

BOOK REVIEW

**CRACKING KNUCKLES: THE FAILURE OF
MORAL VISION in James Ng'ombe's
Sugarcane with Salt (London: Longman
Group U.K. Ltd., 1989) 124 pages, Price MK 30**

THE BEEN-TO IN HIS SOCIETY

Sugarcane with Salt falls into the "been-to" category. Dr. Khumbo Dala comes back to Malawi after being away for eight years for medical training in the United Kingdom. He has done what other been-tos have done before him: forgotten his childhood sweetheart, gone out and lived with a white girl, returned home and gone out with another girl till his white girl follows him home and continues to cohabit with him. He returns home to find his parents divorced, his childhood sweetheart married to his younger brother and his younger brother and mother at the centre of drug trafficking motel managing. The larger society is also involved in most of the activities in which Dr. Khumbo Dala is enmeshed as soon as he gets off the international airport in Lilongwe: seduction, infidelities, corruption and inefficiency in high and low places.

The only difference between this been-to story and other novels of this type is that in most cases the central hero or at least someone in the story tries to right the wrongs of the society. Dr. Khumbo Dala whose close relatives, brother and mother, are heading the local drug ring, does not actively seek to better those around him although he is aware of the widespread corruption involving high-ranking police officers and government officials. Furthermore he is not even aware of his own capacity for corruption, busy as he is with his own infidelities, seduction and deception of the women he comes into contact with. The novel ends with Dr. Khumbo Dala assuming responsibility for his widowed sister-in-law who happens to be his childhood sweetheart with promises of more illicit affairs in future. In this again the society is an accomplice since after the funeral ceremony the discussion centers on the fact that Dr. Khumbo Dala must protect his dead brother's wife and son. In fact, he has to call them his wife and son as custom demands.

Usually, in such novels, it is left to the women or at least a representative to be the upholders of the positive values of the society. In this novel, however, none is depicted as crusader of traditional values and morals, or any standards, local or borrowed. Khumbo's mother, who could have been a kind of earth-mother, is already portrayed as an evil woman: growing and trading drugs locally and abroad. Her Gonapano motel is not above being suspected of trading flesh wares, too. Before this she had given birth to an illegitimate white boy hence the divorce. Grace Ndele, the primary school teacher, is all too happy to jump into bed with the been-to in spite of being engaged to another man. The affair results in her becoming pregnant and her deciding to deceive her fiance that he was responsible. Chimwemwe Musa, Khumbo's childhood sweetheart, now his brother's widow, allows herself (and her son) to be inherited (along with the motel), perpetuating adultery and infidelity. Sue Kelly, the white girl who had willingly cohabited with Dr. Khumbo Dala in England and in Malawi, has no moral centre. The reader does not know whether her cohabitation is due to western woman's emancipation or helplessness, or simply a refusal to be committed to matrimony. She does not or is not allowed to articulate any views, social or political. None of the women is allowed to have any strong views about any issue, even concerning their domestic or emotional lives.

If Dr. Khumbo Dala and his women are not righters of wrongs, the reader is tempted to fall back upon the perpetrators of the worst wrongs: the men. Billy Dala is discarded immediately: he and his mother are convicted drug traffickers, and he finally dies in prison (suicide or homicide? It is not revealed). Pempho, the headmaster who could have been a beacon in the village society is a pub hopper, patronising bargirls and becoming a pimp with a difference: he brings young men to Grace Ndele, hoping she will fall for one of them, which she does in the end, only it happens to be Dr. Khumbo Dala again. Mr. Dala, the district commissioner, is too inarticulate to be the moral centre of the novel. Too many things have happened to him: his wife gave birth to a white child, Billy, his son, is convicted of drug trafficking, Khumbo, his other son, cohabits with several women. He has no tongue to reveal anything, even his grievances. Thus, not even in the men can one hope to find the rallying point of moral values.

TAINED MORALITY

If sugarcane with salt is taken to be the central theme of the novel, it suggests that the sweetness of life, love, comfort, stability, humanity, etc can only be enjoyed with the sourness of infidelities, crime and injustices for every character, major or minor alike. If this is the central message then the future of the society is bleak, indeed, since there is no one around to save it from the bitterness of the wrongs perpetrated by man upon man.

