

Images of women: Prostitutes and bad/unworthy women in Lughano Mwangwegho's poetry

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Abstract

The notion of prostitution in Malawian literature has been either avoided or misrepresented. The misrepresentation has mainly stemmed from conservative and patriarchal forces which have guided theory and practice in Malawi and many parts of Africa. Women have mostly been viewed in binary terms as either good or bad, constructive or destructive, civilised or backward. Only recently, there has been a change in approach to the subject of prostitution caused by the emergence of feminism and human rights bodies. Even though this change is moving towards recognition of the prostitute body as autonomous, there are still remnants of patriarchal forces that want to maintain or preserve the peripheral position of the prostitute body in Malawian literature. Apart from this prostitute body, another notion of a bad/unworthy woman has been rarely researched. It is mainly confused or included in the same bracket of prostitution. This paper dwells on these two bodies and how they have been (mis)represented in selected poems of Lughano Mwangwegho's *Echoes of a Whisper*. The paper leans on sexuality by focusing on Josephine Donovan's images of a woman in *Beyond the Net: Feminist Criticism as a Moral Criticism*. It also dwells on the notion of power relations expounded by Sylvia Tamale.

Keywords:

Prostitution,
Patriarchy,
Literature,
Power,
Feminism,
Malawi

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1.0 Introduction

Prostitution in Malawi and Malawian literature has long been addressed within narratives of perversion and irrelevance. There have been a variety of (mis) representations of the prostitute's body in Malawian literature as authors

and poets try to reflect different realities in their societies. This paper explores the representation of prostitutes and bad/unworthy women in selected poems from Lughano Mwangwego's *Echoes of a Whisper*. It mainly focuses on different portrayals Mwangwego accords the female prostitute's body and the unworthy woman, which I have distinguished later on. The paper leans on sexuality in the context of power relations within a society. It mainly focuses on the notion of images of women as proposed by Josephine Donovan in *Beyond the Net: Feminist Criticism as a Moral Criticism*. Sylvia Tamale argues that sexuality is a product of culture and society and is crucial in maintaining power relations within a community (Tamale, 2011, p.16). In the introduction of *African Sexualities: A Reader*, Tamale (2011) argues that "although sexuality might represent notions of pleasure and the continuity of humanity itself, the term conjures up discussions about sources of oppression and violence" (p.1). Donovan (1988), on the other hand, writes that

much of [...] literature depends upon a series of fixed images of women, stereotypes... The objectified images have things in common; however, they define the woman insofar as she relates to, serves, or thwarts the interests of men...Female stereotypes often symbolise either the spiritual or the material, good or evil (p.266).

Despite writing about images of women from a Western perspective, Donovan's idea is very relevant and key to this study because, as this paper shows, such images are equally used in Africa to maintain power relations in the binary existence of man/woman and evil/good.

With all its complexities, sexuality, especially in the African society, has often been subjected to public scrutiny by patriarchal, religious and social forces to regulate its manifestation in public. This is the case in Malawian society in particular. The result is that there are only a few normative ways of expressing one's sexuality in Malawian society and beyond, mainly for women who, according to the conservative nature of the nation, primarily try to maintain their 'good image' ascribed to them by the society. In short, women face increased surveillance in the performance of their sexualities than men.

In Malawi, a patriarchal society, “the subordinate position that women occupy” (Ngwira, 2017, p.95) negatively affects the expression of their sexuality. In addition, women are often under surveillance to conform to what is known as “proper womanhood” (Mtenje, 2017b, p.158). These expectations affect their self-expression as they try to avoid being labelled deviants.

Commenting on the expression of sexuality in Malawi, Asante Mtenje argues that “despite some shifts in contemporary understandings of gender and sexuality, in patriarchal societies, sexuality is still widely considered a tool to control women’s capabilities and mobility” (Mtenje, 2017c, p.26). In the present era, there has been a rise in movements, organisations and policies which promote women’s rights in relation to gender and sexuality. However, much of such an attempt is in theory because, in practice, patriarchal forces still hold a grip on the sexuality of women, as per Mtenje’s observation (2017b). This paper examines how patriarchy tries to maintain the suppression of female sexuality through literary production.

