

**Animal Metaphor, Satire, and Political Resistance in Jack Mapanje's Poetry**

**R. Dharmalingamm, Dr. M. Arunachalam**

Part Time Ph.D Scholar in English, Jamal Mohamed College (Autonomous), Trichy - 20.

(Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli)

Research Advisor & Assistant Professor of English, Jamal Mohamed College (Autonomous), Trichy - 20.

(Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli)

**Abstract**

This article examines the use of animal metaphor, satire, and political ridicule in Jack Mapanje's poetry. Located within ecocritical and zoocritical concerns, the study reads animals not as decorative images alone but as charged figures through which Mapanje exposes tyranny, censorship, fear, and betrayal in postcolonial Malawi. In his poems, chickens, chameleons, wagtails, beasts, and other creatures become signs of vulnerability, cunning, violence, submission, and survival. These images enable the poet to criticise the authoritarian politics of Hastings Kamuzu Banda's regime and to show how ordinary citizens were reduced to a condition of fear under dictatorial power. The paper also recognises the ethical tension within such poetic practice. Mapanje's use of animals strengthens his satire, but it may at times repeat cultural assumptions that associate animal life with irrationality, cruelty, or moral decline. Even with this tension, animal imagery remains one of the poet's most effective instruments of political resistance. Through animal allegory, Mapanje turns poetry into a space of memory, protest, and moral judgement. The study argues that his animal metaphors connect ecology, culture, and politics, and that they offer a distinctive way of reading resistance poetry from Malawi.

**Keywords:** Animal metaphor; satire; ecocriticism; zoocriticism; political resistance; Jack Mapanje

**1. Introduction**

Human beings have often defined themselves through their relation to animals. Ancient cultures and philosophical traditions did not always draw a rigid boundary between human and animal life. A. Lytton Sells observes that many early societies saw little distinction between the soul of a human being and that of an animal. He also notes that the belief in metempsychosis was present among the Chinese, Hindus, Persians, Arabs, Egyptians, and certain Greek philosophers (Sells xiv). Anaxagoras did not see an essential difference between the animal soul and the human soul. Pythagoras of Samos believed that the human soul might inhabit different animals and birds in successive reincarnations. Empedocles, Socrates, Plato, and later thinkers also contributed to the doctrine of transmigration. These older beliefs are significant because they suggest that animals were once seen as part of a shared moral and spiritual order.

Modern ecological thought has renewed this concern in another form. The environmental or green perspective recognises that human life cannot be separated from the lives of animals, plants, landscapes, and other forms of nonhuman existence. It tries to recover a sense of balance between human society and the natural world. Some scholars examine the relationship between hunter-gatherer communities and animals. Others turn to biblical interpretation, environmental ethics, animal rights, conservation, and cultural studies. Such approaches have opened new ways of reading literature. Literature becomes a place where human attitudes towards animals can be examined with care.

This paper studies the representation of animals in the poetry of John Alfred Clement, popularly known as Jack Mapanje. It reads his poems from ecocritical and zoocritical perspectives. The study is concerned with the way animals are used as metaphors, symbols, and subjects in Mapanje's poetry. It also asks how these representations are connected with questions of justice, identity, cultural memory, political violence, and belonging. Mapanje frequently uses animal images to criticise leaders whom he holds in contempt. His animal metaphors often expose the cruelty, cunning, and moral emptiness of political authority in Malawi, especially during the First Republic under Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda.

The focus of the paper is not the biological animal alone. It is also the cultural and political work that the animal image performs in poetry. Mapanje uses animals to ridicule power, to record oppression, and to keep alive the memory of public fear. Yet such use also raises an ethical question. When a poet compares violent or corrupt rulers to animals, does the poem challenge human brutality, or does it repeat negative ideas about animals? This tension makes Mapanje's poetry a rich site for ecocritical and zoocritical discussion.

## **2. Mapanje, Satire, and the Malawian Political Context**

Mapanje believes that a poet, like the griots or izibongi of old, should offer constructive criticism of leadership and society (Mapanje, "The Use" 32-33). His understanding of poetry is closely connected with public responsibility. A writer, for him, cannot stand outside the moral failures of his time. Poetry has to examine the institutions, structures, and habits of society. Such criticism is necessary because it helps a community move forward (wa Thiong'o, "Open Criticism" 82).

