



**MEMORIES OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN'S REPRESENTATION IN
MARSHA SKRYPUCH'S *MAKING BOMBS FOR HITLER* AND TIYAMBE
ZELEZA'S *SMOULDERING CHARCOAL***

BY

Eyoh Etim

Department of English,
Akwa Ibom State University
+2348027898705
eyohetim29@gmail.com

and

Catherine Gilbert,

School of Modern Languages,
Newcastle University, UK
+447741463730
CatherineGilbert@newcastle.ac.uk

Abstract

In this paper, we deploy the comparative approach in exploring the conditions of women and children caught in Hitler's dictatorship of Nazi Germany and that of Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda of Malawi. The paper is motivated by the need to centralise the traumatic experiences of women and children in dictatorial spaces and how these experiences are remembered and represented in contemporary academic culture. Leaning on theoretical approaches drawn from cultural memory and cultural trauma, among other related concepts and frameworks, we base our analysis on Paul Zeleza's *Smouldering Charcoal* and Marsha Skrypuch's *Making Bombs for Hitler*. The analysis of the primary data sources reveals striking commonalities in the portrayal of women and children in Malawian and Western (Nazi) cultural spaces which reminds everyone about the structuralism of dictatorship irrespective of space or the ideologies that undergird it. We also find out that women and children were not only victims of dictatorial rule, they were also agents of resistance, whose invaluable, but little acknowledged, contributions led to the end of dictatorship in their domains.

Keywords: Dictatorship in Literature, Women and Children in Dictatorship, Cultural Memory, Cultural Trauma, Nazism and Malawian Dictatorship

How to Cite this Paper:

Etim, E.& Gilbert, C(2024). “ Memories Of Women And Children's Representation In Marsha Skrypuch's *Making Bombs For Hitler* And Tiyambe Zeleza's *Smouldering Charcoal*.” *Planeyo Jornal of Art and Humanities*. Maiden Edition, 51-67.

Introduction

The vulnerability of women and children in any dystopian setting and situation has been rarefied in many existing discourses. This is not unconnected with the positions of Otherness occupied by women and children in society and in textual practices. When it comes to dictatorship, women and children usually are the hardest hit due to their vulnerability and helplessness. However, when discussing the menace of dictatorship in society, women's and children's suffering and roles are often residual in significance. This explains the decision to, in this paper, centralise the effects of dictatorship on women and children within the context provided us by the Nazi and Malawian cultural spaces. Though it is not likely that Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda, the Life President of Malawi, adopted his dictatorial methods from Adolf Hitler, we have noted the intersections in the dictatorial narratives of Nazi Germany and those of Malawi under Dr Banda. These intertextual relations are most striking in terms of the representation of women and children as at once victims and agents of resistance in their different political spaces.

Cultural appropriation and reverse psychology characterised the victimisation of women and children in Nazi Germany and Banda's Malawi. Jennifer Llewellyn *et al* (2020) report that Hitler believed in securing the loyalty of children through intense propaganda. In order to achieve this goal, the education system was carefully calibrated and designed to inculcate ideals of racial superiority, the supremacy of the Aryan race, loyalty to Hitler and the need to serve the Nazi regime selflessly in any assigned capacity. Erin Blackmore (2023) has equally reported on the place of young people in Nazi Germany, especially the activities of the Hitler Youth which draws parallel with the Malawian Young Pioneers, the paramilitary Youth wing of the Malawi Congress Party (MCP). Blackmore (2023) maintains that children who had been raised in Nazi ideologies became obedient and fanatical in the service of the *Fuhrer*.

In the Malawian context, Alison Jones and Domoka Manda (2006, p. 205) have written on the nature of education in Banda's Malawi, emphasising the idea that the education system was highly regimented and regulated in keeping with the personal tastes and dictates of the dictator, Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda. The university community was placed under espionage watch, certain subjects like political science were banned or taught as part of history, whose curriculum was subject to the approval of the regime. For instance, history was taught only if it promoted Dr Banda as the foremost nationalist who defeated the British and brought independence to Malawi. The other nationalists, especially those who later opposed Banda were never to be mentioned. Like the Nazi education system, the young people of Malawi were taught to be disciplined and obedient to Dr Banda. Just as the Hitler Youth were loyal to the Nazi leader, the Malawi Young Pioneers were loyal to Banda and their duties were similar in that the Young Pioneers maintained order during public ceremonies and acted as security guards to important political figures in the MCP government of Dr Banda.

Girls in Nazi Germany were raised to be mothers and obedient housewives as reported by Charu Gupta (1991). The Nazi regime, through reverse psychology and cultural appropriation, glorified motherhood, seeing its attainment as the ultimate goal of every

woman. The Nazi regime relied on women to gift the nation its new generations of Aryan race while at the same time sterilising the people of other races in what Gupta (1991, p. 40) refers to as 'race hygiene'. Prolific mothers were rewarded and saluted on special occasions. Cultural appropriation through reverse psychology is seen in the case of Malawi where Banda made himself not only the father figure of the Malawi society, but he also took the title of *Nkhoswe* I, meaning the number one defender of the women in Malawi, a clear appropriation of the *mbumba* tradition of the Malawian culture. This allowed Banda to control the women by dictating their dress code and sense of modesty (Lisa Gilman, 2004, p.39). During important state functions, women were expected to be draped in the uniforms that bore the face of the President, Dr Banda, and dance for his pleasure and that of his coterie of politicians. The songs that the women sang were appropriated from existing folksongs and religious hymns and abrogated to sing the praises of Banda (Emily Mkamanga, 2000, p.36), just as the Hitler Youth changed the Lord's Prayer to extol the image of Hitler as reported by Llewellyn (2023).

