Poetics and Prose of Resistance: Marginalization and Agency in Jack Mapanje's The *Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison* and Tendai Hunchu's *the Hairdresser of Harere.*

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Abstract

This paper undertakes a comparative analysis of Jack Mapanje's *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison* and Tendai Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare*, two influential works from East and Southern Africa that reflect critical currents in contemporary African literature. The researcher adopts postcolonial theory as theoretical anchor, using primary and secondary sources of data collection. While Mapanje's poetry arises from the claustrophobic confines of political imprisonment under Malawi's authoritarian regime, Huchu's novel explores the vibrant yet morally rigid society of post-independent Zimbabwe. The study discovers how both writers use distinct literary forms—poetry and prose—to critique oppressive systems and illuminate personal and collective struggles. Despite their divergent historical and political contexts, both works exemplify the resilience of the human spirit and the enduring role of African literature as a tool for resistance. This comparative study discovers the relevance of both texts within African literary traditions to the ongoing conversations about voice, agency,

and liberation in postcolonial Africa. The paper concludes that literature remains a powerful site for resistance and transformation.

Keywords: Literature; Truth-Telling; Resistance; Reflection; Transformation.

Introduction

African literature, in its diverse forms and voices, serves as a mirror of the continent's turbulent history, dynamic cultures, and persistent struggles for identity, justice, and freedom. From the colonial era through post-independence realities and into the modern-day complexities of urban life, African writers have employed their craft not just to entertain but to resist, reflect, and reform. Among the various regions of the continent, East Africa has produced a rich body of literary works that confront themes such as marginalization, political oppression, social injustice, gender inequality, and the enduring spirit of the people. Two compelling texts that exemplify these concerns are Jack Mapanje's *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison* and Tendai Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare*.

Jack Mapanje, a Malawian poet and academic, wrote *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison* while incarcerated without charge during the dictatorial regime of Hastings Banda. The poetry, written under extreme duress, is a raw yet poetic commentary on the absurdities of authoritarian rule, the resilience of the human spirit, and the subtle power of metaphor in confronting censorship and brutality (Mapanje). On the other hand, Zimbabwean author Tendai Huchu explores contemporary urban life in *The Hairdresser of Harare*, a novel that blends humor, satire, and social critique to highlight the complexities of gender, class,

and sexuality in a society wrestling with economic hardship and moral hypocrisy (25).

Though these works are grounded in different historical and political contexts—Mapanje's being a poetic resistance to state imprisonment, and Huchu's a prose narrative navigating postcolonial urbanity—they both contribute significantly to the main currents in African literature. These include resistance to tyranny, exploration of identity, and representation of marginalized voices. By examining the thematic and stylistic elements of these two texts, this paper explores how African literature continues to bear witness to their society, challenge oppressive structures, and assert the dignity of the African experience. This study argues that Mapanje and Huchu, through their distinct narratives, reveal the enduring power of literature as a form of truth-telling, resistance, identity formation, and social transformation.

Historical and Political Context

Understanding the socio-political environments in which Jack Mapanje and Tendai Huchu wrote is essential to grasping the depth of their literary works. Both *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison* and *The Hairdresser of Harare* are deeply rooted in the historical and political realities of their respective countries—Malawi and Zimbabwe—reflecting both the visible and silent struggles of their people in the postcolonial era.

Jack Mapanje's incarceration without trial from 1987 to 1991 was emblematic of the repressive political climate in Malawi under President Hastings Kamuzu Banda. Banda ruled Malawi as a one-party state for over three decades, marked by authoritarianism, censorship, and suppression of dissent. Intellectuals, writers, and critics were often targets of state surveillance and arbitrary detention. Mapanje, then a university lecturer and published poet, was arrested after the

publication of his first poetry collection *Of Chameleons and Gods* (1981), which subtly criticized the regime through metaphor and imagery. Though no official charges were ever filed, his imprisonment in the infamous Mikuyu prison was widely viewed as punishment for his bold literary voice (xii). His second collection, *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison*, was composed during this detention and smuggled out of prison. The poems, laden with coded language and natural imagery, document the psychological toll of political incarceration and the indomitable strength of the human spirit.

