takes advantage of the fact that he has a car and Sue does not. He offers her lifts to and from work every morning. After a week, he takes her out to a drive-in cinema to watch 'The Spy Who Came in from the Cold', a significant title in the light of the foxy plan Joe has up his sleeve. He arranges with a friend to turn up while they are at the cinema and ask Joe to help with his car which is supposed to have broken down a few miles outside Blantyre. When Joe and Sue reach the place he tells her that his car has run out of petrol and that petrol stations do not open at night. His friend's car is purportedly also out of petrol. Sue is forced into spending the night with

Joe. The relationship between Sue and Joe continues until she falls pregnant and he tells her that in fact he is married and his wife is about to come back from Germany where she is studying medicine. The contrast between Joe and the hero in terms of attitudes to women seems indisputable when one compares Joe's treatment of Sue with the rescue operation that George Supuni mounts to save her from committing suicide.

However, when one takes into account George's abandonment of Sue as soon as they have arrived in Malawi, the hero's own attitude towards women is not entirely blameless. Having lost interest in Sue on account of having met up with Mag again, he starts ill-treating her in order to drive her away without seeming to. He tells us:

> 'My intention was to gradually annoy her till she begun to lose her temper. After that she would realise that trying to stick would only mean more and more pain. At that point, if there happened to be someone else chasing her, which I knew there would be, because of her sausage like body, she would go to him.' (p. 318)

Later he deserts her by moving house while she is away. Considering that he has brought her all the way from South Africa and that she has no relations in Malawi, he cannot be seen as different from Joe. The fact that he rescues her from a suicide attempt and that he later marries her for the sake of the child she is carrying does not minimise his irresponsible behaviour. In a sense, one suspects that he is the one who is to blame for Sue's falling into Joe's hands as it is he, the hero, who puts Sue in a desperate position by abandoning her without any qualms. Here we are confronted with a significant area of blindness in the text, the production of an ideological excess that the narrative cannot account for without foregrounding its moral contradictions. The narrative need to have Sue in a position where she is pregnant and therefore in need of rescue by the hero, overrides the attempt to present the hero as the most upright of all the male characters in the novel.

The narrative fissure noted above is symptomatic of a wrong reading by the hero of his subject position in his social formation; he has been rather quick to cast a stone at other men without examining his own gender subjectivity. The hero's radical views on the welfare of children do not extend to the children's mothers. The most telling evidence of the attitude can be read from the way he *images* women. By describing Sue as possessing a 'sausage like body', the hero reveals the extent to which, despite the text's attempt to construct him as someone who *counter-identifies* with the dominant masculine discourse, his identity is typical of a male who has been thoroughly socialised in the language of his gender. Furthermore, when George Supuni is in South Africa he

uncritically approves of and appropriates the language of Afrikaner patriarchy without stopping even for a minute to reflect on its relationship with his moral and social vision. The reason he does not protest is because his attitude is not different from that of Pet Stoffel. The sexist conversation between Supuni and his boss Stoffel aptly demonstrates that, despite the racial barrier and cultural difference between the two characters, their attitudes to women are very similar:

> 'You are going to have a lot of fun. That girl is an Angel.' It was a whiteman speaking highly of a black girl. 'Love is one hundred percent sausage. At the club each of us has admitted it before our wives that if it hadn't been for the Immorality Act, we would be tearing each other over that girl.'

The hero's conformity with the discourse of male territoriality apart, his participation in a discursive practice that reduces women to a culinary metonymic representation does suggest that though he has set himself up as a defender of women, he is still caught up in the very rhetorical representations that legitimize the situation from which he wishes to protect them.

The degree to which the hero's mission is compromised by taking on board the dominant mode of rhetorical representations of gender is best illustrated by his speech in which he criticises the whiteman for having replaced polygamy with a marriage practice which does not protect the child adequately. He further argues that monogamy ignores the idea that 'boys will be boys'. Finally, he attributes the prevalence of polygamy to the social pressure put on men who do not wish to participate in the practice. Thus the ease with which our radical hero appropriates terms from what is essentially a masculine form of discourse is grounded in his support of a gender ideology which takes gender difference as God-given.

