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Nationalism and politics of narrating the Malawian nation in Legson Kayira’s novels and autobiography

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Abstract

In this study I set out to investigate how Legson Kayira, one of the leading Malawian novelists, has narrated the nation across the colonial and early post-independence eras through his novels and autobiography, and highlight key questions surrounding the country's nationhood which he confronts. The thesis contends that the main concern of Legson Kayira's literary works is the concept of the 'nation,' a topic that has not been adequately explored by critics in relation to him. It argues that Legson Kayira largely narrates the Malawian nation as a contested discursive formation in which certain interpretations or discourses are pushed into dominance and others marginalised, but his aim is to foreground the excluded conceptions in relation to the dominant ones, to stage a contest or debate among the various strands of thought and/or belief. The five content chapters of this thesis are organized thematically as each chapter focuses on one text to thoroughly investigate aspects of nationhood around which the text is constructed and which appear to be dominant in that text. I draw upon the ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) and Homi Bhabha (2009) to account for Kayira's narration of the nation. In Bakhtin's view, the process of narrating a nation exposes literature's tendency of heteroglossia, that is, to inhabit stories that portray different and competing imaginings of the same nation. The nation is, therefore, viewed as a space of dialogue between histories, narratives and perspectives all imbedded in it. As for Bhabha (2009), competing narratives of the nation are embedded within a literary text because the nation is an ambivalent, contested and unsettled construct to such an extent that literature's engagement with the nation is very political and ideological. Broadly, I also utilize the postcolonial theory, specifically its key concepts of essentialism, subversion, ambivalence, otherness and hybridity to consider how Kayira has interrogated key aspects of Malawi's nationhood through those concepts and reveal how the characters try to recover their lost pre-colonial identities, histories and cultures in vain which leads them to search for new identities as individuals or groups. I observe that in narrating the

Malawian nation, Legson Kayira has engaged elements of nationhood to confront key political questions and dominant discourses about the nation in order to achieve his overall aim of showing that the postcolonial Malawi nation-state is a highly contested and complex entity to define. In order to achieve that broad aim, I have concentrated on how Kayira has interrogated the main elements of Malawi's nationhood by using incidents in the characters' lives and elements of form that question or cast doubt over Malawi's status as a nation. I have further examined the rather problematic relationship between the tribe and the nation especially how it reproduces and challenges the country's claims to nationhood. This is done by uncovering the metonymic and oppositional relationships it has with the nation's official imagination, history and character. In all the texts that have been analysed, the protagonist as a member of a particular tribe represents the nation allegorically in order to construct and even undermine the dominant discourses such as the traditionally rooted depiction of the Malawi nation as a mother (Mother Malawi) which Kayira over-rules as masking the true nature of the country's nationhood and character. It is also observed that Kayira's writing seems to edge the Malawian nation imagination towards Globalization which is characterized by homogeneity of cultures through embracing universal values and a common vision of social organization and control leading to internationality. Although Kayira wrote all his texts within the context of an emerging Globalization as a dominant social reality, this study has revealed that his gender, international exposure, race and ethnic background seem to have greatly influenced the manner in which he has narrated the Malawi nation to such an extent that his internationalist thrust is somehow undermined. This is reflected in his rather subjective selection of historical events and hostile engagement with the Chewa nationalism that has come to define the identity and character of the Malawi nation, and through the positive depiction of elements of modernity towards which the Malawi nation is edging.