Literary production in Malawi offers a unique window to examine the expression and repression of sexualities, mainly female sexualities. This is because patriarchy calls for strict conformity of female bodies to specific ways of performing their sexuality to maintain ‘good’ and acceptable images. I argue that the bodies of female prostitutes and bad/unworthy women in Mwangwego’s poetry try to preserve the hetero-normative order of patriarchy in trying to legitimise the old age binary existence of men/women and good/evil. Mwangwego’s poetry is an example of how literary production exists as a tool to strengthen societal prejudice regarding the expression or performance of female sexuality in a patriarchal society.

The question of a woman’s place in society has been contested for quite a long time in, but not limited to, religious, sociological and literary circles. Kwatsha (2015) argues that the “[...] portrayal of women characters is part of a debate that translates itself to the contemporary everyday philosophical, social theory” (Kwatsha, 2015, p.1), and it continues to be “assessed and reassessed” (Ogot, 1976, p.22). Religious and patriarchal societies place women as second class, or to use Simone de Beauvoir’s term, the second sex, for various reasons which validate their

claims. Adherents of Christianity, for example, drawing from the Bible, superimpose men over women because Eve was made from “Adam’s supernumerary bone” (De Beauvoir, 1949, p.25). Patriarchal forces expect women to be subservient while carrying the burden of doing household chores, giving birth and raising children.

The woman who plays well the function of ‘second sex’ is rewarded with praise and applause. Conversely, deviating from the above earns a female body judgement and expulsion from society. This is so because, as argues Tamale (2004; 2013):

regulating and controlling women’s sexuality [...] is central to the survival of patriarchy [...]. It represents an essential and necessary way of instituting and maintaining the domesticity of African women, with the link between women’s sexuality and domesticity manifested in the regulation and censoring of women’s reproductive capacity, behaviour, movements, dress, and appearance, etc. (p. 16).

Women are thus given a specific way of existence if they want to survive in a patriarchal society. Such a way of life has influenced the representation of women in Malawian literary imaginaries. As Sagawa (cited in Mtenje, 2017a) argues, there has almost always existed a binarism 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.

As much as there is that ‘Madonna versus whore’ literary representation of the female body in Malawian literature, for a long the female body (in its entirety) has been side-lined as most of the texts have been produced by people; both men and women, embedded in patriarchy and religion (Chiponda and Wassermann, 2016). Only recently, with the rise of African feminism, have we seen the female body receive recognition in African literature. However, against the effort of many writers, activists and politicians to place the female body on the right footing with that of the male, I argue that some contemporary literary pieces in Malawi still push women into the marginalised section of the society. Such pieces, as those

under study here, aim to propagate the notion that women are evil to maintain the power relations that have existed for a long time in favour of men.

A prostitute, in simplest terms, is a person with multiple sexual partners. According to Wasosa (2011), “the term prostitute refers to a woman who has multiple sexual partners in exchange for money and other material benefits” (p.25). A prostitute, in most cases, is not married and is primarily found in drinking joints, bars and rest houses. On the other hand, I define unworthy woman as a married woman who does things contrary to the expected norm of society. If given a womanhood test per Malawian patriarchal society’s standards, both would miserably fail and consequently be labelled evil women. In other words, the prostitute and the unworthy woman fail to fulfil normative feminine obligations that patriarchal societies ascribe to a woman.

In the age of HIV, the prostitute and the unworthy woman are seen as threats to civilisation and are therefore cast as harbingers of diseases (Ngwira, 2017; Mtenje, 2017b) and vessels for moral denigration (Lipenga, 2019; Senkoro, 1979). Anderson notes that “Malawi is [...] one of the countries hardest hit by HIV” (Anderson, 2012, p.268), and it is the female body, mainly the prostitute, that is blamed for transmitting the virus to male counterparts. Ngwira also notes that “[it] is the tendency by society to blame for infection on women, which often comes with degrading images of women and their bodies” (Ngwira, 2017, p.96).

In his study of the prostitute’s body in Malawian poetry, Lipenga argues that some Malawian poets “seek to expose the prostitute’s humanity, in opposition to the overriding denigration as a harbinger of disease and immorality” (Lipenga, 2017, p.1). On the contrary, I argue that Mwangwegho’s poetry, under study here, removes the humanity of the prostitute and the ‘unworthy woman’ by placing them at the periphery of the Malawian patriarchal society and blaming them for moral denigration, inhumanity and transmission of HIV.