Apart from the foregoing, the atrocities of the Nazi regime were highlighted in the treatment of races other than the Aryans and the traumatic consequences of such treatments have been alluded to and studied by Cathy Caruth (1996) and Ann Kaplan (2005) who both, in varying ways and degrees, examine the 'unclaimed experiences' of the Jews in the memoirs of Sigmund Freud, Marguerite Duras and Sarah Kofman. Kaplan (2005), for instance, grapples with the concepts of trauma paradox and truth in trauma narratives, positing that trauma is manifested in self-narratives 'when the writer is struggling to communicate something powerful that happened in the past, something that the writer remembers. . . but which we are not to read as a literal rendering of truth' (p.43). For Caruth (1996), the truth claim of trauma arises because trauma is an event that is experienced 'too soon, too unexpected; to be fully known and is therefore not available to the consciousness until it imposes itself again. . . in nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor' (p.4). Hence, in Kaplan as well as in Caruth's thesis, trauma implies at once absence and ghosting whose reality cannot be denied.

The implication of trauma's elusive nature is that its manifestation is based on the politics that memory plays with the human mind as the trauma victim relies on the agency of their memory to recall the lost but haunting event. This is usually the point where recalled traumatic memory conflicts or varies with history. This is yet another issue that Caruth (1996, p.11)) grapples with when she opines that history serves to bridge the gaps left by memory because trauma being 'an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events' whose recall is usually delayed until later, there are bound to be lapses even as trauma itself often manifests in the 'recurrence of words, symbols and images that speak to the reenactment of pain' rather than a coherent recollection of the past. Perhaps, this explains why we consider cultural memory and cultural trauma as suitable theoretical approaches for the analysis of the primary data purposively selected for the study.

Wulf Kansteiner (2002, p.182) defines cultural memory as 'the body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose cultivation serves to stabilise and convey that society's self-image'. These cultural symbols, according to

Kansteiner, help members of a society to recall important events in the life of its history. For this study, we have selected such cultural objects from two cultural backgrounds: Nazi Germany and Banda's Malawi, to help us recollect the fateful events that marked historical milestones in the two cultural spaces. The remembrance is aimed at forestalling the recurrence of such events by making them constantly fresh in the living consciousness of the members of society. In this context, therefore, to remember is to caution because there are emerging tendencies in the spaces being studied that get one worried about the possibilities of re-experiencing the horrible events that are being remembered. One is the rise of the far-right movements in Europe and another is the recent strings of military coups in Africa. The way and manner that the Nazi regime in Germany treated people of other races like the Jews and Russians call to mind the recent immigration policies in America, the United Kingdom and some parts of Europe where there are increasing restrictions on the number of people allowed from 'Other' countries to gain entry for work and study purposes.

Closely linked to the concept of cultural memory is cultural trauma which examines how trauma affects 'the social fabric of a nation or culture during civil wars or in interactions or conflicts with other cultures or divergent subgroups of the same culture' (Hudnall Stamm *et al*, 2004, p.1). Cultural trauma, as defined by Stamm *et al* (2004), fits our discussion on the experiences of women and children in Nazi Germany and Banda's Malawi who were exposed to severe cultural violence which did a lot to alter the identity of the victims (Bonaventure Mkandawire 2010, p. 23), implying that trauma is usually implicated in the alteration of the victim's identity resulting in trauma culture which Reina Vander Wiel (2009, p.137) defines as 'an identity rooted in a conception of trauma entailing an abortive process of working through and acting out, and fostered by recurrent self-narration'.

The Nazi policies on women and children resulted in their traumatic experiences – the sudden change of circumstances, recurrent tragedies like loss and separation from family members, emotional anguish, haunting hunger, physical and mental exhaustion from overwork – all which coalesced with the fiery heat of racism to wound the mind of these women and children. In the Malawian context, the dictatorship of Banda showed its overarching determinism in the lives of women and children in terms of the anguish the women and children went through when their husbands and breadwinners were deprived of their rights, arrested and detained, killed or 'disappeared'. In the paragraphs that follow, we will analyse discursively the selected primary data sources to ascertain the traumatic memories of women and children in Nazi and Malawian dictatorial spaces.

Memories of Traumatic Experiences of Women and Children in Marsha Skrypuch's *Making Bombs for Hitler*

Published in 2012, Marsha Skrypuch's *Making Bombs for Hitler* depicts the Ostarbeiter phenomenon as practised in Nazi Germany during World War II. The Ostarbeiter designates those children who were forcefully taken from their homes in Nazi occupied territories to work as slave labourers in Nazi Germany during World War II. In their articles on the Ostarbeiter, Gelinada Grinchenko and Marta Olynyk (2012) present the Ostarbeiter

as a rarefied aspect of the Nazi/World War II memory studies, maintaining that the Ostarbeiter 'experience and memory had long remained on the periphery of official discourse' (401). The authors do not only report on the dire conditions of the slave labourers during their captivity in Nazi Germany, they also discuss the appropriation of their situation in the Soviet war propaganda meant to motivate hate and resistance towards the occupiers. It is interesting to observe that most of what Grinchenko and Olynyk (2012) report on the Osterbeiter are correlated in Skrypuch's *Making Bombs for Hitler*.

Skrypuch's *Making Bombs for Hitler* is a form of walking through for the narrator, Lida, who had been a child labourer in Nazi Germany during World War II. Telling the story implies that she is a survivor and her narrative constitutes and can be read as a survivor's testimony. *Making Bombs for Hitler* is a form of analepsis as the story is told after the events themselves had occurred. The story is told from the first person narrative point of view, which is consistent with most victim/survivor testimony narratives. The novel, which is organised in twenty-four chapters and an epilogue, also utilises the chronological plot structure which speaks to the idea of the narrator walking through all her trauma paths right from when she is captured alongside her younger sister, Larissa. They are soon separated through the Nazi eugenic experiment or test using a metal instrument. Lida will not see or hear from Larissa again until the end of the novel when she receives a letter from Larissa that she is in Canada and was the girl that Lida saw briefly in a German family's car during the war.