Tendai Huchu's Zimbabwe, though different in context, shared similarities in the form of systemic decay and suppression of alternative voices. Following independence in 1980, Zimbabwe, under President Robert Mugabe, transitioned from liberation euphoria to economic collapse, political unrest, and widespread social inequality. By the 2000s, Zimbabwe faced hyperinflation, unemployment, and emigration crises. Simultaneously, strict social norms, homophobia, and classism continued to plague daily life. *The Hairdresser of Harare*, set in the midst of this decline, captures the contradictions of urban Zimbabwe—vibrant yet broken, hopeful yet hypocritical. Through the voice of Vimbai, a talented but prejudiced hairdresser, Huchu reveals the moral complexities of a society torn between tradition and modernity (15).

While Mapanje writes from the dark interior of political imprisonment and censorship, Huchu's narrative explores the surface realities of postcolonial urban life. Both writers use their art as a means of resistance: Mapanje resists silence and oblivion; Huchu resists moral dogmatism and societal decay. These historical contexts illuminate the writers' motivations and ground their works within the larger discourse of African literature as a tool for truth-telling and transformation.

Postcolonial Theory as Theoretical Anchor

The Postcolonial critical theory is propounded by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin in their canonical work on postcolonial studies, *The Empire Writes Back*: *Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* published in 1989. They define postcolonial as "all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day" (2). The Postcolonial critical theory deals with the postcolonial literary works that are produced as a reaction to colonial domination from the time of colonialism to the present day. This literary theory investigates the outcomes of the oppression of European colonialism on the oppressed indigenous people of those countries which were once under the control of the British Empire. Echezona Ifejirika quoting a critic on postcolonial literature attests that:

> Post-colonial literature refers to a body of writing from Europe's former colony which addresses questions of history, identity, ethnicity, and language. The term is to date, the most convenient way of embracing the powerful and diverse body of literary responses to the challenges presented by decolonization and the transition to independence and post-independence in a wide variety of political and cultural texts…It is a form of literature that tilts more towards self–examination and evaluation of the state of affairs in the independent states after the formal withdrawal of the colonial masters (136).

To sum it up, Postcolonial theory mirrors the major function of Postcolonial African literature which seeks to provoke social introspection. It reinstates the values and traditions of the African man which seeks to tell her own story. Postcolonial theory documents political incarceration and the indomitable strength of the human spirit. It looks into issues of past experiences with the intention of telling the truth and forestalling a new phase of distasteful experiences, by ways of correcting and engineering social transformation. These ideas inherent in postcolonial theory will be apt in the comparative analysis of Mapanje and Huchu's distinct genres and narratives.

Poetics and Prose of Resistance: Marginalization and Agency in Jack Mapanje's *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison* and **Tendai Hunchu's *The Hairdresser of Harere.***

Jack Mapanje's *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison* is a seminal work in African prison literature that offers a poignant critique of authoritarianism while celebrating the resilience of the human spirit. The poems, written under conditions of duress during his unlawful incarceration in Malawi's Mikuyu Prison, serve as a testament to literature's enduring capacity to resist oppression, document injustice, and preserve human dignity. Mapanje's poetic expression is deeply rooted in African oral traditions, metaphor, and political symbolism, contributing to what scholars refer to as the "poetics of resistance" in African literature (102).

At the heart of the collection is Mapanje's lived experience of unjust imprisonment, censorship, and the absurdity of authoritarianism under Hastings Banda's dictatorship. His arrest, as previously mentioned, was never accompanied by formal charges, reflecting the arbitrary and often absurd logic of authoritarian regimes. In the poem "On

Boredom and the Rats", Mapanje metaphorically explores the monotony, fear, and psychological disintegration faced by prisoners. The rats are not just literal pests but symbols of the invasive and degrading nature of state control: "The rats… gnawing away our thoughts and shoes alike" (21). Here, Mapanje equates the regime's attempt to destroy intellectual thought with physical decay, a theme common in prison literature across Africa.