It is a known fact that there are men who have multiple sexual partners, but such men are not labelled as prostitutes. Of interest again is how the term ‘male

prostitute' misses out in our everyday discourse. This is so because prostitution is a social construct placed on women to control the performance of their sexuality. Tamale (2011) similarly observes that “[t]he offences of *prostitution*, abortion and adultery curtail both women’s and men’s sexual autonomy (although [...] it is women’s autonomy that is most severely under threat” (p.3 my emphasis). Tamale (2011) again notes that “because reproduction [is] viewed as the role par excellence for women in hetero-patriarchal societies, it [becomes] the primary definer of their sexuality” (p.18). From this argument, a prostitute loses her privilege of becoming a woman (in a heterosexual society) because she mostly avoids becoming pregnant, which would curtail her business endeavours. With that, a prostitute goes even further down the pecking order on the hierarchy of womanhood.

It must be noted that the notion of a prostitute is not new in the African context and beyond. As much as I have differentiated the prostitute from the term ‘unworthy woman’, both go hand in hand to some extent – as they are all social outcasts in patriarchal societies. Rees (cited in Tamale, 2011) writes that European women (of the Victorian age) were supposed to have their “dress, behaviour and morals [...] geared to erasing any hint of sexuality. Women who acted otherwise would immediately be branded prostitutes or courtesans” (p.15). This code of sexuality got transferred into African contexts by colonialism, and thus prostitution came to be defined within those lines.

Forces within patriarchy have made sure to put women in a position where they (the women) do not make decisions. Palamuleni (2014) writes that “the ability of women to make decisions that affect their circumstances is essential for their empowerment” (p.64). Concurring with Palamuleni (2014) is Kathewera-Banda *et al.* (2005), who argue that “women have no guaranteed protection from HIV transmission since their sexual and reproductive health choices are overtaken by socio-cultural expectations and their *subordinate status* in society” (p.650, my emphasis).

The female prostitute body is also accused in a patriarchal setting of being a harbinger of diseases without stressing the male partner's role in the same. Tamale (2013) writes:

The continued total prohibition of sex work in African states is justified on two main grounds: (a) that prostitution promotes social immorality; and (b) that prostitution poses a public health hazard to society, particularly STDs such as HIV. The morality argument buckles in the face of the apparent double sexual moral standards that most African penal codes set for men and women; the law targets and penalises only the sellers of sex (primarily women), letting the clients (mostly men) off the legal hook (p. 20).

From the above quote, it is only the woman's body that is blamed for the spread of HIV. As John Lwanda (2002) writes, "one of [Bakili Muluzi's [the former president of Malawi] solutions [to mitigate the spread of AIDS] was to 'prohibit' and lock up prostitutes" (p.163). According to Kathewera-Banda *et al.* (2005)

"Malawian women are situated in a socio-legal and political-economic environment that sustains unequal gender power relations that tolerate the perpetuation of violence against women and leave women more vulnerable to HIV infection and the infringement of their sexual and reproductive health rights" (p.651).

It is such sexualised power relations that place women in an awkward position because they are made to shoulder blame from all angles in the patriarchal state, which pits every woman as, in Ngwira's words, *a daughter of Eve* (Ngwira, 2017).

Poetry plays a role, either entrenching these negative images or challenging them. Mwangwegho, unfortunately, does the former, and this paper illustrates how. The poet taps from 'canonised' traditional knowledge to portray how such female bodies are seen as a threat to a patriarchal society since they transmit diseases, cause psychological breakdown to their 'good' husbands, and jeopardise their future children. Poetry under study transmits the perverted, twisted and patriarchal proven 'truth' that women are not supposed to perform their sexuality beyond their

private spaces and normative social contexts. Women are portrayed as inherently evil, therefore needing men's 'salvation' and guidance.