Lida is taken on a long and traumatic journey in a boxcar alongside other captured children from their village in Ukraine to Germany where they are forced to work for the Nazis from 1943 when the children are captured to the end of the war in 1945 when the children are liberated by the Allied/American forces. In this paper, we are interested in reading the traumatic memories, scenes and moments in the story in order to highlight the treatment of children and women in Nazi Germany during World War II. The first traumatic act that occurs to Lida and, indeed, Larissa, is the loss of their parents to the soviets and to the German dictators. This separation and loss would haunt Lida throughout the narrative because she keeps having haunting memories of not only her parents, but also of Larissa. The scene of the separation between Lida and Larissa has trauma marks on it. Larissa screams, 'Lida! Don't leave me!' When Lida tries to reach out to Larissa, she is slapped and held back. She goes on to narrate: 'I was thrown into blackness. With a screech of metal, the door slammed shut' (Skrypuch, 2012, p.7). Trauma, according to Henry Greenspan *et al* (2014, p.190), 'entails every anguish that survivors endure – and, much more broadly, it stands for historical catastrophe in general'. This explains why we perceive Skrypuch's *Making Bombs for Hitler* and Zeleza's *Smouldering Charcoal* as not only sites of memory, but also sites of traumatic human memories which must be recalled through analysis.

The journey motif which the novelist adopts in relating the traumatic tales in *Making Bombs for Hitler* intersects with the concept of retracing trauma stations in walking through, as well as alluding to the biblical stations of the cross; with the cross also serving as a key symbolism in the novel as it stands for Christianity which contrasts with the Nazi religious ideology which according to Zivord Milenovic (2001, p.385) was occultist and

satanic in nature, and this perception is sustained through the various inhumane actions taken by the Nazis against the vulnerable in the novel. These inhuman actions are seen to be traumatic and are so described in the analysis of the novel.

Trauma can be at once physical and psychological (Athanasios Anastasiadis, 2011) and denotes all life threatening situations that have potential for future psychological ramifications. These are the types of conditions that the Ostarbeiter are exposed to in Skrypuch's *Making Bombs for Hitler*. The children being transported from the Eastern Occupied territories to Western Germany are crammed together in a boxcar, left unattended to for days and survive through Hobbesian conditions. The motif of lack of space for the children is not only literal, but also figurative and is illustrated throughout the novel; whether in the boxcar or in the living space the Nazis provide for them in the work camps. Describing the conditions in the boxcar, the heroine-narrator writes that the train 'smelled like a dirty ban. . . It was so stuffy and stinky and crowded that I could barely breathe' (Skrypuch, 2012, p.7). At Barracks 7 where the Ostarbeiter are housed, the room is small and cold with an ineffective heating device, the bed spread and the pillows smell, making the narrator to comment: 'Such a small and mean place for thirty-six young girls' (Skrypuch, 2012, p.50).

The crammed train in which the unfortunate children are travelling in is depicted as a mobile prison cell. The children go unwashed and are infested with lice. There is one pail in the train which serves as toilet and it explains the foul smell in the train. It is this cruel condition that makes Marika, one of the captured children, fatally ill (Skrypuch, 2012, p.16). The children are frightened and frustrated. This is seen in how Lida keeps hammering on the door of the boxcar to be let out but is told by the boy, Luka, that her effort is futile.

Physical trauma manifests in the violent abuse meted out to the children by the Nazi agents in the novel. When the train makes a stop and the children are commanded to alight, Lida who is disoriented and ill, delays leaving the boxcar and lives to narrate the consequences as follows: 'All at once I felt a blow to my head. I fell out of the car and smacked into gravel on my hands and knees. My palms and kneecaps screamed with pain. . . ' (Skrypuch 2012, p.16). Lida experiences a near-trampling experience following this act of physical violence and this adds to her trauma load. Luka is also exposed to a life-threatening act when a soldier points a rifle at him (Skrypuch, 2012, p.10) at the point they stop to replace the toilet pail and put a pail of food for the children.

Another life-threatening condition in the novel is the motif of bombs which go off at unpredictable intervals throughout the duration of the war. Luka is hit with a club for speaking a dialect asking the boys to look away from the girls while undressing at the work camp. Lida is whipped by a *Wachman* (police/soldier) for holding on to the sick and weak Marika during parade. Lida lets Marika fall and she dies. This scene dramatises the inhumanity of the Nazi regime whose policy is that everyone must be productive and useful to be worthy of staying alive. The Nazis did not have any ounce of mercy on the weak and the vulnerable members of society, women and children inclusive.

Lida Ferezuk and some of the children have to lie about their age in order to survive. Those who say their true age are taken to the hospital where they are bled to death and their blood taken to the Front for wounded Nazi soldiers. This is the fate of children like Tatiana, Daria, Katya and Olesia in the novel. Even for the children who have lied about their age to make themselves older, they must work and be useful to the Nazi authorities, otherwise they would be killed. Somehow Lida knows this truth which is why she insists to the Nazi officer that she is 13 years old, and not 9 which is her true age. She emphasises in an ingenious way her sewing skills which she had learned from her mother and even spots defects in the Nazi officer's uniform in order to be spared the ominous hospital experience. The children are assigned to work in different sectors to move the Nazi war machinery forward. Lida at first works as a seamstress before being assigned to work in a bomb-manufacturing factory towards the climax of the war when the Nazis are losing men and other resources.

