

STATE AND CULTURE IN POSTCOLONIAL AFRICA

Enchantings



Edited by

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9 The African Postcolonial Predicament

A Logic of Revenge, Prison Poetry, and Becoming Human

Ken Walibora Waliaula

The question remains for us to see in what ways postcolonial Africa continues to be complicit in a prison experiment that uses a logic of revenge, and does little to restore hope or humanity.
—Mechthild Nagel, “‘I Write What I Like’: African Prison Intellectuals and the Struggle for Freedom”

OYEKAN OWOMOYELA'S ESSAY “Dissidence and the African Writer: Commitment or Dependency?” represents one of the most trenchant critiques of what he calls the “academic-literary elite,” whose claim to humanistic and nationalistic motivations he strongly discounts and doubts.¹ Owomoyela attributes the acrimonious contestation between African writers and rulers of their independence states to the writers' desire to share power with or usurp it from bona fide politicians. Westernized African writers, Owomoyela claims, arrogate to themselves the modern equivalence of traditional bards who were part and parcel of the royal court. They therefore lament their exclusion from political power in their respective African states and take to dissidence to appeal to their European patrons and sponsors. Illustrative of the explicit expression of thirst for power, Owomoyela explains, are the remarks of Ghanaian writer Ayi Kwei Armah and Nigerian Wole Soyinka. He quotes Armah as having pronounced in a speech at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, in 1979 that the “exclusion of (writers) from power by modern-day rulers represents a breach with African ethos.”² Armah's plaintive cry resonates with Soyinka's assertion earlier on in Stockholm in 1968: “When the writer woke from his opium dream of metaphysical

abstractions he found that the politician had used his absence from earth to consolidate his position.”³ One could say these dissident African writers, in Owomoyela’s view, look up to the European gaze in their quest for the political power they have missed out on. The writers’ portrayal in their fictional and nonfictional works of leaders of independent Africa as inept and corrupt belies their own unbridled megalomania.⁴ Indeed, the list of who’s who of Africa’s political prisoners includes well-known writers who were or are deemed antigovernment both for their writing and their activism. For these groups of African elites, Owomoyela has no sympathy, and he is appalled by efforts to demand their release from prison for their antigovernment stances.

The struggle between academic elite writers and rulers in postcolonial Africa is a divisive issue, with different individuals taking sides. Owomoyela, by tendentiously denouncing the literary output and activism of the academic literary elite, obviously takes sides with the rulers whose underbelly he decidedly refuses to expose. Yet the controversy is an index of the complexity of the postcolonial state in Africa. It is a controversy from which it is almost impossible to remain neutral, objective, and balanced. The controversy speaks to multiple narratives and counternarratives that are told to make sense of the political quagmire of postcolonial Africa. When Owomoyela says that writers conceive of themselves as the positive side in the struggle “between enlightenment and anomie,” we are made to confront both the writers’ conception of themselves and their world and how their detractors conceive of them.⁵ The writers, ostensibly, see themselves as special and should therefore be a part of African governments; the governments, however, see them as antigovernment and deserving of exile, detention, or death. Both sides of the divide have strong opinions on the question of the postcolonial state in Africa, whether it is characterized by enchantment or disenchantment, and whether there is sufficient respect for democracy and human rights.

It bears clarifying that this chapter does not attempt to extrapolate at length on the intricacies of human rights theory and the intellectual skepticism around it; that is perhaps a matter for another day. However, suffice it to say, discussions on human rights are inextricably tied to the alluring “idea that every person anywhere in the world, irrespective of citizenship or territorial legislation, has some basic rights, which others should respect.”⁶ But a

sizable number of critics have pointed at the conceptual weaknesses underpinning the theory and praxis of human rights, of which failure to justify universalizable interest is one. As Mark F. N. Franke correctly asserts, human rights tends to be geographically oriented.⁷ Human rights activists, however, routinely deny or diminish the boundedness of human rights. As Amartya Sen states, drawing on Karl Marx, activists in their zeitgeist, eager to change the world without necessarily interpreting it and apprehending its multifaceted nature, routinely resent any critique of human rights.⁸

African writers who have been imprisoned for political reasons have often particularly come face to face with the reality or uncertainty of their individual and collective humanity while behind bars. Thanks to the dehumanization, deprivations, and denials of basic human rights (otherwise taken for granted), writers are compelled to ponder their sense of being human. For most of them prison becomes the locale for writing themselves into existence, regaining sanity, surviving. Unable or unwilling to use the gun, the writers resort to wielding the pen as their weapon against what they perceive as despotic regimes in postindependence Africa. In their moment of crisis as prisoners, these writers are bound to use writing as a means of reflecting on their place within the confined world of the prison walls and the world beyond the prison walls. More importantly, they would be thinking about the reason for their incarceration. Writing in prison, then, becomes a voyage of self-discovery, a quest for the sense of being human, of the right to be human. And as Ioan Davies asserts, the prison writer almost always asks the question, “What did I do wrong?” to which Owomoyela would answer, hastily, of course, for your being power hungry, for your antigovernment activities, including your writing.⁹

As Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson contend, “One dirty little secret of the African literary tradition is the flourishing of the form of writing we could call ‘writer’s prison diaries,’ that is, poems, fictional and non-fictional prose, and dramatic works by writers about their experience in the jail of the postcolonial state as political prisoners.”¹⁰ In the twentieth century, Africa witnessed a tremendous increase in its incarcerated intellectuals and activists, creating an endless list of works typifying African prison writing, what Olaniyan and Quayson term as the “dirty little secret” emerging in “adversarial contexts.” Nelson Mandela remains perhaps the most famous of African prisoners of conscience, thanks to his twenty-seven-year jail term by

the apartheid government of South Africa. In general the colonial encounter in Africa had produced its long list of political prisoners from the rank and file of indigenous peoples who sought to break free from the colonial yoke. The treatment of the colonized during this turbulent period underscores the excesses and abuses of empire as it clung to its illegitimate overseas sphere of influence. Thousands were incarcerated, persecuted, maimed, raped, or castrated across Africa in some of the most appalling and atrocious instances of human rights violations in modern times.