As much as this study focuses on the misrepresentation of the prostitute and the evil woman's body, it also brings forth a topic that is rarely critiqued in Malawian and African literary circles. Senkoro (1979) observes that "the subject of prostitutes and prostitution in African literature has relatively less discussion devoted to it in criticism. It has often been treated as secondary literature which deserves less space in criticism and discussion than the other primary and more serious subjects" (p.102). Even though three decades have passed since this observation, the trend has not changed much as the issue of prostitution is mainly left to those in the sociological and medical fields. This paper sequels Lipenga's paper on prostitution, the only known literary severe paper devoted to prostitution in Malawian poetry. Lipenga's essay portrays how "poets seek to expose the prostitute's humanity, in opposition to the overriding denigration of her as a harbinger of disease and immorality" (Lipenga, 2019, p.1). In contrast, this paper seeks to portray how poetry has been used to propagate and enhance the denigration of the female prostitute and evil woman to benefit patriarchal forces that aim to maintain legitimised power relations in a society.

This paper is relevant as it brings to light that there are still some literary pieces that portray prostitutes and bad women according to dominant dictates of patriarchal origins to maintain the skewed power relations (in favour of men) that have guided social affairs for a long time.

In the section that follows, I analyse five poems by Lughano Mwangwegho. The poems are "A Well by the Roadside," "Sundown at Mwenilondo," "Behind a Man's Downfall," "Dust in the Calabash", and "The Tale of a Chicken." These poems have been carefully selected as they all speak with a singular voice - that of denigration of both the prostitute and the evil woman.

2.0. Re-creation of Daughters of Eve

The female body is considered a source of life because it gives birth. The female body in “A Well by the Roadside” has been portrayed as that which seems life-giving and beautiful only on the outside but harbours evil and diseases inside. Men are attracted to her beauty with little knowledge of what she has inside.

The image of women as dangerous in the time of AIDS has been discussed at length by scholars such as McFadden (2003), Ngwira (2017), Lwanda (2002); Mtenje (2017b); and Anderson (2012). In addition, Rankin et al. (2005) observe that in Chichewa, Malawi’s national language, the “term for sexually transmitted infections [STIs] is woman’s disease” (p.11). Mtenje (2017b) even notes that

[T]he stereotypical representations of female sexualities as dangerous and the discourse of female bodies as diseased or carriers of diseases remain dominant in most awareness/prevention campaigns. For example, one finds billboards which include images of a highly sexualised, scantily dressed female body while passing men admire her body. These images are usually accompanied by Chichewa proverbs like “*Chikomakoma chanoyu nkati mwake muli nyerere,*” which can be translated as ‘looks can be deceptive (p.177).

As much as the female body is dubbed as the source of life, the same body is paradoxically accused of being a harbinger of diseases and moral denigration. In stressing the prostitute’s loathsome position within the patriarchal society, the poet depicts her as a “well” by the roadside, which any man walking by can use to quench his lust. The image of the “well” evokes that notion of life providence as the common saying goes, water is life. However, instead of depicting a woman in the context of life-giving water (because she gives birth), the poet portrays her as a toxic source because whoever drinks from her well will die as her water is contaminated or poisonous.

There is a paradoxical representation of the female body in this poem. She is portrayed as both docile, innocent, beautiful and dangerous. She is a wolf in sheep’s clothing. The very first two stanzas start with warning her would-be victims so that they avoid her traps:

Behind that smile

Are razor-edged teeth

Coated in rust

Her narrow-waisted body

Dark and soft like a baby's cheek

Is a beehive (2017, p.43)

Rust represents a worn-out metal which is blunt and can cut nothing, but the woman in this poem has sharp objects behind her meek appearance. The woman in this poem is a wolf hiding behind her smile, “dark and soft” and “narrow-waisted body” (Mwangwego 2017, p.43). Such features allure men to sleep with her with little knowledge that behind all the smiles and luring gazes, there are “razor edged-teeth” and a “beehive”. As much as women smile because they want to, as much as women take care of their bodies for their own sake, the portraiture here shows that such behaviour is done to attract men sexually. The discourse being propounded is that women groom themselves to trap men with “honey” and “sting” them later (Mwangwego, 2017, p.43). The woman's sexuality is being questioned to make the female body recoil in coyness so that patriarchy gains control over the body.