Apart from physical violent abuse which constitutes a source of trauma for the Ostarbeiter in *Making Bombs for Hitler*, verbal abuses in the form of invectives are directed at the children by their Nazi handlers. It is our belief that these verbal abuses are sources of trauma for the children as these hurting words are not only threatening to the children, but also impugn their self-image and sense of identity. For instance, when the children arrive in Germany, a Nazi soldier says to them, 'Stay in here, Russian swine' (Skrypuch, 2012, p.10). Similar words of abuse are repeated by another soldier as a command for the children to leave the train at the final stop: 'You dirty swine, get out now!' (Skrypuch, 2012, p.16). It is observed in the novel that forced identity which characterises the dictatorial actions in the novel can be traumatising to the victims. In the invectives limned above, the dominant imagery is animalistic and it *performatively* alters the identity of the victims from humans to animals as they are being spoken. This equally raises a more serious aspect of forced identity in the novel; the deliberate refusal by the Nazi authorities to acknowledge the existence of Ukraine which they refer to as an occupied Eastern territory. Hence, all captured Ukrainian children are tagged Russian and are so treated (Skrypuch, 2012, p.25).

The identification of children like Lida as Russian rather than Ukrainian means that they would be treated as the enemy in keeping with the Nazi-versus-Soviet enmity that was prevalent at the time. The manifestation of racial segregation is seen in the general degree of treatment accorded each of the races in terms of how they are valued by the Nazi authorities based on the nature of Germany's political relations with their respective countries. For instance, at the point of serving food, the serving points are arranged and tagged Aryan, German, Polish and Russian, from the most preferred to the least valued. The taste of the food served to each race equally varies, with that of the Aryan being the tastiest while that of the Russians is the least tasty. Lida is identified as Russian and she describes how she is served as follows: 'The cook stepped over to the lone Russian pot and slopped some of its contents into my bowl, using a separate ladle. I looked down at the murky brown mess and my eyes filled with tears' (Skrypuch, 2012, p.28). Lida observes that the food that she is served has a faint rotten smell. When she asks for some pudding, she is told by the cook: 'We don't waste precious food on sub-humans. . .' (Skrypuch, 2012, p.28).

Lida is equally segregated against by the Hungarian girl, Juli, who feels superior to Lida

because she is given a better cuisine treatment by the Germans, even though she is also a work prisoner in Germany. Juli makes hurtful remarks to Lida, even referring to Russians as thieves (Skrypuch 2012, p.29). However, this is the only time that Juli would be mean to Lida in the novel because the next time the duo meet in the canteen, Juli is remorseful and apologises to Lida, having realised that her condition is not better than that of Lida simply because she is served a tastier meal by the Nazis. The two are then bonded in sisterhood which help them survive the war, though Juli dies sacrificing her life to save the remaining Ostarbeiter by confronting and shooting Officer Schmidt before both are finished off by an Allied bomb. Lida only decides to eat the bad and tasteless food the Nazis serve her as a form of resistance. She is determined to eat the food so as to stay alive and resist the Nazis, survive the war, reunite with Larissa and tell her story. This act intertextualises with the experience of Jack Mapanje in Mikuyu Prison during the totalitarian regime of Kamuzu Banda. Mapanje is determined to survive his incarceration by eating the foul prison food that he is served (Jack Mapanje 2011, p.48).

In the midst of traumatic experiences, memory usually serves as a means of escape, a survival strategy and resistance strategy for the victim. An instance of this is how Lida remembers the last happy memory she had with her family before the Nazi invasion: 'I remember that last night before the Nazis came. Before Larissa and I were stolen away. We had snuggled up together under our grandmother's thick goose-down quilt. Baba had sung a lullaby as we closed our eyes and drifted off to sleep. That was my last happy memory. I wanted to hold it in my heart forever' (21). However, not all remembrances are rosy and happy; Lida's recollections are a salad of happy and painful memories sometimes flooding together in a dream: 'Memories of scents and tastes crowded the bombs – lilac blossoms, vanilla pudding, wormy turnip soup. A flash of Larissa; fear in her eyes and arms outstretched. 'Lida, please don't leave me!' I tried to grab her but she was just a dream' (Skrypuch, 2012, p.34).

In *Making Bombs for Hitler*, memory also serves as Post-traumatic Stress Disorder for the victims. A good instance is seen in the post-war period when Nurse Astrid wants to give Lida an injection and she shrinks in fear because she remembers the horrible things that the Nazis did to children during the war (Skrypuch, 2012, p.119). Again, when Lida lines up to be served food in the post-war era when she is a refugee in Germany, she recalls the days of the Nazis when she was served horrible meals: 'I got my tin cup, spoon and bowl from my sleeping area and stood at the end of a snaking lineup of people who were waiting for breakfast. Each morning as I did this, it made me think of eating that horrible sawdust bread and coloured water for months on end' (Skrypuch, 2012, p.131).

At other times, remembrance can result in victim guilt which is a manifestation of PTSD. In *Making Bombs for Hitler*, Lida remembers with guilt how she collected candies from a Nazi woman in exchange for information which inadvertently betrayed her family, leading to the loss of her parents (Skrypuch, 2012, p.92). In the African experience, this situation intersects with what happens to Toundi in Ferdinand Oyono's *Houseboy*. Toundi, alongside other children, is enticed with sugar by Father Gilbert to accept the Christian religion, only for him, in the end, to realise, through bitter experiences, the deceptive nature of the

European religion and culture (Oyono 1952). The haunting nature of survivor's guilt as PTSD is depicted when Lida confides in her instructor, Pani Zemluk, after the war about her fears, hopes and dreams, including taking the candy from the Nazi woman and literally making bombs for Hitler during the war. It would take the kind and firm words of Pani Zemluk to convince Lida that it was not her fault and that she should not be guilty (Skrypuch 2012, p. 126).