Indeed, although the level of bloodshed and human rights violations in colonial Africa differed from country to country and from region to region, it was generally a tale of wanton and egregious violation of the human rights of indigenous populations. Incidentally, quite a number of the founding fathers of postindependent African states met the full force of the colonial tyranny, becoming prisoners themselves. Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah and Kenya's Jomo Kenyatta, who soon became first presidents of their respective independent nations, were themselves imprisoned, hence victims of the colonial attempt to silence opposition. Could it be said that, in a sense, Nkrumah and Kenyatta were convicted criminals who later became leaders of their nations? Was not the British colonial presence in Africa criminal in and of itself?

The devastating colonial encounter and its attendant violation of human rights completely sullied the pretentious and spurious civilizing mission in Africa that the empire had arrogated on itself. As Robin D. G. Kelley, following Aimé Césaire's polemical *Discourse on Colonialism*, would argue, the rape, torture, violence, and immorality imperial Europe unleashed on the colonized was the most telling evidence of how "colonialism 'decivilize[d]' the colonizer."¹¹ Even those Africans not included in the hundreds of thousands who were literally incarcerated were virtually under the figurative colonial prison. The state of unfreedom in colonial Africa was similar to the prison life in apartheid South Africa, of which Winnie Mandela would speak of as the "prison inside and the prison outside."¹² In other words, it mattered little that one was in literal prison, being outside prison was equally incarcerating, stifling, and suffocating. Not surprisingly, indigenous Africans, in the prison inside and the prison outside, began to use their inventiveness and ingenuity to come up with means to survive the hellish ambience that surrounded them.

Moreover, the victims' penchant for narrating incarceration as a survival mechanism, as a therapeutic exercise, as well the tendency to mask meaning to the oppressor in the oral narratives of colonial Africa, anticipated the written narratives of incarceration that would come in the postcolonial period. It is a paradox of our times that the unfreedom that existed in colonial Africa persisted in the so-called postcolonial Africa. In contemplating this paradox and the love-hate relationship between the modern African state and prison, one comes closer to understanding the depth and width of what Kelley would call Africa's "postcolonial predicament."¹³ The conditions that necessitated the narration and thematization of literal and figurative prison in colonial times seem to have continued almost unabated in postcolonial Africa. It is the state's determination to thwart the human spirit, to curtail freedom in colonial and postcolonial Africa that impelled victims to tell stories to capture their experiences, to survive. Additionally, fear of further reprisal and victimization motivates prison narrators to turn to fascinating inventiveness and circumlocution in colonial and postcolonial Africa.

The list of texts that constitute the corpus of narratives of incarceration in postindependence Africa is legion as are the circumstances that produced them. For instance, in Ethiopia the popular revolution that brought down Emperor Haile Selassie was followed by disenchantment and then grievous human rights violations by the military junta under Mengistu Haile Mariam, who hijacked the revolution. Former political prisoners have written chilling accounts of this dark chapter in Ethiopian history, detailing the abuses and excesses visited by the state on the populace in the prison inside and the prison outside. The Ethiopian corpus of firsthand political prisoner accounts includes Taffara Deguefe's *A Tripping Stone: An Ethiopian Prison Diary* (2003), Dawit Shifaw's *The Diary of Terror: Ethiopia 1974–1991* (2006), and Nega Mezlekia's controversial memoir, *Notes from the Hyena's Belly* (2002), while Ethiopia/Eritrea has Abeba Tesfagiorgis's prison account, *A Painful Season and a Stubborn Hope* (1992).

In Kamuzu Banda's Malawi, jailed poet Jack Mapanje wrote *And Crocodiles Are Hungry at Night* (2011) and the *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison* (1993), while his contemporary and senior civil servant Sam Mpasu wrote *Political Prisoner 3/75 of Dr. H. Kamuzu Banda of Malawi*. In Yakubu Gowon's Nigeria, detained Wole Soyinka came out with his prison memoir, *The Man Died: Prison Notes* (1972), and a prison poetry

collection, *A Shuttle in the Crypt* (1987), while in Sani Abacha's Nigeria, Kunle Ajibade wrote *Jailed for Life* (1981). In Zanzibar, Shafi Adam Shafi fictionalized his incarceration after the 1967 revolution in the semi-autonomous islands in his Swahili novel *Haini* (2000), while in Idi Amin's Uganda, P. M. O. Onen narrated his confinement in *Diary of an Obedient Servant During Misrule* (2000).

In apartheid South Africa, examples of political prisoner writings include Breyten Breytenbach's *True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* (1984), Dennis Brutus's *Letters to Martha and Other Poems from a South African Prison* (1968), Molefe Pheto's *And Night Fell: Memoirs of a Political Prisoner in South Africa* (1983), Frances Baard's *My Spirit Is Not Banned* (1986), and Tim Jenkin's *Inside Out: Escape from Pretoria Prison* (2003).

