

The Silent Text: Symbolism amidst Political Disillusionment in Luangala's *On a Campaign Trail*¹

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Abstract

The paper discusses symbolism in John Luangala's short story 'On a Campaign Trail'. It begins with an examination of symbolism and how it is employed in literary texts. The work then focuses on the short story and identifies that symbolism has been employed in two ways: firstly the text as a symbol and secondly individual symbols are in the text. While the text as a symbol has been tied to the author of the work, the other two symbols are physical items identified in the text. The two identified symbols have also been seen to have multiple interpretations subjected to them. It has finally been concluded that the symbols employed by Luangala are centred on showing how much the author is disillusioned with modern-day politics.

Keywords: symbolism, politics, literature, society

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Introduction

Every literary work is symbolic in nature. As Wellek and Warren in their highly influential work of literary criticism *Theory of Literature* (1956) argue, the text occurs at two levels: the sound representation, and the meaning stratum. This implies that there are sounds that form the text which later are seen as a meaningful unit. However, this is not the only point at which symbolism is encountered in the literary text. According to de Man (1979), the text always contains substitutions. His argument is that the text is incomplete as it is presented. Meaning in the text cannot be restricted to what has been presented because what has been presented ought to be read at another level. Could this suggest that the space in which the literary world is not enough and the world should therefore be expanded through substitution for an even broader interpretation? This paper seeks to explore symbolism and show how it has been used to expand the worldview of Luangala's characters in *On a Campaign Trail*. The work will further attempt to understand why Luangala has employed symbolism, if he has, in the work. The paper, therefore, will begin by defining symbolism before identifying the various forms of its manifestation in the literary text and in other cases related to the text. Later, the understanding will be applied to Luangala's story *On a Campaign Trail* and a conclusion will be drawn based on the interpretation of the text.

Symbolism

Symbolism has been a part of humanity for very long. For instance, Lindly and Clark (1990) say that symbolism in humans can be traced to as far back as the Middle Stone Age, about 300,000 to 30,000 BC. The implication is that symbolism is as tightly knit to humans as it is to literature even though it is seen usually in literary terms by literary critics as can be noted from Roberts and Jacobs (2007) who see it as a way of expanding meaning. They see it to have developed from 'the connections that real-life people make between their own existence and particular objects, places, or occurrences, through either experience or reading' (pg 380). Symbolism in this case appears to be a phenomenon crafted for real society in real time. The symbol is man's own creation for his own social interpretation as has been argued above. In talking about symbolism, which as it was argued earlier by de Man to be substitution, it becomes imperative to relate the symbol to the sign. The sign has been well expounded by De Saussure (1959) who sees a sign to have two sides to it: what it is (signifier) and what it represents (signified). An example would be the word tree. It is a signifier which signifies a woody perennial plant, typically having a single stem or trunk growing to a considerable height and bearing lateral branches at some distance from the ground. It is this plant that is the signified in this case. It is at this same point, argues Frye (1952) that the word, and all language, becomes a sign as it represents what exists outside the string of words and language itself. He, therefore identifies a literary work's representation of the world as symbolism. This shows that the literary work represents a world that it has been molded after. One would conclude that just as the words that form the text represent what lies outside them, the text itself as a whole is equally a symbol as it represents another world outside it but which itself is also a part of.

On the other hand, Todorov and Klein (1974) awaken us to the fact that one item can represent two outside it. They show that it is possible to make reference to two different items in language. For this reason, it should be suggested that while it has been acknowledged that language represents something outside it, it should further be interpreted in the sense that language represents several things outside the world. One would be made to feel at this point that the selection of what exactly is implied or signified in an utterance is not only the context but also the background of the recipient decoding the signifier. This could further be used to provide a path to the interpretation of symbols. Turner () says that the individual or group responsible for interpretation or assigning of meaning to symbols have control over the meaning and effect of the symbols. For this reason, one would wish to interpret symbols in their own way so as to benefit from the same interpretation. This therefore gives an added advantage and power of the interpreter over the rest as they can manipulate not only the symbol but also the consumers of the symbol.