One of the most symbolic and recurrent images in the collection is that of the chattering wagtails—small, seemingly insignificant birds that flutter freely near the prison walls. These birds, unbothered by the high fences and guards, symbolize freedom, resilience, and the contrast between nature's liberty and man's cruel confinement. In the titular poem, Mapanje writes, "Even wagtails chattered unmolested by state house crows" (5). The juxtaposition of the carefree wagtails against the oppressive "state house crows" subtly mocks the regime's obsession with control and reveals nature as a silent witness to tyranny. This symbolism aligns with a broader current in African literature where nature becomes both a refuge and a form of resistance. Writers such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Wole Soyinka have similarly used nature and animals to critique power while circumventing censorship. Mapanje follows this lineage but with a uniquely Malawian voice, embedding his critique in the familiar landscapes of Southern Africa.

The poem explores a vital theme of memory, isolation and resistance—not just as recollection but as resistance. Through recollections of family, friends, and academic life, Mapanje asserts a psychological defiance against attempts to erase his identity. In poems like "Of Boredom, Time and the Clock," time drags on endlessly, yet memory becomes a source of sanity and structure. The act of remembering, writing, and imagining freedom allows him to maintain his mental and emotional integrity. Mapanje's poetry

also explores spiritual resilience, often referencing Christian motifs and prayers not as signs of submission, but as personal sources of strength. His language is layered—at once restrained and intense, personal and political. This duality is a survival strategy, reflecting the African literary tradition of using coded language to speak truth to power.

Stylistically, Mapanje's poetry uses poetic form as a Protest, it draws from oral traditions: free verse, repetition, and rhythm. These features not only reflect African poetic aesthetics but also serve to democratize his work, making it accessible and rooted in community. His rejection of strict Western poetic structures is itself a political choice—a literary decolonization that aligns with the larger anti-colonial currents in African literature.

Moreover, the poems do not adopt a tone of bitterness but of careful irony and intellectual resistance. Mapanje does not merely curse his jailers; instead, he questions the entire system with a composed voice that makes the horror even more chilling. As Binyavanga Wainaina noted in his reflections on prison poetry, "What is unsaid in African prison literature often roars louder than what is declared" (67). Through *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison*, Mapanje does not just recount his ordeal—he transforms it into a literary weapon. The collection stands as a beacon of African poetic resistance, embodying themes that transcend his personal experience to echo the wider African struggle against tyranny, silencing, and dehumanization.

Tendai Hunchu's *The Hairdresser of Harere.*

Tendai Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare* is a contemporary African novel that captures the contradictions, complexities, and crises of post-independence Zimbabwe. Set in urban Harare, the novel centers around Vimbai, a successful hairdresser, and her evolving

relationship with a mysterious colleague, Dumisani. Beneath its vibrant, accessible storytelling lies a sharp critique of social hypocrisy, gender roles, classism, and the marginalization of LGBTQ+ individuals. Huchu's work stands out as a bold contribution to African urban literature, illuminating lives often hidden or silenced.

Huchu situates his narrative within a collapsing Zimbabwean urban life and economic realities. The story reflects a country struggling under hyperinflation, unemployment, and political dysfunction. Vimbai's salon, while colorful and lively, is also a microcosm of national hardship. Her clients, colleagues, and conversations reflect a collective struggle to survive in a crumbling society. Huchu writes, "We all wore the same perfume called poverty, some more liberally than others" (48). This metaphor captures the class disparities in Harare while emphasizing a shared, unavoidable suffering.

In this way, the novel aligns with a significant current in African literature: the portrayal of urban spaces not only as sites of aspiration but also as places of profound resistance and disillusionment. Much like in the works of Meja Mwangi and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Huchu portrays the African city as a paradox—vibrant yet decaying, modern yet rooted in outdated traditions.