However, the production of prison narratives is not the preserve of sub-Saharan Africa. One of the better-known prison writings is Nawal el Saadawi's personal prison memoir, *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* (1983), recounting her detention without trial in Anwar Sadat's Egypt as well as her fictionalized account of a real woman's life in *Woman at Point Zero* (1975). In Morocco, poet Abdellatif Laâbi wrote his French prison memoir, *Le Chemin des ordalies* (1982), which has been translated in English as *Rue du Retour*, to capture his prison experience for crimes of opinion or thought.

The relationship between state tyranny and the emergence of prison writing in Kenya presents a fascinating scenario that perhaps qualifies as a touchstone for the rest of Africa. Indeed, Kenya is a supreme example of how independence did not translate into complete emancipation, of how there was transition from hope to despair due to tyranny and curtailment of freedom. The reign of Kenya's founding father, Jomo Kenyatta (1963–1978), and his successor, Daniel arap Moi (1978–2002), witnessed a proliferation of prison writing. A former political prisoner and detainee himself, Kenyatta took a cue from the colonial potentate to detain and imprison, and even assassinate, critics and dissidents. The assassinations of Pio Gama Pinto, Tom Mboya, and J. M. Kariuki are attributed to his state terror machine. Both Abdilatif Abdalla and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o were survivors of the brutalities of Kenyatta's regime, telling their stories in *Sauti ya Dhiki (Voice of Agony)*, 1973) and *Detained* (1980), respectively.

Moi, Kenyatta's vice president, succeeded his former boss, ruling Kenya for twenty-four years with an iron fist until his retirement in 2001. Initially a

moderate political leader, Moi seemed to have been jolted into dictatorship by an abortive military coup mounted against his regime in August 1982. He espoused what he fondly called the “Nyayo philosophy” (the Swahili word *nyayo* means “footsteps”). On ascension to power Moi vowed to walk in his predecessor’s footsteps, which he claimed meant clinging tenaciously to the principles of “love, peace, and unity” in order to foster truly prosperous Kenyan nationhood.¹⁴ But that love, peace, and unity epitomized by the Kenyatta era is a theme found only in the official authorized Kenyan national narrative.

The alternative narrative has it that Kenyatta set the pace and precedent for silencing opposition through detention, imprisonment, and assassination. Kenyatta is, therefore, painted in this version of the Kenyan story as one whose example it was dangerous for anyone to follow. According to this alternative national narrative, Moi became more and more inclined to emulate his predecessor’s worst qualities, following Kenyatta’s footsteps in turning Kenya into a virtual police state. Moi’s regime saw a monumental increase in political detentions, censorship of media and books, and ruthless crackdown on opposition activism in every area of the country. The assassination of foreign affairs minister Robert John Ouko in 1990 was the apex of political intolerance in the Moi regime. Leftist intellectual Alamin Mazrui and journalist Wahome Mutahi are examples of survivors of the state terror and tell their experiences in *Chembe cha Moyo (Arrowhead in My Heart)*, 1988) and *Three Days on the Cross* (1991), respectively.¹⁵ As an analysis of Mazrui’s prison poetry demonstrates, Kenya under Moi was an instance of Africa’s postcolonial predicament, Kelley’s characterization of the continent that echoes Basil Davidson’s idea of the “black man’s burden.”

Davidson’s book *The Black Man’s Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State*, widely regarded as his magnum opus, is audacious and unequivocal in pinpointing nation-statism as what ails Africa, the main reason for the continent being in “deep trouble.”¹⁶ Nation-statism is the curse and burden breaking the back of postcolonial Africa, in Davidson’s view. Davidson argues that the lights have gone out in Africa because of the pernicious imposition of nation-statism, an alien concept or ideology, at the expense of effective indigenous African systems of governance that thrived in the precolonial moment. Nation-statism, Davidson argues, came with the invention of untenable and incompatible national and group identities that

hardly cohere. At the same time, imposition of nation-statism was characterized by rejection and denigration of the values and vitality of African precolonial governance ethos. In this regard, pioneer Western-educated African elites such as Obafemi Awolowo and Nnamdi Azikiwe stand accused of being complicit in aiding the introduction of the destructive and incongruous Eurocentric notions of governance that have led to “general and continental failure in Africa.”¹⁷ In his magisterial text, Davidson enacts a juxtaposition of African nationalism and Eastern European nationalism to justify his central argument that nationalism is necessarily unsuited for African realities. Nevertheless, he argues that it would be foolhardy to entertain despair regarding the present crisis in Africa and therefore suggests a rather hazy “escape route” that looks to African solutions to African problems, indeed a sort of mass-character democracy that overlooks the place of human rights.¹⁸ It is to the meditation on the impact of an African state’s recourse to what Mechthild Nagel terms the “logic of revenge” and denial of an individual poet’s human rights that we now turn.¹⁹

Mazrui’s collection of prison poems invites us to meditate on a poetics and a politics of pain and relief for the political prisoners. If the poems in *Chembe cha Moyo* capture the anguished perception of tragedy and trauma that detention signified for Mazrui, they also underline the love-hate relationship between the poet and his Kenyan state. *Chembe cha Moyo* as a text is centrally situated within the context of incarceration and political struggle for change. It essentially grapples with issues of personal and collective dignity and freedom in the wake of human rights abuses, despotism, and decay in the postcolonial or neocolonial moment. Mazrui wrote *Chembe cha Moyo* while locked up as a political detainee during the Moi era in the 1980s.

By the time of his detention, Mazrui had already burst onto the Kenyan literary scene in a powerful way. His literary oeuvre had begun with *Kilio cha Haki* (*Crying for Justice*, 1982), a predetention play that placed him among the leading East African playwrights, principally because of its superior aesthetics and anticapitalist stance. The publication of *Kilio cha Haki* would become both a blessing and a curse; imprinting indelibly Mazrui’s name in the canon of Swahili literature and incurring the ire of the paranoid Moi regime. One could say Mazrui’s detention seemed to have been

essentially linked to the regime's displeasure with the publication and popularity of *Kilio cha Haki*.