In the last stanza, the poet portrays the female body as existing for the sole purpose of transmitting sexually transmitted diseases. He writes;

She is a well dug by the roadside

That quenches the thirst of passers-by

At no cost (2017, p.43)

Unlike prostitutes who charge for sexual service, the woman in this poem does not. The payment she gets is, suggestively, mere satisfaction while transmitting sexually transmitted infections to men. The way the female body is portrayed in this poem is problematic because it seems the woman knows that she has STI, but

she still goes on to sleep with men. The image of “honey...but a bike of bees/that will sting anything near” (Mwangwego, 2017, p.43) tells more of the character of this woman. Men who are only allured by the honey turn to be victims of the disease(s) they get from her. In other words, the woman has been given the image of Eve as a harbinger of diseases. Interestingly missing is how men, thought to be heads and brains, do not avoid the *honey trap* laid by the woman.

Another poem which denigrates the female body is “Sundown at Mwenilondo”. It starts with a description of a “good image” of Mwenilondo, “a small town/on the edge of the northern county” (Mwangwego, 2017, p.52). However, this image is on the brink of decimation as its streets are “stained with lust” (Mwangwego, 2017, p.52). The poem reveals that there is an attempt to control women through the notion of nature. People expect nature to be pure to sustain humanity. In the same vein, the female body must remain pure to support men while being exploited simultaneously.

The women ruining the image of Mwenilondo are busy coercing men who walk by the streets. Mwangwego writes that

Women display their wares

By the roadside

Each coercing passers-by effortlessly (2017, p.52).

Using the words’ coercing effortlessly’ points to the fact that these women, probably prostitutes, have a certain force of attraction that men cannot afford to resist. Thus, men are not to blame because the power of attraction exerted by the prostitutes is irresistible. However, these ‘blameless’ men are “caught unaware” (Mwangwego, 2017, p.52). Despite men claiming to have superior intellectual and rational faculties to women, they fail to detect that they are being ‘trapped’ by the prostitutes.

In a later stanza, the poet explores the reasons why women engage themselves in prostitution. Instead of simply mentioning the grounds, the poet

debases the reasons as immoral. He first notes that women “part legs for fun” (Mwangwegho, 2017, p.52). The idea of parting their legs brings a negative notion which kills the weight the word ‘fun’ was supposed to carry. The stress here is that these women are immoral and, therefore, a stain on the beautiful Mwenilondo scenery. The second reason he gives is “cash” not because of poverty but simply “because of their hands/itch for the currency” (Mwangwegho, 2017, p.52). The reasons the poet gives a moral attachment, therefore, attenuates any other reasons people engage in prostitution.

In patriarchal societies, men blame women for many things to exercise their controlling power over the female body. As a result, the female body is made to bear mistakes, even those made by males. Ngwira (2017) argues that men’s blame cast on female bodies alludes to Adam’s blame of Eve for his fall from grace. This kind of thinking has pervaded history to the present age. Even when the topic of rape is raised, man does not blame his loose libidinal slackness but rather blames the light dressing of the victim. In such cases, the woman becomes victimised for being a woman and for expressing her right to dress. Another notion validating the blame on a woman is her socially constructed dependency on a man. The female body is socially constructed to feel incomplete without a male body. This supposed attachment to the male body makes her entirely dependent on him and thus vulnerable to any attack. This social construction is evident in “Behind a Man’s Downfall”.

In this poem, the poet explores the image of Eve and the legitimised construction of the female body in a patriarchal society. The poet starts by saying, ‘ behind every successful woman, there is a man’. This is a counter-narrative to the common saying that ‘behind every man’s success, there is a woman’. Next, he writes how a man, a victim of the patriarchal society himself, works hard to provide for his wife and family. However, instead of being grateful, the woman cleans the house, leaving the man with nothing. Part of the poem reads:

There is a woman behind a man’s downfall

Who sweeps his house clean
And leaves him as he was before
With nothing but a beard on his chin
And returns when he gathers enough wealth
Only to take for all that it is worth (2017, p.21)

Here there is a typical depiction of one lousy woman who does not appreciate all the good things her husband does for her. The man deserted here is the one who buys his wife “costly clothes [and a] mattress” while he “wears torn trousers” and “sleeps dead on a mat” (Mwangwegho, 2017, p.21). This man, as already argued, is also a victim of patriarchal forces which dictate that he is the provider of his family. The poet overlooks this and puts the blame solely on the woman. He depicts her as a gold digger who gets into a relationship with a man for his money and then leaves him when the gold is depleting. In this poem, the man works hard, denying himself happiness, comfort and leisure to make his wife happy, yet the woman deserts her husband while taking away all his wealth. Donovan (1988) writes that “women in literature written by men are for the most part seen as Other, as objects of interest only as far as they serve or distract from the goals of the male protagonist” (p.264). The woman in this poem has taken the latter’s role, one who distracts her husband from fulfilling his patriarchal role of providing and taking care of his home.