Sugarcane with salt itself is the central image of the story. The image occurs several times in different parts as the narrative progresses. The reader first meets it in a flashback to Khumbo Dala's childhood: how he loved chewing cane in the village during his school vacations. The narrative is interspersed with Khumbo Dala's preoccupation with sugarcane in his thoughts or his hands or mouth. In one of the early scenes in the village Khumbo the townboy comes to realise that sugarcane is not sweet throughout the year. During certain seasons it tastes salty. Later, when the main character is on his way to Nkhota Kota on his return from England, he interrupts his journey to buy a piece and renew his childhood pleasure. One interesting scene has Dr. Khumbo Dala on a date with Grace Ndele stopping the car to steal sugarcane from the Dwangwa plantations, against all regulations.

It is in this final scene of stealing sugarcane that the image symbolizes Dr. Khumbo Dala's corruptibility. Hitherto the image only suggested how the sweetness could be mixed with salt during the off-season. It also carried the idea of tainting the pure taste. Khumbo as a youth learnt of this phenomenon from sugarcane he had been given by his grandfather. However the grandfather had to "break regulations" to give Khumbo his heart's desire. In other words, it was not customary to cut and eat sugarcane in between times. It was only at Khumbo's insistence that the grandfather permitted it. Corruptibility begins to set in at this stage, however imperceptibly. It becomes perceptible when the adult Khumbo stops his car, steps out, goes into the plantation garden, breaks a stalk and chews it on the spot, against the estate owner's regulations. It becomes rampant when the watchman, afraid of the respectable thief and punishment from the bosses for letting it happen, asks Khumbo to hide the evidence of the crime. Khumbo gives the watchman money as payment for keeping quiet, i.e. hush money.

CRACKING KNUCKLES AND SELF DECEPTION

Another image that characterises Dr. Khumbo Dala is cracking knuckles. In more than seven instances he finds the opportunity to crack his knuckles. In some of them the action is innocent enough: "He cracked his knuckles, something he enjoyed" (p. 8). In others, it is out of frustration, as when the Training Office could not find his file to employ him on his return from England. In yet others it symbolises strong emotions: "Anger welled up inside him as he locked his ten fingers and cracked them several times over" (p. 98). "... the tremor in his voice taking him by surprise. His ten fingers were locked and they cracked in protest against the stifling evening revelations" (p. 39). Over all the action is associated with the turmoil that's going on in and out as he tries not only to sort out things in his mind but also to control the events around him. When this happens the image comes with furrowed brows as in "Khumbo cracked and locked his knuckles while biting his lower lip. The furrows were back on his forehead" (p. 15).

The furrows on Khumbo Dala's forehead signify not only the inner disturbance but also his inability to make sense out of what is happening around him: why everyone is secretive about his parents, why Billy cannot tell him about his wife, why Billy looks prosperous (owns trucks) but goes around in a jalopy, where his mother and sisters were, why his civil service file cannot be found, why sugarcane tastes so salty sometimes. Although "in moments of concentration his forehead was always invaded by deep furrows" (p. 14), Dr. Khumbo Dala is either unable to think deeply or cannot sustain probing.

It is suggested that Dr. Khumbo Dala's inability to think deeply is part of his inner weakness as a man. His weakness for women is obvious and external but his indecisiveness over crucial matters is symptomatic of lack of inner strength. So the furrows on his forehead are also indicative of puzzlement over himself and others. In fact, the furrows are verbalised several times with the questions "where did I go wrong?" (p. 71 and p. 92). The following passage exemplifies the point.

Khumbo waited for more surprises, powerless to control their effect on his mind. His hand automatically went up to scratch his head. The furrowing of the forehead no longer signified anger with Mai Nabanda, but his loss of direction (p. 87).

The operative expressions are "powerless to control" and "loss of direction," for throughout the story Dr. Khumbo Dala seems to be other-directed or people and events seem to control him, not the other way round. His father tells him not to marry Chimwemwe, his childhood sweetheart because she is a Moslem, he cuts off relations; Sue cohabits with him refusing to legitimise their relationship, he complies; the headmaster leads him to Grace, he makes her pregnant. Billy dies in prison, the society instructs him to inherit his brother's wife, son and motel, he submits, in spite of Sue, his fiancée. He tries futilely to rebel:

As he returned into Area 18 his mind was clearer. Nobody, not even Grace nor Sue nor Mai Nabanda for that matter, was going to control his destination. Never again would he let his fate be decided by other people, Baba, Sue, or even those yet to be born. He was a man in control of his fate, and that resolution gave him the much needed respite as he prepared himself for the forthcoming **kusesa bwalo**. (p. 108).