Mazrui's poetry of incarceration, *Chembe cha Moyo*, has not elicited as much critical attention as his preincarceration play. Critical responses to *Chembe cha Moyo* are few. It is germane to bring to the fore not only Mazrui's thematic preoccupations but also the ethos underlying his prison poetry. In this regard, it is appropriate to ask questions such as: What is the connection between the text of Mazrui's poems and the detention context within which they were written? How and to what extent does he thematize truth? What is the place or role of the pronoun "I" in Mazrui's poetic world? Does the "I" enter the stage in multiple guises as expressions of the poet's various ways of self-narration? How is the "I" related to the "we" of the collective identity? This study also addresses the questions of trauma as they are related to the text and context of the carceral imagination and experience.

Mazrui was dragged from the classroom at Kenyatta University in March 1983 during the first round of detentions in the Moi era under the Preservation of Public Security Act, chapter 57, of the Laws of Kenya. He joined the long list of officials of the newly proscribed university faculty union who were detained, such as Dr. Willy Mutunga, Kamoji Wachira, Professor Edward Oyugi, Maina Kinyatti, and Mukaru Ng'ang'a.²⁰

One of the most salient aspects of *Chembe cha Moyo* is the apparent silence on the back cover and in the introduction on detention as the place of writing. The back cover vaguely dwells on generalities, merely stating that "*Chembe cha Moyo* ni mkusanyiko wa mashairi yenye mdundo wa kisasa kututongolea hisia za ndani zinazotokana na mazingira mapya katika mataifa ya Ulimwengu wa Tatu [*Chembe cha Moyo* is an anthology of poems with a modern resonance revealing inner feelings that emerge from a new environment in the Third World nations]."²¹ The back cover does not say whose "inner feelings" are at stake, and it presumes that those feelings are typical of all individuals in the third world! Neither does it account for the presumed newness of the environment in the third world.

The loudness of the silence regarding the where of *Chembe cha Moyo*'s writing is accentuated by the militant tone of the poems in the collection. Yet it is difficult to surmise the why of the writing of *Chembe cha Moyo* without also unearthing the where. It is, I think, in unraveling the connection between where and why that we can come close to fully understanding the interplay

between context and text in Mazrui's poetry. Mazrui has disclosed that he had indeed discussed unequivocally the question of why and where in his original introduction of the anthology.²² Nonetheless, fearing that such candid revelation would short-circuit the book's distribution and sales, the editorial team at the Nairobi office of Heinemann publishers decided to elide it altogether. The introduction that remained in the published version is, therefore, a mutilated vestige of the original manuscript, dwelling as it does on the safe stylistics and aesthetics of Swahili poetry in general and making no mention about why and where Mazrui wrote his collection of poems.

However, whereas the peritext succumbs to the culture of silence that the Moi regime perpetuated and perfected, it is still not impossible to speculate about the motivation for Mazrui's poems. For one thing, the bulk of the poems are preoccupied with incarceration with some of them being quite explicit in this regard. The first poem, "Niguse" (Touch Me), is a case in point.

Nitokapo Kizuizini
Nitamwomba yeyote mwendani
 aniguse
 taratibu
 pole pole
 lakini
 kwa yakini
Niguse tena
Unijuze tena
Unifunze tena
 maisha yalivyo
 maisha yaonjavyo
 ladha yake ilivyo
Nipo hapa nimekukabili
Niguse tena tafadhali
Niguse!
Niguse!

[When I come out of Detention
I will beseech any of my beloved ones
 to touch me

softly
slowly
but

surely

Touch me once again
Let me know once again
Instruct me anew
about how life is
 about how life tastes
 the taste of life
Here I am facing you
Please touch me once again
Touch me!
Touch me!]²³

From the very first line of the first poem, Mazrui foregrounds the reality of incarceration, alluding to the moment “Nitokapo Kizuizini [When I come out of Detention].” The plea “Niguse” in the title and repeated throughout the poem underscores the deprivation of human contact, human rights in general and in particular, and the denial of human touch that the speaker in the poem has experienced in detention. The plea is indicative of the speaker’s desperate yearning for human touch and contact, literally and figuratively, and envisions the momentous and joyous moment of release that would make such contact both possible and probable. The reference to “Kizuizini” (Detention) is overt, not tacit, amplified as it were, with the initial uppercase K. And yet this allusion to the condition of detention in particular and incarceration in general is not isolated but indeed suffuses *Chembe cha Moyo* far too much to assume that it is accidental.

Because the silence on the facticity of detention in the introduction and back cover deprives us of potentially useful hints as to the motivation for writing, we are left to speculate from what we can glean from the poems themselves. Thankfully, the poems do not disappoint in this regard, as “Niguse” illustrates. Other poems that explicitly mention or thematize incarceration include “Kifungoni” (Incarceration), “Kizuizini” (Detention),

“Nayeyusha Pingu” (I Am Melting Handcuffs), and “Hakuna Yeyote” (Alone).²⁴ Mazrui wrote a play, *Shadows of the Moon*, and *Chembe cha Moyo* under the depressing conditions of detention and against the wish of prison authorities. Prison authorities generally tend to be antibooks and antiwriters. As Nagel cogently notes, religious books such as the Bible seem to be the only “innocuous” texts one is allowed access to while behind bars.²⁵ Prison, like boarding houses across most of sub-Saharan Africa, is home to dog-eared copies of the Bible, presumably reminding inmates of their sinfulness and/or their proximity to sin as well as their need to make peace with their Maker. One could argue that for the political prisoner the presence of the Bible in the cell is an implicit message that by sinning against the state he or she has sinned against God and should therefore make amends.