This poem portrays an undesirable woman who ruins her husband economically. On the one hand, the poet paints the male figure as a saint who works hard and sacrifices everything for his wife. But, on the other hand, the wife cuts the figure of Eve, destructing a man’s progress. Thus, the woman in this poem is a symbol of an undesirable thing – a thing that has to be cast out of society.

In another poem, “Tale of a Chicken”, the poet insinuates that females in the urban space act in an unholy way, thereby falling in the same category as prostitutes or unworthy women. In the poem, for example, there is a binary grouping of

women into marriage type and prostitutes/unfit type. Every woman who does not fall into the former category finds herself in the latter. Thus, women's sexuality is limited according to the dictates of patriarchy to keep women within a boundary check. Furthermore, the female body is commodified in the poem as it is referred to as a "chicken."

The question of the female body's commodification and objectification in literature has long been tackled. Nevertheless, the poet, against the efforts of other writers, activists and feminists, propagates the portrayal of women as commodities in "Tale of a Chicken".

In his reading of Jack Mapanje's poetry, Syned Mthathiwa (2012) concludes that "Mapanje uses animals as metaphors for human characters that he holds in contempt or seeks to criticise, satirise, scorn, and lampoon" (p.95). Mwangwegho, in his poem "Tale of a Chicken", takes on Mapanje's armour to criticise, scorn and even commodify the female body. The poet typifies the setting (urban versus rural) as an exclusive marker of purity or lack thereof in the commoditised and victimised female body. Unknowingly, he is underscoring "the harmlessness, victimhood, and suffering of [female] victims while emphasising the oppressors' evil and injustice" (Mthathiwa, 2012, p.95). The oppressors here are men who are at liberty to purchase and 'use' the women in the way they want.

The poet portrays the urban woman (who has been placed on the same plane as a prostitute/unworthy woman in the poem) as a chicken "at the market" (Mwangwegho, 2017, p.27). The poet is advancing the idea that women are like material entities which have to be purchased, and the buyer, the man, has to be very careful as he does not want to buy sub-standard or rotten material or the kind of chicken which will "[...] lay eggs/Wherever and whenever/As long as they spread their legs" (Mwangwegho, 2017, p.27). First, the poet paints a rather negative image of prostitutes/unworthy women as chickens on the market. He then compares this to the good woman as a chicken in the village, which is docile and obedient. Here is a more excellent picture as represented in the poem:

When you want a chicken

Do not buy at the market

It will not roost in your kitchen

Chickens at the market lay eggs

Wherever and whenever

As long as they spread their legs

.....

When you want a chicken to rear

Buy from the village

It will stay on when you are not there

It will not let other cocks

Roost in its cage

Which is always kept under locks (2017, p.27)

In the first stanza, a man is advised not to look into town women or unworthy women/prostitutes because they are not respected as they will “roost” somewhere else with other men rather than their husbands. The imagery of roosting evokes the notion of the unfaithfulness of these women who go from one man to another seeking sexual gratification. Their behaviour is like that of a hen with no specific rooster for mating.

Apart from the image of unfaithfulness or infidelity, immorality and irresponsibility are other images with which prostitutes/unworthy women get

associated. For these women, reproduction does not define their sexuality as they can “lay eggs/wherever and whenever” (Mwangwegho, 2017, p.27) since their primary purpose is “[spreading] their legs” (Mwangwegho, 2017, p.27). Here the poet portrays prostitutes/unworthy women as people who simply love sex for pleasure, against the natural notion of reproduction.

In contrast to the image of females in towns, the poet paints the docile and good wives who stay at home even “when you are not there” (Mwangwegho, 2017, p.27). Many people, according to Ngwira and Mthatiwa (2020), view the city as “an emblem of cultural decay and a nexus of corruption, perversion, greed, destruction and death” (p.1). Thus, a lady worthy of marrying cannot spring from such an environment. Urban women are seen as prostitutes/unworthy from the typical traditionalist view in Malawi. This idea is the same being advanced here by the poet who calls on men to rally home to the village when they desire the docile woman preferred by the traditional society. Equally significant in the poem is the consideration of the female body like a chicken “which is always kept under locks” (Mwangwegho, 2017, p.27). The line above highlights patriarchal expectation of the sexuality of a woman as something that is to be tamed, controlled or caged, just like animals are tamed. This is a derogative representation of the autonomous female body as it is imprisoned by patriarchal forces represented by their husbands and societal tenets.