All these resolutions are shattered as the story progresses, his sense of control is slowly stripped off him by the people and events around him. Throughout and till the end he keeps reminding himself: "He had to remain in control" (p. 120).

Control and lack or loss of control is brought in also in the image of a ship going through a turbulent sea. While the relatives are deciding he should inherit his brother's wife and son "the stars in his eyes flashed crazily as he made efforts to keep steady at the helm of his destiny" (p. 114). The arguments rage around him and he reminds himself again "He must keep a cool head until the ship had sailed through the stormy waters" (p. 115). The turmoil in his mind matches the crazy events around him as it becomes clear that he was going to be forced to accept inheriting his brother's wife. He latches onto Sue as his escape route: that he was married already. With this he thinks he has controlled the situation: "He was still at the helm and negotiating the last mile of the storm" (p. 116). But he knows that he was "very much playing the expediency game" (p. 117).

Dr. Khumbo Dala is very adept at self-deception. Although, by profession he should have great clarity of vision he is depicted as a character prone to myopia, schizophrenia, and hallucination. One powerful image to demonstrate his distorted vision occurs when he has just picked up Sue from the airport and he has to sort out what is going to happen to his domestic life.

He sat in the car and allowed his eyes to be deceived by the mirages on the tarmac, his mind grappling with the implication of Sue's counter question. Could she really be coming to stay? His concentration on the mirage soon calmed his nerves, his racing blood returned to its normal pace, and his mind stopped seeing visions (p. 90).

The man permits fantasies to become real and escapes into fantasies for therapy, but when he wakes up the situation has not changed. Well, not much. However, it is not the dreamer who has effected any changes. The changes have been effected by others and he still has to cope with the changed reality which is the real situation he has to live in with his eyes wide open.

The woman closest to Dr. Khumbo Dala diagnoses his central problems. In spite of his womanising, he lacks manliness. When given Chimwenwe to look after he procrastinates, giving Sue as his excuse. Mai Nabanda, his mother, calls him a "coward ... just like his father" (p. 116). Later, she confronts him again: "You have a second chance to prove yourself a man" (p. 118) by looking after his deceased brother's family and business. In the end he takes her advice and fulfills his society's sense of obligations. However, his taking on these responsibilities is still what other people drove him to do. And Sue is still there cohabiting with him as sure as he is going to cohabit with his brother's widow.

SUPERFICIAL DESCRIPTIONS

As indicated earlier, this is a much used formula of the been-to and how he copes with himself and his society after his re-entry. The usual psychological traumas of re-orientation are not really there, because the character is not much given to self-questioning, and deeper exploration of what the whole experience means to him. The sociological implications do not produce much conflict too because the society the character moves in is not depicted vividly or richly. It is as if the eight years Dr. Khumbo Dala was away were spent just a few miles away in another African country not dissimilar enough from Malawi to produce any drastic changes internally and externally.

This minimal depiction of psychological and sociological conflict is reflected also in the matter of relationships. Dr. Khumbo Dala's changes of female partners are made casually without qualms, without reflection, without exploration on the implications for the self and the society. Childhood sweethearts are dropped as if they did

not matter; they are resumed as if they were taken for granted. The society does not question but, in actual fact, actively encourages the takeover. Casual friendships between the opposite sex are taken as a matter of course, as if expected of any man or woman (if they did not, they would be accused of abnormality). They are also discarded without any conscience, if not with relief, not explored to their emotional conclusions. The fact that Sue, a white girl, comes to join Dr. Khumbo Dala in Malawi does not seem to cause a sensation (except among primary school pupils); it is not even discussed by father and son, or mother and son, yet Mr. Dala had strongly advised his son not to marry Chimwemwe who was a Moslem and Malawian. The same Moslem Chimwemwe was allowed to marry Billy, the younger brother of the same Khumbo.

Such inconsistencies are symptomatic of the characters and their depiction. Some leave several questions unanswered: how did Mrs. Dala come to have a white child in the first place, for her marriage to end in divorce? What extenuating circumstances were there, if any? How did she and Billy get involved in drug trafficking if she was well provided for by her lover? How come Grace and Khumbo could enter in and out of their affair so easily? How is Grace going to explain her pregnancy to her fiancé? How come Dr. Khumbo Dala, a medical man, could be so surprised that Grace became pregnant by him? Did they not discuss precautions in all their meetings? If Dr. Khumbo Dala is going to protect his brother's widow and son is he also going to be responsible for his child by Grace? Does Sue have any living parents (or relatives)? What do they think of intermarriages? How is Sue coping with the cultural shock? Or doesn't she have any, like Khumbo on his return?