That is not to suggest that prisoners find the religious text antithetical to their ideals. As Ethiopian political prisoner Deguefe’s prison diary, *A Tripping Stone*, illustrates, the prisoner’s quest for solace in religious texts and tenets is sometimes integral to maintaining sanity or coping with the trauma of incarceration. In his diary Deguefe repeatedly recounts how a pattern of prayer and sermons sustained him and other believing detainees in the early 1970s after the fall of Ethiopian emperor Selassie.²⁶ In his diary *Detained*, Ngũgĩ, too, records how spiritually inclined fellow detainees turned to religious activities as a means of coping with the trauma of incarceration.²⁷

If the presence of the Bible was meant to woo Mazrui toward a spirit of repentance and contrition, to lead him toward submission to secular authorities, it perhaps achieved little or nothing in this regard. And yet the Bible made possible Mazrui’s search for solace in ways that the prison authorities least expected or desired. Mazrui was least interested in simply reading and imbibing the wisdom of the Bible given to him by prison authorities; instead, he used the margins to scribble his poems and play. Also, he resorted to stealing pens from prison warders and once from a pilot to be able to write. On the whole, the write-and-hide game he had to play indicates that writing under prison conditions needed more than a simple will to write.

Writing, then, appears to have been a compulsion, something that needed to be done in spite of or because of the antiwriting detention surroundings. In answering the question concerning the where of the writing, one should also

take into account the locale. Why write from such an unlikely place? As the title of this chapter suggests, seeking solace in writing was evidently an important motivation for Mazrui's prison writing. The therapeutic properties of writing seem to play a crucial role in the writer's motivation, particularly in the genre of poetry, which lends itself toward free release of pent-up feelings and emotions. But this self-expression also enables and enhances self-narration, albeit in the somewhat incoherent and circuitous poetic form. This brings us to the grammatical "I" of Mazrui's *Chembe cha Moyo*.

There are multiple "I" pronouns in Mazrui's prison poetry that reflect and refract the poet's self and reality as a real historical person detained for political reasons. Or perhaps to put it more accurately, these "I" pronouns project the poet's wide spectrum of invented selves. They range from optimistic to nihilistic, from militant to resigned, from devout to almost irreligious, from confident to doubting, from cultural nationalist to Pan-Africanist, and so on. In "Niguse" the "I" refers to an incarcerated yet optimistic self. There is optimism, if cautious, because the yearned for desire for authentic human interaction is now more than just a remote possibility due to the apparent prospect of freedom. In this opening poem, Mazrui presents a self that needs to learn to be human again as the second stanza suggests:

Touch me once again
Let me know once again
Instruct me anew
 about how life is
 about how life tastes
 the taste of life²⁸

This is an "I" whose selfhood hangs onto a receding sense of being but that takes refuge in the knowledge of the real possibility of becoming human again, of belonging yet again in the human fold, of enjoying one's unalienable human rights once more. Through the desperate tone of the narrating and narrated "I," Mazrui compellingly reveals how life in detention and outside detention are worlds apart. The experience in detention has almost erased the speaker's memory of what it means to be free outside the prison walls. His experience is similar to that of Moroccan political prisoner Laâbi, whose prison memoir, *Le Chemin des ordalies*, demonstrates the extent to which the

“spatial configuration of the prison yard itself affects the narrator [Laâbi] to his very core. It affects his physical relationship to the world around him.... Again the moment of release is both a time to rejoice, and a time of trepidation; it is a move from the known to the unknown.”²⁹ For the incarcerated inured to being treated as nonhuman, release signifies a new learning experience in the business of normal human existence. Indeed, incarceration had taught Mazrui to forget what it meant to be truly a free human agent. Clearly, by using the “I” in transition from nonbeing to human being, the poem reveals profoundly the magnitude of dehumanization that detention may work on individuals.

The same sense of cautious optimism is expressed in the poem “Nitangojea” (I Will Wait) in which the narrating “I” projects itself as exercising patience and looking forward to reunion with a beloved one.³⁰ Yet expressing or representing oneself in terms of the possibility of release and relief in the foreseeable future despite the present moment of crisis accords with the search for refuge in poetry that underwrites the ebb and flow of *Chembe cha Moyo*.

But the optimistic “I” is sometimes replaced by a doubting, even nihilistic “I” in the range of poems in the anthology. In “Mtabiri” (Seer) one encounters an “I” presenting itself as a prophet of doom bereft of any iota of hope for a better future.³¹ The speaker in the poem predicts assertively:

sauti tishi zimenijia
kusudi kunitabiria
hatari zilotukalia
na kutukamia

[fearful voices have come to me
warning me of what is yet to come
about the danger we are bound to face
dangers that are about to engulf us]³²

The narrator then lists a host of oddities that, according to his predictions, are set to occur (e.g., a female goat bearing through the mouth a grotesque offspring that is neither completely goat nor sheep, a human mother giving birth to a deformed child with a wound in place of the eyes, and the human

population being pounded by the “mvua ya mauti” [rain of death], etc.). The speaker concludes by suggesting that the upheaval in the system of things shakes even angelic hordes:

Ndimi mtabiri
Mwona Mbali
Nami naogopa

[I am the prophet
The far-sighted one
And I am fearful]³³

It is possible to perceive this tremor or transformation of the social equilibrium as an emblem of social revolution, the kind envisioned by political activists who are not contented with folding their arms and watching their societies crumble under tyranny and misrule. The leftist ideology that underpins Mazrui’s entire literary output in general seems to lend credence to this supposition. However, the grotesque and unattractive images of the changes that ensue undercut the possibility of the prediction of an expedient revolution whose outcome is positive change. The speaking self in the poem is overwhelmed with fear, ending the poem with little or no hope of a bright future as the lines “Naogopa [I am fearful]” clearly indicate.