During Banda's rule in Malawi, this kind of criticism became dangerous. Political praise songs and public performances were turned into instruments of propaganda. The older function of oral poetry, which could praise and correct leaders, was weakened. Mapanje laments that praise poetry under the new leaders became watered-down propaganda with little poetic insight (Mapanje, "The Use" 29-30). His own poetry therefore tries to restore the lost power of critique. He identifies himself with the poor and oppressed and aligns his art with the struggle for a society where human dignity, good governance, and justice are respected.

Mapanje's political disillusionment places him beside other African writers who saw postcolonial independence turning into a betrayal of the people. Like Ayi Kwei Armah in the Ghanaian context, Mapanje sees independence in Malawi as a change in the identity of rulers rather than a true liberation of the masses. The hunters and the hunted change places, but

oppression continues. His poetry attacks the elites who inherited political power and used it for fear, greed, and control.

This political anger explains Mapanje's frequent animal imagery. By portraying Banda and his supporters through animal metaphors, the poet dismantles the official image of a wise and courageous father of the nation. In many cultures some animals are associated with violence, cunning, predation, and irrational behaviour. Mapanje uses such associations to expose rulers who have traded moral responsibility for cruelty. Banda had presented himself as the liberator who broke the federation and brought freedom to his people. Mapanje's animal satire shows another truth: the liberator had become a predator.

### **3. Censorship and the Need for Animal Allegory**

The historical circumstances of Mapanje's poetry are important. His collections include *Of Chameleons and Gods* (1981), *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison* (1993), *Skipping Without Ropes* (1998), *The Last of the Sweet Bananas* (2004), and *Beasts of Nalunga* (2007). These collections belong to different stages of his career, and each stage reflects a particular political and personal experience. The poems need not be read only in chronological order because their images, animals, and ideas often overlap across collections. Together they form a sustained record of fear, resistance, imprisonment, and exile.

Creative writing that criticised Banda's leadership was seen as foolhardy. Several Malawian writers, including Frank Chipasula, Lupenga Mphande, Felix Mnthali, and Legson Kayira, went into exile. Writers who stayed within Malawi often had to use private, cryptic, obscure, and metaphor-ridden forms of expression in order to escape censorship and political persecution (Nazombe, "Malawian Poetry of the Transition" 138-139). Even myth did not always provide safety. The regime watched words, stories, memories, and gestures that questioned its authority.

Mapanje himself was arrested at the Gymkhana Club in Zomba on 25 September 1987. He was detained in Mikuyu Maximum Security Prison until 10 May 1991. He was held for three years, seven months, and sixteen days without charge or trial. Mapanje later suggested that his imprisonment was connected with his poetic exposure of the evils of Banda's regime, what he called his 'peeping into the dictator's drawer' (Mapanje, "The Changing Fortunes" 219). His imprisonment places him among African writers who suffered detention, torture, and silencing under postcolonial dictatorships.

*Of Chameleons and Gods* was written under such pressure. Mapanje says that the poems in the volume span ten turbulent years and were an attempt to find a voice, or voices, as a way of preserving sanity. The exercise, he adds, was therapeutic (Mapanje, *Of Chameleons and Gods* ix). The National Censorship Board, established after the Censorship and Control of Entertainments Act, declared many publications undesirable. Tiyambe Zeleza observes that the board performed its work with remarkable thoroughness, issuing permits and certificates while also banning publications, pictures, statues, and records (Zeleza 11). Censorship did not stop with printed material. The regime also censored memories, stories, and words that contested its singular authority.

In such a climate, allegory became a means of survival. Some writers turned to harmless themes and avoided political confrontation. Others chose silence. Mapanje used obscurity, irony, grim humour, rhetorical questions, and animal metaphor. *Of Chameleons and Gods* contains many poems where protest is hidden beneath carefully chosen images. A reader aware of Malawi's history can recognise the political target beneath the surface. Poems such as "On His Royal Blindness Paramount Chief Kwangala" and "When This Carnival Finally Closes" point directly towards Banda, though they do so through indirection and satire. The collection later became difficult to circulate. Bookshops were not permitted to display it openly, and in 1985 the Ministry of Education and Culture banned its use in schools and colleges (Africa Watch 76).

#### **4. Animal Metaphor as Political Resistance**

Mapanje's poetry may be called resistance poetry. The term need not be limited to poetry produced within organised liberation movements or armed struggles against colonial domination. In Mapanje's case, resistance arises within a postcolonial state where the new political elite oppresses the people it claimed to liberate. His resistance is directed against social injustice, abuse of power, despotism, exploitation, fear, and cultural degradation. He writes against what may be called a politics of force, violence, deceit, corruption, and greed.