Most of these questions have been raised because the story lacks very important details in terms of characterisation and relationships, plot and setting, and even theme. We do not see Dr. Khumbo Dala and Sue engaged in a genuine discussion of their situation, we lack significant statements on the moral/amoral stand taken by them in life. We need some exploration of the present and past of Mr. and Mrs. Dala to explain the whys of the plight of Mrs. Dala and Billy their son, and even Khumbo's present behaviour.

The author hurries over the physical characteristics of most of the characters. Perhaps we can visualise Billy, and his huge stature or Baba Dala's aging features. But what did Sue or Chimwemwe really look like? The main character, does not fill the page with his living physical presence.

The need for significant detail is felt also in terms of the setting. Although the author can describe the coming of the first rains and the activities surrounding it; although the mourners at Billy's funeral, wave after wave of them, can be described albeit in a humorous manner in some places, the author misses the opportunity for earthing his characters in the background around them. Take, for example, the matter of meals. We are not told what Dr. Khumbo Dala's first meal was at Sam's place or later at the Capital Hotel, only Carlsberg green and the Danish company are dwelt upon with almost loving care. What was the welcome party, the crowd, the drinks, the dancing really like? When he is denied help on the way to Nkhota Kota, and having to get the water for the radiator from the river himself, what was it really like for him to toil up and down the banks, what container did he use? Did he get wet at all doing it? Did he sweat? Were there any mocking or curious passers-by? These details add to the human dimensions of the characters, and flesh to the story.

THE LANGUAGE OF FOLKLORE

The style of the story has been discussed at the level of imagery and symbol. Here we can briefly discuss some of the expressions used in the authorial descriptions. In dialogue, of course, characters can be allowed to use as many cliches or original turns of speech as desired. In description, especially in a non-native language, one has to be careful that the language is fresh. The author was aware of this, of course, as demonstrated by the different styles used. There are vernacular Chichewa terms or expressions (some are translated in the text, others in the glossary at the end of the book) including prefixation for respect (e.g. a Chairman). Some are reworked English cliches like "if a pin had dropped it would have exploded somebody's eardrums" (p. 116) or "This man had swallowed the bait and the hook and Sue had come out the winner" (p. 106) which are mixed metaphors, even taken in context. Others are taken from folklore. An interesting one is

Khumbo was genuinely lost - as lost as the needle which mother chicken is still looking for in the sand as she scratches and pecks at the soil, scratching and pecking in spite of the decree from the oracle that the needle was doomed to eternal darkness inside the all-conquering earth (p. 8).

This extended simile is quite startling in the context and fits into the texture of the story. There is another extended folkstory metaphor towards the end of the story, however, which is not so well integrated. This is the story of the two childless sisters who have to be kind to an ugly old woman if they want to have a beautiful child. One sister is not kind and gets an ugly one, the other one is kind and gets a well-deserved attractive child (p. 91). The metaphor does not fit because, for one thing, it is too long to take in a reader's stride (although it is summarised in three paragraphs). For another, it is applied to Sue, a stranger to this indigenous love. There is a clash of cultures and characters since she did not know this particular story herself, although the story in this section is told from her point of view. Whereas the other metaphors of sugarcane and cracking knuckles can be said to be organic, this one is not.

Another image that seems to be contrived is that of heat (fire) and sex. Dr. Khumbo Dala's progress from Lilongwe to Nkhota Kota is filled with the anxieties of whether or not the old car will make it. The car overheats several times along the way, forcing the driver to stop to allow the engine to cool. The climax comes when Dr. Khumbo Dala is with Grace going to the sugarcane plantation. The radiator smokes or steams forcing Grace to shout "fire". While they wait to let the engine cool, they also let loose their own pent up emotions in the car. After that having sex with each other becomes routine, if not easier. The problem with the overheating also seems to have been rectified. It is not mentioned anymore afterwards.

Perhaps, in the final analysis, the reviewer is being too hard on what was not meant to be a serious novel. However, serious themes are being touched upon here which demanded committed and careful handling. Perhaps the reviewer is castigating the author for external reasons: there has not been a serious novel for a long time, and readers had expected this to be one of the lasting ones. This could be the reviewer's fault, of course, expecting what the author never intended. Nevertheless, the review has attempted to evaluate the story as it was designed and the reviewer has remained close to the story throughout without making any external references. In the end, **Sugarcane with Salt** remains what it was meant to be: light reading.

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