If in “Mtabiri” the poet predicts impending doom and gloom in the not so distant future, he is no more sanguine in his estimation of the present in “Mashindano” (Contest). The poem opens with the persona describing a tireless porter toiling to fend for himself and countless dependents:

Nimuonapo hamali mwenye tumbi ya midomo
yote yataka kulishwa
Huona mja asukumaye jabali liso kikomo
juu ya mlima usokwisha
Kwa kujikaza hulisogeza kidogo
Shubiri baada ya shubiri ilonyumbuka
Na chini ya kivuli cha huu mzigo
Humwona amejikita kwa tambo liloumbuka

Mishipa huvimba na kuiva rangi
Damu ikakimbilia usoni kwa wingi
 sasa akishindwa
 sasa akishinda
akishindilia vidole katika ardhi yenye mashaza
 kimya kimetanda
 roho inampaa
 moyo ukimdunda
Katika muda huu wa hatari
 muda wa kifo na nusuri
Ole wangu wee! ...
 jabali hili litamshinda huyu mpweke
 limvuruge chini ya nguvu zake
 likititimka kurudia kwenye kiza cha mauti?
 Kimya ... mashindano yaendelea
ya wawili katika ndoto

[Whenever I see a porter with many mouths
 All needing to be fed
I behold a person heaving a limitless boulder
 Towards a limitless mountain
He exerts himself to move it a little bit
 Inch by inch he moves it
And in the shadow of this burden
 I behold him standing erect with a disfigured figure

Veins swell and his color darkens
Blood rushes to the face
 Now he wins
 Now he loses

He digs his finger into the shell covered soil
 There is quiet everywhere
 He is distraught
 His heart pounds
At this perilous moment

The moment of life and death.

Oh! Woe unto me! ...

Will this boulder conquer this loner
Will it crush him under with its might
As it tumbles back to the darkness of death?

Silence ... the contest continues
between the two in the dream.]³⁴

It is the risk, danger, and futility of the porter's onerous task of moving a huge boulder uphill that the persona foregrounds. And yet the porter is undeterred in doing the impossible and perhaps profitless job of heaving the boulder uphill; he is impelled by the plight of the countless mouths that depend on him for food. The narrator poses the disturbing question: Will the boulder crush the porter to death? If the question appearing at the end of the poem remains unanswered, it also diminishes the need for the question of wages that may accrue from the task. In other words, the possibility of death supersedes the issue of whether the porter gets paid. Clearly, in "Mashindano" the poet reenacts the Greek narrative of Sisyphus who continually rolls a boulder uphill only for the boulder to come tumbling down.³⁵ Although the speaker in the poem alludes to a third person struggling to heave the rock up an endless hill, one is bound to discern that the person in question is indeed the narrating self from the line "Ole wangu wee! [Oh! Woe unto me!]" in the final stanza. Also, although the rock is not directly said to be rolling back in "Mashindano," the sense of futility that pervades the poem suggests such possibility.

It is tempting to read this poem as being primarily concerned with the economic imperative, to interpret it as a classic case of a hardworking porter trying to make ends meet in a thankless economic system that has perfected depriving and denying workers. Given Mazrui's leftist orientation, such interpretation may seem plausible. While not altogether discounting such an interpretation, I think being attentive to the context of the poem points toward Mazrui himself as the porter and hence is suggestive that the task of heaving the stone uphill symbolizes activism against the Moi regime. Incarceration allows for self-scrutiny for the revolutionary, enabling the detainee to take

stock of his or her individual role in particular and the general direction of the struggle. Mazrui seems to acknowledge the enormity of the task at hand. In this poem Mazrui creates a self that is a “loner” or lone ranger thrust into loneliness and solitude through the isolation concomitant with detention. He may strive to push the boulder of Moi’s tyranny up the mountain, but the danger of it rolling back and crushing him looms large. The exclamation “Ole wangu [Woe unto me]” is therefore applicable to Mazrui the political detainee pondering the “perilous moment” of detention and being uncertain of his release, much less the success of the revolutionary struggle for which detention has made him an ineffectual lone ranger. Or is he that ineffectual? One could say that Mazrui heaves the boulder of the Moi tyranny fundamentally and solely through writing while incarcerated. At the perilous moment of detention, he continues writing without knowing whether or when these works of literature created in captivity would see the light of day. He has no clue at that moment whether prison authorities will find his resistance literature and confiscate or destroy it, crushing him and his precious prison oeuvre.

However, in trying to present various versions of the “I” that tend to reflect and refract his selfhood, Mazrui does not always foreground the ideological at the expense of the essentially human. The sense of being or becoming human that his various “I” pronouns in *Chembe cha Moyo* aspire to or despair aspiring to is not obscured by a quest for ideological abstractions. This is so despite or because of the poet’s manifestly Marxist stance. Granted, Mazrui’s uncle, Ali Mazrui, has aptly characterized his nephew as a Kenyatta University instructor “who was detained without charge by the Moi regime for being a left-wing Kenyan academic.”³⁶ But in the poem “Mimi ni Mimi” (I Am Me), there is ostensibly a vehement disavowal of ideologues and the ideologies and ideals with which they identify themselves or are characteristically identified.³⁷ The narrating “I” refuses to be branded in accord with any ideological orientation:

Waniita mkomunisti
Waniita mkapitalisti
Na mimi ni binadamu tu,
Kwani hilo halitoshi?