That the children are not only victims of the war, but also agents of resistance is well documented in *Making Bombs for Hitler*. A good instance of resistance by the children is the act of sabotaging the bombs that they are forced to manufacture for the Nazi regime. They fill the bombs with dirt to sabotage them, even inserting messages of support and allegiance to the Allies in the bombs: 'Dear Allies, this is all that we can do for you now' (Skrypuch 2012, p.97). It is rather unfortunate that these sabotaged bombs are never put to use as the factory explodes shortly afterwards. Resistance can exist in the mind. In fact, mental resistance and resilience is what empowers most of the children to survive the war. An instance of mental resistance is seen when Inge, Lida's supervisor at the laundry, asks the efficient and skillful Lida to return early from lunch for more work, Lida outwardly affirms 'Yes, ma'am' but adds in her mind that she feels like slapping Inge. This act which signals at once resistance through affirmation and psychological resistance is motivated by Lida's hatred of Inge and her husband's theft of a blouse and forcing Lida to remove the original owner's name to imprint Inge's own (Skrypuch, 2012, p.64). They might have considered it a war loot and gift from Inge's husband but Lida sees it as theft, hence her mental resistance.

Luka Barukovich's trauma is trans-generational because his father was arrested by the Soviets and sent to Siberia where he died, while Luka's mother was taken as a slave labour in Nazi Germany. It is unfortunate that Luka has had to go through in the hands of the Nazis, and later the Soviets, the same harrowing experiences that his parents went through (Skrypuch 2012, p.56). Luka is a definition of a survivor because he had escaped slave labour by the Nazis before but was recaptured. He also survives being tricked by the Soviets to return home to Ukraine after the war. He is lied to that his father is alive and well in Ukraine, having returned from Siberia, only for the story to change when the Soviet soldiers begin to maltreat him and the other children once out of the Allied territories. Luka survives the Nazi nightmare through grit, determination and bonding with Lida. As the novel ends, it is obvious that the duo will be a couple for life.

The analysis in the foregoing paragraphs has indicated, among other things, that the Ostarbeiter phenomenon was a reality during the Nazi regime in Germany and that these children were forced to work under the most inhumane conditions, thus generating and aggravating trauma symptoms in them. In the paragraphs that follow, we will analyse the memories of trauma, victimhood and resistance by women and children in Paul Zeleza's *Smouldering Charcoal*.

Memories of Trauma, Victimhood and Resistance by Women and Children in Paul Zeleza's *Smouldering Charcoal*

Published in 1992, Paul Zeleza's *Smouldering Charcoal* is a novel that documents the traumatic moments in Malawian history during the dictatorship of Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda, which spanned 1964 and 1994. In the novel, Banda is represented by the ghost character, the Leader, and together with the other leadership characters like the Party Chairman and the woman leader, Mrs Gonthi, and her deputy, Mrs Madimba, they constitute the leadership and dictatorial structure in the work. The novel depicts how the unconscionable actions or inactions of the leaders affect the common people like Mchere, the bakery worker, and his family, who live in abject poverty because their labours do not pay off. Other characters that represent the oppressed masses in the novel are Bota, Mchere's colleague at the factory; Biti, the seamstress and neighbour to the Mcheres and Lucy, the prostitute. The character of Chola, the journalist, is used to depict the suppression and censorship of the press during Banda's time, while the character of Ntolo, Mchere's eldest son, captures the consequences of dictatorial leadership on children.

Reporting on the complex nature of trauma, Irene Viser (2014, p.119,110) notes that '... trauma is not only to be understood as acute and event-based, but can also be chronic and non-event based; it can be debilitating and disruptive to individuals and communities, but it can also create a stronger social cohesion and a renewed sense of identity'. This assertion captures the depiction of the traumatic memories of women and children detained in Zeleza's *Smouldering Charcoal*, which are analysed and compared to some aspects of the Nazi dictatorship as documented in extant cultural objects selected for the study. In general terms, the space portrayed in the novel is a police state, one that is under the tight grip of a dictator, where every aspect of the citizen's life is controlled. An instance of this is seen in how Chola, the conscientious journalist, is harassed by the Youth Militia to purchase the Party membership card which was compulsory for every citizen during Banda's time.

The depiction of the Youth Militia mirrors the Malawian Young Pioneers, a militant youth group that worked for the Malawian Congress Party during the dictatorship of Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda. In the novel, the Youth Militia threaten to hurt Chola, banging his car and speaking insolently to him, including ordering him around (Zeleza, 1992, p.17). The actions of the Youth Militia remind us of the portrayal of the Hitler Youth in Skrypuch's *Making Bombs for Hitler*. In the novel, Lida is caught by the Hitler Youth when she returns to the hospital to get the other children to escape the Nazi regime shortly after Juli had been killed (Skrypuch, 2012, p.103). Hitler Youth also inspect the bombs manufactured by the Ostarbeiter in the novel (Skrypuch 2012, p.97), among other activities.

In *Smouldering Charcoal*, the Youth Militia are depicted as radical, fanatical, sycophantic and criminal in their actions. Chola recalls that they could lynch anyone who they think has insulted the Leader, Dr Banda, the Life President. The narrator bares Chola's thoughts thus: 'Chola was in many ways lucky that he had not yet suffered a worse fate. Others were beaten to death, their houses burnt, or women raped and children barred from school, if they did not possess the almighty card' (Zeleza 1992, p.18).

Another aspect of dictatorship depicted in *Smouldering Charcoal* is press censorship which is what the journalist Chola experiences working for a newspaper in Njala Town. The Editor of the newspaper is antagonistic towards Chola for always aiming to report the truth. The Editor is a symbol of press censorship in a dictatorship as he always 'scissors' Chola's reports which makes Chola frustrated and annoyed as he cannot write against his conscience. In the end, Chola has to resign from the newspaper to join the Movement, which is an underground group dedicated to the resistance of the Banda dictatorship. He is arrested as he tries to flee the country, put in prison, tortured and then murdered by the regime, though they report his death as suicide.