Roberts and Jacobs (2007) have said that symbols come in two types: cultural and contextual. Cultural symbols being those symbols easily understood by everyone as they have been accepted as such by a cultural group. Contextual symbols are those symbols that are qualified by their use in the work and the prominence they have been given. As has been argued by Turner () above, Circlot (2001; xi) also sees the symbol as not having fixed interpretation. He says that “the symbol proper is a dynamic and polysymbolic reality, imbued with emotive and conceptual values: in other words, with true life.” It could be said that in this case, it is the contextual symbol that squarely falls into this category. The contextual symbol can easily change the target referent.

With the above in mind, it will be concluded that symbolism is very diverse and cannot be wholly discussed in this paper. Robb (1998) says that symbolism includes cognitive structures, ritual icons, identities such as gender, prestige, and ethnicity, technological knowledge, and political ideologies among others. For this reason, this work will restrict itself to literary symbols that are both linguistic and physical in the text.

Symbolism in *On a Campaign Trail*

While acknowledging that this work is dedicated to studying symbolism in the text in relation to political disillusionment in the people, particularly the characters in the text, the work does not focus on political symbols. Cohen (1979; 87) says that “often, the less obviously political in form symbols are, the more efficacious politically they prove to be.” This implies that the approach should not necessarily be to identify political symbols, but merely to identify symbols and interpret them in a political sense. The work has been classified as a political text because it centers on a political event, particularly a campaign for election to parliament. Disillusion is seen in the major character, Luke Chimbalanga, a University of Zambia lecturer in economics, who withdraws from politics citing the dirt in politics. He claims people need to be

educated to vote for the right leaders while they need the right leaders to have the much needed education that will in turn bring them the right leaders. Luangala brings into the text the chicken and egg controversy that takes the centre of the text. It leads to the question, what is the role of education in politics?

In Luke's family, politics begin with slogan chanting Sankhulani, Luke's maternal uncle who is a very successful politician. He dies of 'kaliondeonde' and, interestingly, his death is a crowd puller. His coffin is given prominence as it is said that the lucky ones had a glimpse of the coffin. While this shown the importance of the old man, the prominence given to the coffin. While the coffin is not presented in any negative sense in the story, it seems to diminish the relevance of developmental politics in the story. When Luke's father takes over from his brother-in-law, he does not seem as successful a politician as his predecessor regardless of the fact that he is a very good leader. He is presented as more of a leader than a politician. He is able to refuse offers for higher offices opting for councillorship. The coming in of Luke and his premature withdrawal from the race signifies the death of politics in the family. The coffin in this case comes in at a very crucial point. This is a very contextual symbol in that it is restricted to Luke's family.

In the slogans, highly championed by Sankhulani, there is an allusion to the goat and the sheep. In this case, goat sees moonlight and believes it is day while the sheep waits for the actual sunlight. The goat is caught and eaten by hyenas. Luangala interprets this symbolism to be allegorical of "some Africans, who upon receiving favours from the whites in the Federal Party, relented in the struggle for true freedom, in the belief that they were now better off, (142)". Yet, on further reading, this could be seen as an allegorical allusion to the Jesus Christ parable of the sheep and goats delivered in Matthew 25:31-46. This allegorical allusion could show the text as a sermon to the electorate to say there will come a time when politics will separate get rid of right people, well-intentioned people from the process of development in the nation. Luangala takes the position of the messiah in this text and shares his philosophy that politics will not be meant for the educated, those with a heart for the people and the nation as a whole. Luangala, who is himself educated and a philanthropist, seems to say that politics will detach him from directly contributing to the nation through the political arena. Could this suggest that he has political ambitions but thinks that the ground is not fertile enough for an intellectual? Luke's reason for joining politics was not for making money; it was to serve the people. He wanted to show the people that a university graduate was the best for a politician as opposed to the 'rug bags masquerading as heroes' in the community. While others would probably wish to interpret the goat and sheep allusion in relation to the clever one day being replaced by the right minded sheep, it ought to be mentioned that this story ends in despair. There is no sign that Luke will return to politics. It appears that the goat and sheep allusion can be seen as a single entity, as a reproduction of the text, making Luangala an equal of Christ in this scenario.