[They call me a communist
They call me a capitalist
And yet I am just human
Isn't that enough?]³⁸

The narrating “I” in this poem conceives of a selfhood that is not mediated through opposing ideological branding or paroxysms. Ideologies or ideological branding, whether accurate or inaccurate, glosses over the quintessential human attributes embodied in the self. Furthermore, emphasis on ideological differences tends to overlook our common humanity, or that we are fellow passengers on the train of life. To the poet humans everywhere face challenges so similar as to make fiery arguments over ideology or ideological identification and differentiation count for little or nothing. But by tending to reject ideology and invoking his sense of humanity, the speaker in the poem may be said to be seeking solace in a fundamental truth that humans have flagrantly trampled on throughout history. The detaining authorities do not fully appreciate or acknowledge the humanity of the detainees as they do their own, otherwise they would not subject them to extreme dehumanizing conditions as they often do. Nagel’s allusion to the overriding “logic of revenge” in the postcolonial African prison industrial complex in this chapter’s epigraph underscores this negation of humanity. When and if my humanity is denied or negated as now, the self in Mazrui’s poem seems to be saying, it behooves me to console myself with both the declaration and the knowledge that I am still human. The poem is, therefore, the poet’s attempt to stake a claim on subjectivity as opposed to being regarded as a mere object. Only that staking a claim on humanity appears to come at the expense of repudiating something held dear.

The apparent disavowal of ideological identification or taxonomy in the poem, including that of the leftist variety that undergirds Mazrui’s activism, should only be accepted with a caveat. The poet creates an image of a self that renounces ideology; rather it is a self that values the fundamental sense of just being human. Yet there is a level of inherent contradiction or irony in this self’s disavowal of ideology, since the disavowal itself is based on ideology, the ideology of devaluing ideology. At the same time, by deigning to claim he is not to be branded a communist and any number of ideological tags, the self seems to point to the rehabilitative propensity of detention, its

capacity to reform a detainee hitherto corrupted by hated and dangerous ideology. The Kenyan state would not have been more pleased than to hear a detained leftist intellectual recanting any and all ideology, including his leftist stance. It is supposedly a true measure of the success of the prison system. Nonetheless, I think the disavowing self and voice in the poem is only a ploy the poet employs to hoodwink the authorities that he has reformed. As Barbara Harlow states in *Barred: Women, Writing, and Political Detention*, “penal institutions aim to function as part of the state’s coercive apparatus of physical detention and ideological containment.”³⁹ And the tenor and thrust of Mazrui’s poem tends to delude the state into celebrating its victory over the poet. But is the state really triumphant in this regard, earning for itself this ostensibly double success of effecting on Mazrui both “physical detention and ideological containment”?

Implicated in this humanist impulse in Mazrui’s poetry is an acute awareness of personal tragedy and trauma. It is true that some of the poems are concerned about the global village, about humanity, and about disenchantment with the postcolonial situation in Africa and other all-encompassing issues that affect larger collectivities or entities. But *Chembecha Moyo* is more than a chronicle of the faceless “inner feelings” of the third world as the writer of the back cover purports; it is also, if not more, about what the back cover and the introduction do not say—namely, meditation on the personal trauma and tragedy of incarceration. The poems in the anthology amply demonstrate how incarceration, isolation, torture, and trauma are inextricably bound up together. Therefore, poems like “Niguse,” which thematize incarceration, do not only locate detention as the site for writing but also bring to the fore the extent of the site’s traumatizing potential. Apart from “Niguse” there are a number of poems in the anthology that underwrite this sense of trauma in Mazrui’s poetic narration of self and confinement. For example, in “Kifungoni,” the speaker relates both the desolation of his sense of self and the dissipation or disappearance of hope for recovery:

Kwa kuangalia juu mbinguni
Na kulia sana kwa matumaini
Samawati imeingia
Mwangu machoni.

Kwa kuota mahindi mashambani
Na kulia sana mahuzuni
Manjano imeingia
Mwangu machoni.

Waache majemadari waende vitani
Wapenzi waende bustanini
Na walimu mwao darasani
Ama mimi, tasbihi nipeni
Na kiti cha kale, cha zamani
Niwe vivi nilivyo duniani:
Bawabu mlangoni
Katika kingo ya maumivu ya ndani
Maadamu vitabu, sheria na zote dini

Zitanihakikisha mauti

Nikiwa na njaa au kifungoni
[Because of looking up in the heavens
and weeping so much with optimism
The color blue has entered
into my eyes.

Because of the sprouting of corn in the fields
and weeping so much with sorrow
The color yellow has entered
into my eyes.

Let the commanders go to war
Lovers to the park
And teachers to their classrooms
As for me give me prayer beads
And an ancient chair, an old one
So that I can remain the way I am in the world:
A Sentry at the door
On the banks of inner pain
So long as books, the law and every religion
Will ensure my death

In my famished or incarcerated state.]⁴⁰

The speaker's "kulia sana kwa matumaini [weeping so much with optimism]" in the opening stanza is not a mark of optimism, but a postoptimism reevaluation of his state as an incarcerated individual. At any rate, that weeping has borne no tangible benefits. To the contrary, his eyes have turned blue, for nothing, one could say, because the much hoped for divine intervention has not materialized, much less changed his material reality. It is instructive that the initial "weeping with optimism" soon turns into "kulia sana mahuzuni [weeping so much with sorrow]." The trauma is intensified by the knowledge that while one languishes in detention, other people such as army generals, lovers, and teachers go about their duties as if there is nothing amiss.