His argument that monogamy is unnatural provides the best example of how a humanistic ideological position, with its insistence on the notion of an essential human nature, can be used to underwrite and legitimize oppressive social relations. It is equally significant that the moment the hero contradicts his humanist stance, by acknowledging the role of history, he offers a version of pre-colonial history which supports the form of matrimonial practice that he has already *privileged*. The hero also appeals to cultural nationalism: 'before the whiteman came our people married more than one wife.' By appealing to nationalistic sentiments, he collapses gender difference into a collective identity within which gender difference is strategically obliterated in the service of male hegemony. On the whole, the contradictions in the project of the novel reveal the manner in which the text elides discourses which threaten its privileged ideological stance. However, the

most significant ideological elision in the novel is the transfer of the problem of fatherlessness from the domain of the political economy of gender to that of patriarchal philanthropy.

In concluding the paper, I wish to make some general observations on the problems raised by the text. First the contradictions which I have located in the text show us that a project that is radical in one respect might be found to be conservative in others. We have seen how the relentless attempt to protect the child is achieved at the expense of the mother. Secondly, we have seen how both women and men as subjects constituted by specific gender ideologies co-operate in the oppression of women, which goes to show the complexity of gendered subjectivity, and the inadequacy of some of the Feminist positions which, by transferring questions of gender ideology from culture to biology, have ended up producing a simple and false antagonism between male and female identity, which has, sometimes, alienated those men who have wanted to make a contribution towards the emancipation of women.[10] Male dominance is not a matter of biology, but rather of culture. That is why there is hope.

NOTES

1. The following are among the major publications by Aubrey Kalitera: *A Taste of Business* (Nairobi: Heinemann East Africa, 1976); *Why Father Why* (Blantyre: Pen Power Books, 1982); *Mother Why Mother* (Blantyre: Pen Power Books, 1983); *Why Son Why* (Blantyre: Pen Power Books, 1983); *Fate* (Blantyre: Pen Power Books, 1984); *To Felix With Love* (Short Stories) (Blantyre: Pen Power Books, 1984); *She Died in My Bed* (Short Stories) (Blantyre: Pen Power Books, 1984).
2. Antonio Gramsci cited by Janet Batsleer and others, *Rewriting English: Cultural Politics of Gender and Class* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), p. 79.
3. Pierre Bourdieu makes a distinction between that part of the bourgeoisie that is concerned with the domain of material production and the section which produces cultural capital. See his essay, 'Symbolic Power' in D. Gleeson (ed.), *Identity and Structure: Issues in the Sociology of Education* (London: Nafferton Books, 1977), p. 15.
4. Malawi has historically supplied labour to the mines and farms of Zimbabwe, Zambia and South Africa. See Landeg White, *Magomero: A Portrait of An African Village* (Cambridge: University Press, 1987).
5. This is a good example of *identification* with dominant ideology.
6. The notion of 'subjectivity' I employ in this paper is based on the work of Louis Althusser, particularly his essay, 'Ideology and Ideological Apparatuses' in *Lenin and Other Essays* (London: New Left Books, 1971).
7. Landeg White, op. cit., pp. 220-251.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., p. 232.

10. I have in mind the kind of Feminist position exemplified by certain tendencies within the Feminist position identified by Iris Young as *gynocentric*. To a certain extent, Julia Kristeva's notion of the *chora* or female linguistic principle falls within this kind of essentialist representation of gender difference. For a critique of the approach, see Ania Loomba, *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1989), pp. 23-25. I must acknowledge how much the paper benefited from the reception it received from the participants at the '1989 Research in Progress Conference' organised by the Centre of Southern African Studies, University of York, United Kingdom. Thanks to Angela Smith, John Drakakis, John MacCracken, Catriona Tocher, Mary Stevens and Evelyn Nkalubo for their invaluable comments on the earlier drafts of the paper and to Robin Law in whose home this version was written.