One of the novel's most striking themes is social hypocrisy and the moral policing prevalent in Zimbabwean society. Vimbai, the narrator, often expresses judgments that reflect internalized societal biases—particularly towards Dumisani, whose sexual orientation becomes a central conflict in the story. The eventual revelation that Dumisani is gay causes a rupture, not because of his skill or humanity, but because of the deep-seated homophobia that runs through Zimbabwean culture.

Huchu uses Vimbai's character to expose this hypocrisy. She is at once sympathetic and problematic, representing the average citizen who is both victim of and complicit in societal injustice. Her transformation over the course of the novel suggests that true change must begin at the individual level. The novel thus challenges the reader to confront their own prejudices, mirroring the function of much of postcolonial African literature, which seeks to provoke social introspection. As Huchu notes through Dumisani's quiet dignity and eventual downfall, there is a "truth that dares not speak its name" (172). This aligns *The Hairdresser of Harare* with African literary texts that highlight the silent suffering of marginalized groups, particularly LGBTQ+ individuals whose narratives have long been excluded from mainstream African fiction.

The novel is also deeply invested in exploring gender roles and the intersections of power and identity. Vimbai navigates a male-dominated society by asserting herself professionally, but she is also hemmed in by traditional expectations of womanhood—marriage, motherhood, and submission. Her conflict with Dumisani—who is not only more talented but also subverts traditional masculinity—reflects deeper insecurities about her place in society.

Huchu challenges these gendered dynamics, portraying women like Vimbai's mother and Mrs. Khumalo as both enforcers and victims of patriarchal norms. The beauty salon itself is a space of female empowerment and self-expression, yet it is also a battleground of gossip, judgment, and control. This duality reflects the complexity of African women's lives in urban centers, caught between liberation and repression.

In this way, Huchu contributes to the evolving narrative of African feminism in literature, paralleling authors like Tsitsi Dangarembga and Sefi Atta, who use

female characters to interrogate social and gender norms.

Stylistically, Huchu's language is accessible, witty, and colloquial. He integrates Shona expressions and local idioms, grounding the story in its cultural context while ensuring authenticity. Humor plays a critical role, softening the harsh realities of life in Harare and making the characters more relatable. Through Vimbai's often humorous narration, readers are drawn into a world that is both painfully real and tenderly human. This narrative voice makes the novel appealing to a broad audience, reflecting a shift in African literature toward inclusivity and relatability. As literary critic Mpalive-Hangson Msiska observes, "New African narratives aim not only to challenge the past but also to engage the present with humor, intimacy, and honesty" (134).

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Comparative Analysis: Mapanje and Huchu in Dialogue

Though Jack Mapanje's *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison* and Tendai Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare* differ in genre, tone, and historical context, both texts offer profound insights into the socio-political landscapes of East and Southern Africa. They explore themes of freedom, identity, marginalization, and resistance, reflecting distinct yet overlapping literary currents within African literature.

The most immediate difference between the two works lies in their form. Mapanje's poetry is compact, metaphorical, and symbolic—each poem a distilled moment of resistance. His verses demand careful attention and often rely on metaphor and implication, especially given the context of censorship and surveillance. In contrast, Huchu's novel employs a linear narrative with vivid dialogue and characterization. The prose format allows

for a more expansive and detailed exploration of everyday life, particularly the interactions and complexities within urban Harare.

However, both authors use their respective forms as tools of critique. Mapanje's poems are sharpened weapons against tyranny, while Huchu's novel uses narrative and characterization to unmask the silent injustices in post-colonial Zimbabwean society. Both forms serve their purposes effectively: poetry as compressed resistance, prose as immersive exposure. A significant point of convergence between the two texts is their focus on marginalization and resistance. Mapanje writes from the literal margins of society—prison—highlighting the experiences of political prisoners and intellectuals silenced by autocratic regimes. His poems are a quiet rebellion, a form of intellectual survival. Meanwhile, Huchu gives voice to sexual minorities and women navigating a deeply patriarchal and morally conservative society. Dumisani, the quietly gay hairdresser, and Vimbai, a strong but judgmental woman, symbolize different kinds of social exclusion and resistance. Mapanje resists externally imposed imprisonment; Huchu's characters battle internalized social prisons—bigotry, poverty, and tradition. This juxtaposition reflects different types of oppression: one imposed by the state, the other by society.