A reading of his poetry shows a strong desire for an oppression-free Malawi and an oppression-free world. Mapanje's poetic anger is directed towards rulers who destroy democratic values, human rights, and cultural dignity. Like radical postcolonial writers such as Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Wole Soyinka, and Ayi Kwei Armah, Mapanje exposes the vulgarity and ruthlessness of the postcolonial elite. In the poems written after *Of Chameleons and Gods*, he becomes less cryptic. This change is partly connected with exile. Away from Malawi, he could name political violence more openly, though he continued to depend on metaphor, especially animal metaphor.

Animal images are especially prominent in *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison* and *Skippping Without Ropes*. The anger produced by imprisonment gives many of these poems their sharpness. Animal figures become instruments of mockery and exposure. They also reveal the deep influence of Malawian oral narratives, where animals often act as mirrors of human society. Through them, a poet can speak about rulers, subjects, tricksters, cowards, victims, and predators without naming them directly.

A good example is Mapanje's poem "Song of Chickens", where chickens accuse their master of duplicity. The master once protected them from hawks but later kills them himself. The poem presents a familiar human-animal relationship. A farmer protects domestic animals from other predators, only to become the predator in the end. In the political context of Malawi, the master refers to Banda, while the chickens represent ordinary Malawians. The protector becomes the killer. The father of the nation becomes the eater of his own people.

Master, you talked with bows,  
Arrows and catapults once  
Your hands steaming with hawk blood  
To protect your chicken.  
Why do you talk with knives now,

Your hands teaming with eggshells

And hot blood from your own chicken?

Is it to impress your visitors? (Of Chameleons and Gods 4)

The force of the poem lies in its reversal. The chickens remember the master's earlier promise of protection. They also see the blood on his hands. The question they ask is simple but devastating: why does the protector now speak with knives? The image of hawk blood refers to the earlier enemy, while the hot blood of the master's own chickens reveals betrayal from within. Critics have read the chickens as an allegorical image of ordinary Malawians under Banda's rule (Nazombe, "Malawian Poetry in English" 176; Chirambo, "Orality and Subversion" 82-83; Ngara 158).

The poem also evokes memories of the Chilobwe murders of the 1960s and 1970s. These mysterious killings took place in several townships in southern and central Malawi, particularly in Chilobwe township in Blantyre. Mapanje connects the blood imagery of the poem with a national atmosphere of fear and rumour. Paul Brietzke notes that one rumour claimed the government was responsible for the murders and that the victims' blood was sent to South Africa to repay a loan (362). Whether read as rumour, political memory, or symbolic violence, the image of blood gives the poem a frightening historical depth.

The chickens in the poem are not merely passive victims. They speak, accuse, and remember. Their voice is important because it gives language to those who have been placed at the mercy of political power. The poem converts a farmyard scene into a critique of authoritarian betrayal. It also shows how animal allegory can carry a dangerous political truth under the cover of ordinary imagery. In this sense, the animal is both symbol and witness.

Mapanje's animal satire works by reducing the dignity claimed by rulers. Official power often presents itself as noble, paternal, wise, and necessary. The poet strips this image away. The ruler becomes a predator, a beast, a chameleon, or a creature of appetite. The citizen becomes a chicken, a hunted creature, or a silenced animal. This pattern of imagery allows the poems to dramatise the moral relation between ruler and ruled. Power feeds on vulnerability. Political speech hides violence. Public ceremony covers blood.

## **5. Ecocritical and Zoocritical Tensions**

Although Mapanje's poetry uses animals mainly for political satire, it also invites ecocritical and zoocritical reflection. Ecocriticism studies the relation between literature and the physical environment. Zoocriticism gives particular attention to animals and the cultural meanings attached to them. In Mapanje's poems, animals are rarely presented as independent beings with their own lives. They usually appear as figures through which human politics can be understood. This is why the poems are powerful for political reading but complicated for animal studies.

The ethical tension is clear. When corrupt leaders are compared to animals, the poem condemns human brutality by using animality as a language of moral decline. Such a strategy can strengthen satire because it makes political violence appear ugly, predatory, and shameful. At the same time, it may reinforce the idea that animals stand for baseness, irrationality, and

cruelty. The animal becomes a negative sign through which human failure is judged. A zoocritical reading must notice this problem.