There is also a notion of seduction, unfoundedly considered prominent in prostitutes. The prevailing discourse is that prostitutes are magnetic traps for men to fall into. “The analysis of the prostitute’s position and other people of her social class in relation to the prevailing socio-politico-economic conditions has been, to say the least, very minimal and at times totally misleading and even lacking” (Senkoro, 1979, p.8). The female prostitute body has been chiefly regarded from a patriarchal, medical and moralistic lens without examining it from other points of view. The most prevailing narrative about prostitutes is that they are morally corrupt and harbingers of diseases, mainly HIV. This kind of narrative is well expressed in the first two stanzas of “Dust in the Calabash”, where a prostitute

...walks in

Her behind dances

To the rhythm of her steps

She scatters her eyes

A wide smile across the edge of the mouth

Glimmers on her red lips (2017, p.31)

The poet captures the woman's seductive walk and the way "[s]he scatters her eyes" to catch an interested victim who should fall prey to her gimmicks. This is not a mere prostitute as she has a specific target: "fledglings" (Mwangwegho, 2017, p.31). The prostitute in the poem targets young men, as the word fledglings suggest. As Craddock (2000) observes, "the HIV/AIDS body in Malawi has been produced largely as female" (p.161). Craddock's view is propagation in this poem as the prostitute is portrayed as a harbinger of HIV, which she transmits to young men. The prostitute decides to victimise young men who are "worn out by lust" (Mwangwegho, 2017, p.31) from her seductive antics. With such a portrayal, the female body is entirely bashed as the sole source and transmitter of HIV without putting into the limelight the man, who willingly seeks the services of the prostitute to quench his libidinal thirst.

Portrayed as a ruthless animal or, to use Senkoro's words, a "lustful animal" (Senkoro, 1979, p.11), ready to devour her prey without mercy, the prostitute is "ready to quench thirst" (Mwangwegho, 2017, p.31) of the lust of the young men. As a harbinger of HIV, she is ready to transmit this disease to these young men. This depiction re-evokes the image of Ngwira's daughters of Eve – women (in this case, prostitutes) as destroyers of humankind.

The poet finishes his poem by writing, "each sipping zestfully/she serves the youthful drunkards/who drink alongside dust" (Mwangwegho, 2017, p.31).

The image of dust can be read as a metaphorical representation of HIV, which these young men get as they want to satisfy their lust. Dust here can also be referred to as death which has been used as a symbol for prostitutes. This portrayal of the female body is problematic since we are told in the poem that men are “sipping zestfully” (Mwangwegho, 2017, p.31) or rather wilfully without being forced by the prostitute. In the end, instead of the poet blaming men for their lack of control, he blames the female body for seducing men. It can be seen, therefore, that the poet is entangled in patriarchal whims, which make his poems breeding ground for female victimisation.

3.0 Conclusion

Women, for the most part, are placed in locks of patriarchy, blocking their endeavour to express the “self” as men do. As much as patriarchy still reigns, women and feminists have taken it to the podium and streets demanding equal rights though the efforts still face resistance from all corners of the society. As discussed in this paper, the poet strives to revitalise the long-contested power relation that separates men from women. He has used images of the prostitute and the evil woman to advance a legitimised discourse that paints prostitutes and unworthy women as evil, harbingers of diseases and a threat to the existence of men.

Perhaps the poet’s writing does not reflect his personal view but instead reflects how the Malawian society views both the prostitute and the unworthy woman. Maybe he is just a victim of the system he was born into. But one thing is for sure – a writer has to scrutinise his writing so that the output renders a positive message rather than a message that propels denigration, subordination, subjugation and commodification of a fellow human being.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Associate Professor Ken Lipenga Jr., who went through the first manuscript and showed me the direction I was supposed to take. I would also like to thank Mr Gift Ngulube, who proofread the manuscript.

Declaration of conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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