Chola's activism while alive includes his solidarity with the striking Nkate Bakery workers, his writing of anonymous subversive articles against the Banda regime and his leaving a book manuscript behind which is published posthumously. It should then be noted that *Smouldering Charcoal* is structured as the manuscript that Chola left behind. The manuscript is given to Mchere while they are in prison over their strike at the bakery. The manuscript is then handed over to Catherine, Chola's girlfriend, while they are in exile. Catherine develops and publishes the manuscript with the help of her husband, the playwright Ndatiro, who is portrayed in the image of Jack Mapanje, the great Malawian poet.

The setting of the novel is Malawi during the days of Dr Banda as president. The novel is specifically set in a town called Njala which is depicted as a highly stratified space where the leadership figures exploit and oppress the poor and the vulnerable people, especially women and children. The poor of this society are shown to live in a slum, where crimes abound. The novelist describes 'preoccupied women. . . carrying sacks on their heads and others baskets and children on their backs'; the men are portrayed as gloomy and probably unemployed (Zezeza 1992, p.14). The narrator equally describes the slummy part of the city: 'On both sides of the road there were shacks built of mud, grass, metal sheets, cardboard, and anything else that could provide temporary permanence. Those rickety structures harboured disjointed human forms, not people, surrounded by mad dogs, rats and inhuman stench' (Zezeza 1992, p.16). The dystopian nature of the environment limned in the quote suggests trauma and how it affects the people who live in such an environment. It should be noted that the kind of leadership that operates in the space described is implicated in the agency of the people's woes.

Zezeza's *Smouldering Charcoal* is devoted to the dramatisation of the traumatic experiences of women and children in Banda's Malawi. One of such traumatic experiences is poverty. This is seen in the living conditions of most of the common people in the novel, especially in Mchere's family. The whole family live in a one-room space plagued by want of money and food. The motif of spatial limitation intersects with the condition of the Ostarbeiter depicted in *Making Bombs for Hitler*. The children cry constantly for want of food. Mchere is frustrated into alcoholism, womanising and behaving violently towards Nambe, his wife, and hitting the children. He is depicted as an emasculated male who cannot take care of his family owing to having been deprived of his rights and privileges at work. The burden of poverty on Mchere's family is borne mostly by Nambe who struggles

to take care of the family under extreme pecuniary circumstances. Uneducated and misinformed, Nambe married Mchere as a way of escaping poverty. Her family was happy to get rid of her and reduce the mouths that they had to feed. The novel's narrative voice captures the traumatic effect of poverty on Nambe thus:

When the baby continued crying Nambe tied him onto her back and went into the kitchen to prepare some porridge. The wood was wet. Grandmother and the two boys, Ntolo, eight, and Uta, six, opened their eyes when Nambe was not looking in their direction. As usual they had been woken up by the now ritualistic morning quarrel. But whether out of shame, embarrassment or indifference, they pretended to be asleep. They gave themselves away by their choking. Nambe continued blowing the fire. Before long she was exhausted. She glanced at the balls of smoke billowing in the air. Her eyes began itching. As she rubbed them tears coursed down her face. The child choked and broke into a wail (Zeleza 1992, p.5).

The excerpt above is symptomatic and representative of the motif of poverty and frustration that women and children face in the novel. It is suggestive of how things are not working in the family and the country by extension and how this is the cause of frustration in the people's lives. The children who are constantly hungry have to fend for themselves. This explains the fruit-hunting expedition that leads to Ntolo's fatal fall from a mango tree stung by bees: 'Then the sky was torn by a piercing cry. Ntolo came crashing to the ground. A swarm of bees had blanketed his head and formed a dark umbrella over the area. The boys screamed' (Zeleza 1992, p. 13). The scream mentioned in the quote speaks of a traumatic moment of pain and anguish witnessed by children and it makes us recall the pain and anguish of the Ostarbeiter working in inhumane conditions in Nazi Germany as depicted in Skyrpuch's *Making Bombs for Hitler*.

The inhumanity of the priest and the party leaders towards Nambe when she requests help in taking her wounded son to the hospital equally reminds us of the inhuman nature of the Nazi agents and officials towards the Ostarbeiter. The priest is indifferent to Nambe's plight, asking her to wait till the next day even though Ntolo's condition is an emergency that demands immediate medical attention. Instead, the priest hurries off to a meeting and only offers to pray for the child (Zeleza 1992, p.43). Nambe wonders at the use of going to church as she leaves the priest's house to the MCP Chairman's. The Party Chairman psychologically rebukes Nambe for daring to ask him to help convey her son to the hospital. The actual excuse he gives is that his van is full of the fish brought from the lake that day. He asks Nambe not to worry because he is sure that her son Ntolo will be well the very next day. He knows this because he was bitten by bees once. This rejection and poor treatment by the Party Chairman stand in sharp contrast to the words of the Party Chairman in his recent speeches to the people which Nambe recalls through the narrative voice thus:

Hadn't he [the Party Chairman] said at his last meeting that people should feel free to come and see him about their problems? Didn't the Leader himself always say that women were the backbone of society and they must be respected? Isn't that why he enjoyed watching them in their colourful uniforms as they surrendered their maternal

hips to the drum beat, and let their waists wriggle with the frenzy of youth? Hadn't Nambe always participated in public functions where Njala women sang, danced and ululated until their throats cracked? (Zezeza 1992, p.45).