Freedom—its absence, its illusion, and its pursuit—is a central theme in both texts. For Mapanje, freedom is physical, mental, and symbolic. The wagtails that flutter around Mikuyu Prison symbolize the unattainable liberty his jailers cannot steal. For Huchu's Dumisani, freedom is sexual and personal, but it remains elusive in a homophobic society. The tension between one's inner truth and societal expectations defines the struggle for freedom in *The Hairdresser of Harare*.

In both works, the human spirit remains defiant. Mapanje refuses to break under the weight of censorship, while

Dumisani maintains his dignity despite betrayal and societal rejection. The characters and voices in both texts refuse to conform, aligning with African literature's longstanding tradition of using the written word to challenge oppression and celebrate resilience. Mapanje's Malawi is portrayed as a controlled, closed, and intimidating space—defined by prison walls, guards, and silence. Nature becomes a voice of protest. In contrast, Huchu's Zimbabwe is noisy, bustling, and chaotic. The hair salon becomes a space for gossip, confrontation, and survival. Despite the differences, both authors use their settings to mirror their societies' political climates. The urban realism of Huchu's Harare contrasts with Mapanje's claustrophobic prison, yet both serve the same literary purpose: to illuminate injustice and spark reflection. Each environment is both a character and a context, shaping the actions and reactions of the people within them.

Both works engage with dominant currents in African literature, including: Postcolonial disillusionment: Mapanje critiques the failure of the post-independence state to uphold justice, echoing themes in the works of Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. Social critique: Huchu uses humor and realism to expose societal flaws, aligning with modern African writers such as NoViolet Bulawayo and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Voice and agency: Both authors prioritize silenced voices—political prisoners, LGBTQ+ individuals, women—reflecting a shift in African literature toward inclusivity and multiplicity. As literary critic Charles Nnolim asserts, "African literature continues to evolve as a space where suppressed truths find form and silenced voices are given language" (89). Both Mapanje and Huchu contribute significantly to this evolution.

Jack Mapanje's *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison* and Tendai Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare* represent distinct yet deeply connected strands in the evolving fabric of East

African and Southern African literature. Though different in genre, context, and narrative approach, both works powerfully interrogate the human condition under oppressive systems—be they political, cultural, or social. Mapanje, through his poignant prison poetry, crafts a voice of defiance in the face of dictatorship, censorship, and unjust incarceration. His verses are not only a testimony to the cruelty of Kamuzu Banda's regime in Malawi but also a celebration of the unyielding spirit of intellectual and artistic freedom. The natural imagery of the wagtails, the metaphoric references to silence and speech, and the evocative rhythm of his poetry position *The Chattering Wagtails* as a seminal work in prison literature and postcolonial African resistance writing.

Huchu, on the other hand, uses fiction to unpack everyday injustices embedded within Zimbabwe's urban life. His novel boldly tackles themes such as gender roles, classism, and sexual identity, bringing to the forefront marginalized voices often excluded in mainstream African narratives. The humor, irony, and honesty in *The Hairdresser of Harare* reflect a maturing literary voice that challenges dominant cultural ideologies while advocating for empathy and inclusion.

Conclusion

These texts both demonstrate the richness and diversity of African literature, especially within the postcolonial and contemporary spheres. They remind readers and scholars alike that African literature is not monolithic—it evolves, resists, questions, and affirms. Mapanje and Huchu, each in his own right, contribute to the continuity of African literary tradition while simultaneously pushing its boundaries. In the broader framework of *Main Currents in African Literature*, both

works underscore the persistent relevance of literature as a tool for activism, healing, and reflection. They illustrate how African writers continue to document history, confront societal ills, and envision new realities through their craft. Whether through the bars of a prison cell or the chatter of a hair salon, literature remains a powerful site for truth-telling and transformation.

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