Yet Mapanje's poetry cannot be dismissed on this ground. His animal images are often more complex than simple insult. The chickens in "Song of Chickens" are morally alert. They remember, speak, and accuse. The wagtails of Mikuyu Prison suggest vulnerability, movement, and witness. Chameleons suggest adaptation, disguise, and danger, but they also reflect the survival tactics required under dictatorship. Beasts may represent the violence of power, but they also reveal the damaged moral order in which both ruler and subject are trapped. The animal world becomes a symbolic field where politics, fear, and survival can be examined.

Mapanje's use of animals also draws from African oral traditions in which animal tales often carry social instruction. Such tales do not merely entertain. They expose greed, arrogance, foolishness, deceit, and unjust power. Mapanje adapts this tradition to the modern postcolonial state. His poems replace the village trickster tale with a darker political allegory. The dictator's court, the prison, the public rally, and the censored nation become spaces where animal symbolism speaks with unusual force.

For this reason, Mapanje's animal imagery links ecology, culture, and politics. The animals may not always appear as flesh-and-blood creatures, but their presence reveals how human beings imagine power and vulnerability. The poems ask why rulers become predators, why citizens are turned into prey, and why fear makes a nation speak in coded images. Such questions make animal metaphor central to Mapanje's art of resistance.

## **6. Conclusion**

Jack Mapanje's poetry uses animal metaphor as a sharp instrument of satire, ridicule, and political resistance. His animals expose the betrayals of postcolonial power in Malawi. They mock the ruler who claims to protect his people but harms them. They give voice to ordinary citizens placed under fear. They also keep alive the memory of censorship, imprisonment, violence, and exile.

The study of animal representation in Mapanje's poetry shows that his work is not limited to political protest in a narrow sense. It also opens questions about the cultural use of animals in literature. His poems generally represent animals as images rather than as independent living beings. At times, this practice may reinforce negative attitudes towards animal life. Yet the same images also become powerful poetic tools. They allow Mapanje to expose human cruelty by placing it within a wider symbolic world of predators, victims, disguise, fear, and survival.

Mapanje's poetry is therefore an important site for examining the relation between animals, satire, and resistance. His animal figures act as mirrors that reflect the follies, crimes, and moral failures of Malawi's ruling elite. They also reveal the resourcefulness of poetry under censorship. In a society where direct speech could invite imprisonment, animal allegory became a way of telling the truth. Through these images, Mapanje turns poetry into public memory and moral judgement.

**Works Cited**

1. Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 6th ed., Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1993.
2. Africa Watch. *Where Silence Rules: The Suppression of Dissent in Malawi*. Human Rights Watch, 1990.
3. Beinart, William. *The Rise of Conservation in South Africa: Settlers, Livestock, and the Environment, 1770-1950*. Oxford UP, 2003.
4. Chirambo, Reuben Makayiko. "Poetry for Democracy in Malawi." *Southern Review*, vol. 11, no. 3, Jan. 1998, pp. 16-21.
5. Kalof, Linda, and Amy Fitzgerald, editors. *The Animals Reader: The Essential Classic and Contemporary Writings*. Berg, 2007.
6. Mapanje, Jack. *Beasts of Nalunga*. Bloodaxe Books, 2007.
7. ---. "Censoring the African Poem." *Index on Censorship*, vol. 18, no. 9, 1989, pp. 7-11.
8. ---. *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison*. Heinemann, 1993.
9. ---. *The Last of the Sweet Bananas: New and Selected Poems*. Bloodaxe Books, 2004.
10. ---. *Of Chameleons and Gods*. Heinemann, 1981.
11. ---. "Reading under a Village Tree." *Expression*, vol. 3, n.d., p. 15.
12. ---. *Skipping Without Ropes*. Bloodaxe Books, 1998.
13. Matthews, L. Harrison. *Man and Wildlife*. Croom Helm, 1975.
14. Pike, Burton. *The Image of the City in Modern Literature*. Princeton UP, 1981.
15. Sells, A. Lytton. *Animal Poetry in French and English Literature and the Greek Tradition*. Thames and Hudson, 1957.
16. Warren, Mary Ann. "A Critique of Regan's Animal Rights Theory." *Environmental Ethics: Readings in Theory and Application*, edited by Louis P. Pojman and Paul Pojman, 5th ed., Wadsworth, 2008, pp. 90-97.