The action of the Party Chairman at once signifies the poor treatment of women and children in a dictatorial space, a breach of agreement between the leadership and followership as well as a falsehood that characterises Africa's postcolonial leadership. By this singular action, the Banda's Mbumba policy is seen to be a failure and exposed for its appropriation of traditional institution and exploitation of women for the benefit of the Party. This reminds us of how women in Nazi Germany were oppressed and exploited through the appropriation of womanhood and motherhood ideals like taking care of the home and bearing children. In *Smouldering Charcoal*, Zezeza dramatises women's dancing as one of the ways Malawian women were exploited during the reign of Kamuzu Banda. For instance, during the commissioning of the newly-built brewery in Njala, the women are depicted dancing to add colour to the event following the Minister's speech which is full of praises to Dr Banda, the Leader. The narrative voice presents this thus: 'Some women, clearly from the Party, judging from the uniforms they were wearing, stood up and began singing and dancing in praise of the Leader' (Zezeza 1992, p.33).

It is the same party leaders who try to take advantage of Nambe by demanding sexual favours in order to allow her continue with her *kachasu* [alcohol] brewing business. It only takes Nambe's ingenuity to escape being taken advantage of by the party leader. She first postpones the traumatic event and later tells the man that a higher member of the party has already asked her to keep her body only for him and that the man should take permission from the higher party member if she must go ahead with the tryst (Zezeza 1992, p.73).

Ntolo's death at the hospital intertextualises with the death of the 'children' among the Ostarbeiter in a Nazi hospital portrayed in Skrypuch's *Making Bombs for Hitler*. The conditions at the Njala hospital is described thus: 'When she [Nambe] reached the children's ward she was shocked. It was overflowing with mothers and children. Two or sometimes three children shared a bed, and countless others were littered all over the floor' (Zezeza 1992, p.92). These terrible hospital conditions make Nambe to wonder if the hospital was a place for one to be cured or to contract more diseases. The same irony is attributed to the Nazi hospital depicted in *Making Bombs for Hitler* when Lida narrates: 'A hospital was supposed to be a place of healing, but it was at a hospital that my sister [Larissa] was taken from me' (Skrypuch 2012, p.61).

The exploitation of women by the Party is dramatised when Mrs Gonthe and Mrs Madimba visit Biti, the seamstress, in Nambe's neighbourhood. Mrs Gonthe is the chairperson of the local branch of the Women's Brigade, the Women's wing of the Party, while Mrs Madimba is her deputy. The Women's Brigade is a metaphor for the Women's League which actually existed in Malawi during the time of Kamuzu Banda as the female wing of the Malawi Congress Party (MCP). This organisation, together with its sub-group, Chitukuko Cha Amai m'Malawi (CCAM), reminds us of the German Bund Deutscher Frauenuereine (Federation of German Women's Association) and Bund Deutscher Madel (The League of

German Girls), indicating the similarities in the structures of oppression in any given dictatorship. Shortly before the women leaders' arrival, the women are chattering unwittingly but happily about the patriarchal system in their milieu and how it oppresses women through the empowerment of men who they agree are not to be trusted. Once these leaders arrive, the women go quiet, a situation which suggests fear and mistrust.

The fact that the women are not happy at the appearance of the women leaders is indicative of the leaders' unpopularity among the women. They refuse to sit down with the women; they have come to give instructions to the women and to inspect the uniforms that Biti was sewing for the party. Instead of encouraging her, Mrs Gonthe chides Biti at the slow pace of work, saying that she is slow because she has turned her work space to a chattering house. She also expresses her dislike at the quality of some of the dresses already sewn. One would have thought that having got a contract to make dresses for the Party, Biti would make huge profit from it, but this is not the case. She only makes 'a token sum' because it is understood that sewing the dress is her 'small contribution to national development' (Zezeza 1992, p.40).

The women are not only depicted as victims in a dictatorship, but are also portrayed as agents of resistance who partner with their men to fight against oppression and victimisation in their milieu. Because of Catherine's relationship with Chola, the authorities want Catherine to withdraw from school after Chola's murder by the authorities. In Banda's dictatorship, spouses and relations of those found or suspected to oppose the government were usually victimised. Dr Bakha promises to help Catherine but only if she has an affair with him. Catherine's refusal to give in to Dr Bakha's demands leads to her expulsion from the University (Zezeza 1992, p.161). Before now, Catherine had fought off a rapist in Chola's house shortly after the journalist's arrest. The man was among those who searched Chola's house and has come back for more. He is the one who informs Catherine that Smart, Chola's assistant, was planted in the house by the regime as a spy and an informant (Zezeza 1992, p.145). Many student leaders found to be subversive in their activities are expelled. Nemesis catches up with Dr Bakha as he is suspended for defending Catherine at the Senate of the University for his selfish interest.

The women of Njala also resist the Banda dictatorship by refusing to dance and demanding to be allowed to see their men, the bakery workers, who had been arrested and detained. In anger, Mrs Gonthe orders the Youth Militia to round up the protesting women and bring them to the rehearsal venue at the football field, where they are expelled from the city and their properties confiscated (Zezeza 1992, p.145, 146). The women besiege the prison demanding to see their husbands. It is seen at this point that the men and women have put aside their gendered differences and have bonded together to fight against their oppressors. The confrontation between the women and the prison guards recalls the one the women had with the colonial masters, just as the brutality meted out to the followership characters in the novel reminds one of the high-handedness of the colonial masters in dealing with Africans, including Mchere's father. Just like the resistance against the Nazi authorities came from both internal and external sources, the resistance against the Banda regime, as depicted in *Smouldering Charcoal*, comes from within and outside the country. The

external resistance against the Banda regime is carried out by the underground Movement, those in exile and the international press, following the secret reports sent by conscientious journalists like the martyred Chola.