But for the speaking "state guest," incarceration is never business as usual because of the attendant traumatizing deprivation of basic human rights and agency that it causes. The recourse to "tashbihi" (prayer beads) is not driven by optimism or deep religious devotion but a resignation to one's despondent destiny. The speaker in saying "Maadamu vitabu, sheria na zote dini / Zitanihakikisha mauti [So long as books, the law and every religion / Will ensure my death]" is fundamentally voicing a death wish. When the speaker alludes to "inner pain," he seems to imply the deep psychological trauma that gnaws at him in his incarcerated state. This inner pain is certainly related to what the back cover writer terms "hisia za ndani" (inner feelings) except that the inner pain here points to Mazrui's imaginative projection of the trauma of detention rather than the hazy and faceless third world to which the back cover points.

The poet's "weeping with optimism" and "inner pain" are, then, to be regarded as both individual and collective, touching on his own lived experience as an incarcerated artist and the lived experience of Africa's postcolonial subjects. As someone incarcerated and objectified, he yearns for subjectivity and utilizes prison poetry as the means to achieve this end. "Weeping with optimism" is oxymoronic, but suggestive of the underlying hope amid the hopelessness of "weeping with sorrow" in postcolonial Africa. There is weeping because there is cause for weeping; African leaders have bungled independence and turned against their own people. It is not weeping for one's own sake, however. The lamentation is tinged with

hope for a better future. In other words, postcolonial Africa is at once in a state of optimism and pessimism, simultaneously eliciting Afro-optimism and Afropessimism. Therefore, in trying to humanize himself, Mazrui uses his prison poetry to point to the dialectical duality of Africa's postcolonial predicament. If prison writing such as Mazrui's is a part of the "dirty little secret" of African literature, it is because the conditions of its emergence are a testament to the complexity of the postcolonial predicament. But for the individual incarcerated poet, composing such prison poetry is an escape route from despair and deprivation to the sense of becoming human again.

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Notes

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3. *Ibid.*, 87.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, 85.
6. Amartya Sen, "Elements of a Theory of Human Rights," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 32, no. 4 (2004): 315.
7. Mark F. N. Franke, "A Critique of the Universalisability of Critical Human Rights Theory: The Displacement of Immanuel Kant," *Human Rights Review* 14 (2013): 368–385.
8. Sen, "Elements of a Theory of Human Rights," 317.
9. Ioan Davies, *Writers in Prison* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 54.
10. Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson, *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 139.
11. Robin D. G. Kelley, "A Poetics of Anticolonialism," introduction to *Discourse on Colonialism* by Aimé Césaire, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review, 2000), 8.
12. Winnie Madikizela Mandela, *Part of My Soul Went with Him*, ed. Mary Benson (New York: Norton, 1984), 105.
13. Kelley, "A Poetics of Anticolonialism," 28.
14. Njuguna Mutahi and Mugo Theuri, *We Lived to Tell* (Nairobi, Kenya: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2003), 13.
15. Alamin Mazrui, *Chembe cha Moyo* (Nairobi, Kenya: East African Education Publishers, 1988); and Wahome Mutahi, *Three Days on the Cross* (Nairobi, Kenya: East African Education Publishers, 1991).
16. Basil Davidson, *The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State* (New York: Random House, 1992), 9.

17. Ibid.
18. Pieter Boele van Hensbroek, "Review: Cursing the Nation-State," *Transition*, no. 61 (1993): 114–122.
19. Mechthild Nagel, "'I Write What I Like': African Prison Intellectuals and the Struggle for Freedom," *Journal of Pan African Studies* 2, no. 3 (2008): 73.
20. Mutahi and Theuri, *We Lived to Tell*.
21. Mazrui, *Chembe*. All translations from Swahili are mine.
22. Alamin Mazrui, email communication with the author, March 6, 2007.
23. Mazrui, "Niguse," in *Chembe*, 1.
24. Mazrui, *Chembe*, 14, 27, 33, 40.
25. Nagel, "'I Write What I Like,'" 78.
26. Taffara Deguefe, *A Tripping Stone: Ethiopian Prison Diary* (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: Addis Ababa University Press, 2003).
27. See Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary* (Nairobi, Kenya: East African Education Publishers, 1981), 6. See also Kunle Ajidabe, *Jailed for Life: A Reporter's Prison Notes* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Heinemann, 2003), 107–109. In his prison memoir, Ajibade points to the sustaining power of religious activity and narrates how "We [Nigerian political prisoners] found solace in Christianity and Islam as we waited for [President Sani] Abacha to decide our fate" (107).
28. Mazrui, "Niguse," 14.
29. Alexander Elison, "Opening the Circle: Storyteller and Audience in the Moroccan Prison Literature," *Middle East Literature* 12, no. 3 (2009): 294.
30. Mazrui, "Nitangojea," in *Chembe*, 8.
31. Mazrui, "Mtabiri," in *Chembe*, 52.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid., 53.
34. Mazrui, "Mashindano," in *Chembe*, 31.
35. Ibid., 31.
36. Ali Mazrui, "Pan-Africanism and the Intellectual Rise, Decline and Revival," in *African Intellectuals: Rethinking Politics, Language, Gender and Development*, ed. Thandika Mkandawire (Dakar, Senegal: CODESRIA, 2005), 60.
37. Mazrui, "Mimi ni Mimi," in *Chembe*, 12.
38. Ibid.
39. Barbara Harlow, *Barred: Women Writing, and Political Detention* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1992), 24.
40. Mazrui, "Kifungoni," in *Chembe*, 13.