The country is thrown into a political upheaval as the Secretary-General of the Party is accused of treason and put on trial. It is then seen that the cultural trauma experienced in the country occurs at both personal and collective level. It is in the midst of this chaos that the President orders the release of political prisoners, including Mchere and Ndatéro, the playwright (Zezeza 1992, p.167). Mchere's wife had given birth to a boy which symbolises ease for the family's pain and trauma, as well as hope for the future. The final act of resistance is carried out by Mchere who torches the house of Gwape, the local party youth leader, who had impregnated Nambe when Mchere was in prison. Both Mchere and Nambe go into exile and their personal feud is resolved by the miscarriage that Nambe experiences with the Gwape pregnancy. The burning of the house and the escape recall Isidore Okpewho's (1976) *The Last Duty*. Finally, Chola's manuscript is given to Catherine by Mchere and its publication will birth the story that is told in *Smouldering Charcoal*.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have attempted to illustrate the perpetration of trauma in dictatorial spaces using the Nazi and the Malawian examples. The study utilised ideas and concepts in cultural memory and cultural trauma to discourse the representation of women and children in Nazi Germany and Banda's Malawi especially as documented in Marsha Skrypuch's *Making Bombs for Hitler* and Tiyaambe Zezeza's *Smouldering Charcoal*. Though there are marked differences in the two research contexts, we are stunned at the striking commonalities that exist between the two cultural objects analysed. The women and children in both spaces interrogated are thrown into traumatic circumstances which are traced to the actions of the dictatorial forces in their domains. Skrypuch's *Making Bombs for Hitler* mostly exposes us to the traumas that the Ostarbeiter are made to go through while Zezeza's *Smouldering Charcoal* captures the traumatic conditions of women and children during the Banda dictatorship. The researchers can then safely say that there appear to be predictable patterns that characterise dictatorships across spaces which are made possible by the similarities in structures built and sustained in these police states.

References

- Anastadiadis, A. 'Trauma-Memory-Narration: Greek Civil War Novels of the 1980s and 1990s'. *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*. 35(1), 92-108. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1179/030701311X12906801091674>.
- Blackmore, E. 2023. 'How the Hitler Youth Turned a Generation of Kids into Nazis.' *History.com*. Accessed: 04-08-2023 at [history.com/news/how-the-hitler-youth-turned-a-generation-of-kids-into-nazis](https://www.history.com/news/how-the-hitler-youth-turned-a-generation-of-kids-into-nazis).
- Caruth, C. 1996. *Unclaimed Experiences: Trauma, Narratives and History*. London: The Johns Hopkins Press.
- Gilman, L. 2004. 'The Traditionalisation of Women's Dancing, Hegemony, and Politics in Malawi.' *Journal of Folklore Research*. 14(1), 33-60. Accessed: 03-02-2017 at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3814744>.
- Greenspan, H., S. Horowitz; E. Kovacs; B. Lang; D. Lamb; K. Waltzer & A. Wieviorka. 2014. 'Engaging survivors: Accessing “Testimony” and “Trauma” as Foundational Concepts.' *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust*. 28(3), 190-226. DOI: 10.1080/23256249.2014.951909.
- Grinchenko, G. & Olynyk, M. 2012. 'The Ostarbeiter of Nazi Germany in Soviet and PostSoviet Historical Memory.' *Canadian Slavonic Papers*. 54(3,4), 401-426.
- Gupta, C. 1991. 'Politics of Gender: Women in Nazi Germany.' *Economic and Political Weekly*. 26/17. Accessed: 05-08-2023 at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4397988>.
- Jones, A. & Manda, D. 2006. 'Violence and “Othering” in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa. Case Study: Banda's Malawi.' *Journal of African Cultural Studies*. 18(2), 197-213. Accessed: 07-02-2017 at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25473369>.
- Kansteiner, W. 2002. 'Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies.' *History and Theory*. 41(2), 179-197. Accessed: 14-12-2018 at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3590762>.
- Kaplan, A. 2005. *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*. New Jersey: Rutgers University.
- Llewellyn, J., J. Southley & S. Thomas. 2020. 'Children in Nazi Germany.' *Alpha History*. Accessed: 04-08-2023 at <https://alphahistory.com/nazigermany/children-in-nazi-germany/>

- Mapanje, J. 2011. *And Crocodiles Are Hungry at Night*. Oxfordshire: Ayebia Clarke Publishing Limited.
- Milenovic, Z. 2021. 'Education in Nazi Germany from 1933 to 1945.' *Aenocabuh*. CB. 54,383-393.
- Mkamanga, E. 2000. *Suffering in Silence: Malawi Women's 30 Year Dance with Dr Banda*. Glasgow: Dudu Nsomba Publications Ltd.
- Mkandawire, B. 2010. 'Ethnicity, Language and Cultural Violence: Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda's Malawi, 1964-1994. *The Society of Malawi Journal*. 63(1), 23-42. Accessed: 03-09-2023 at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/29783607>.
- Oyono, F. 1952. *Houseboy*. London: Heinemann.
- Okpewho, I. 1976. *The Last Duty*. Harlow: Longman Group.
- Skrypuch, M. 2012. *Making Bombs for Hitler*. Toronto: Scholastic Canada Ltd.
- Stamm, H., H. Stamm; A. Hudnall & C. Higson-Smith. 2004. 'Considering a Theory of Cultural Trauma and Loss.' *Journal of Loss and Trauma*. 9(1), 89-111.
- Viser, I. 2014. 'Trauma and Power in Postcolonial Literary Studies.' Ed: Michelle Balaev. *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory*. Palgrave Macmillan, 106-129.
- Wiel, R. 2009. 'Trauma as Site of Identity: The Case of Jeanette Winterson and Frida Kahlo.' *Women: A Cultural Review*. 202, 135-156. DOI: 101080/09574040903000795.
- Zezeza, T. 1992. *Smouldering Charcoal*. Oxford: Heinemann.