Another interesting symbol worth considering in this discussion is the rostrum on which the candidates stand to present their manifesto. The construction of the rostrum is quite significant in

this study. It is said, "The rostrum had been constructed a day before, made of several stilts dug firmly into the ground, to support a platform made of small flat poles placed up together with some sisal fibre. For perfect foot balance, and comfort, a layer of elephant grass had been spread on top of the poles, also woven tight using some similar fibre," (149). The rostrum here is constructed out of local materials. There is no foreign material employed. The rostrum is seen to be quite strong and somewhat durable. The fact the materials have been locally acquired somehow suggests that their preferred candidate has to be local. A foreign candidate cannot be rooted in this land. While it might be argued that Luke is not a foreigner considering that this is his village, the fact that he is highly educated and has been abroad seems to suggest that he has been uprooted from his land. He comes to his land not the same person anymore. He cannot connect to his people. It is for this reason that a member of the audience comments on what too much education can do to some young men like Luke. He has been alienated. The rostrum, with all its strength signifies the cooperation among villagers and their inability to be shaken by foreign concepts such as "a shortage of foreign exchange", 'trade deficit', 'balance of payment', the exploitative tendencies of the IMF and the World Bank', financial obligations, 'inflation' and so on" (150) that he could not even translate into vernacular. The rostrum being dug into the ground and also being erected under a 'kacele'tree shows the significance of localization in politics, responding to the needs of the local people, and speaking their own language.

The final symbols to discuss are the candidates' symbols, particularly, Njelebata's axe. Before the symbols are discussed, it is important to firstly look at how it has been revealed to the audience both in the text and the reader outside the text.

"and you women," Njelebata resumed, after allowing the audience a little respite to recover their breath. He strutted about on the rostrum, turning round at critical moments as he spoke, to expose his face in every direction; left, right and centre. "I am saying you women. You see two men coming to propose marriage to you. One of them has a book in his hand, and the other one has an axe on his shoulder, in very dirty clothes. Which man will you trust to be able to give you food to eat?"

"The one with an axe on his shoulder."

"Which one do you think will be able to thatch your roof, or indeed build you a new hut?"

"The one with the axe."

"So you see the reason why I am asking you to go and mark your cross on the axe on that day. When the time comes on that day and you are there alone behind that cloth in that voter's booth, you will remember what you need most in your life, that is an axe. So you will write a cross on where?"

"On the axe."

"Yes on the axe. Because it is the axe that builds a village, not so?"

"Indeed it is so."

"And you men, when you walk to the filed early in the morning, or walk back to the village at dusk, you feel you a man [sic] when you are armed with an axe, not so?"

"Indeed it is so," the men chorused.

"And then you women also, you feel safe to walk in front of a man who has an axe on his shoulder, not so?"

“Yes indeed, that is how it is,” the women chorused in turn.
“Can you feel safe with a man carrying a book in his hands?”
“No.”
“But an axe, not so?”
“Yes.”
“So go and vote for an axe. I have nothing more to say. I know you have work to do, and all of you men have an axe waiting for you at home, and some of you have brought one with you here. You need to return home and use your axe to do some serious work. And even some of you women, you need firewood. You will need to go and borrow an axewith which to cut firewood. So I will not keep you long. Go well all of you, but don't forget that you need what?”
“An axe.”
“Yes, you need an axe and this is where I have ended.” (152-3)

The above lengthy quotation appears towards the end of the story. One would suggest that the symbol of the axe used in this text operates at several levels. It is clear, from the onset that the axe has been used as Njelebata's symbol. He says that one cannot do without an axe in his life. The axe has been used towards the end of the text. Does this in any way signifying the chopping of the text? The text ends with Luke opting out of the race. Luke is still young and would be expected to continue in politics but as the story ends, there is no sign that Luke will rejoin politics. It seems that the text has not been given enough space to say what Luke intends to do with his political life. The text's being 'amputated' would signify the narrator's desire not to show what follows in the story.

In relation to the above, one also sees a Luke whose political career has been cut short. It seems the axe that has been so praised for being used to build villages and provide them with food is also intended for protection from enemies. While Luke is not really an enemy but an opponent, he is treated as an enemy. The old man Njelebata has chopped Luke's career with his axe. His continued reference to all people in the village needed the axe implies that the only one without the axe should be chopped off. Here, Luke is later seen as a victim of the axe as he withdraws his bid just after one meeting with the prospective voters.

The chopping of Luke's career can further be seen as the chopping of his symbol off from the political scene. The political scene here seen is in Luke's village. It appears that Luke's community has rejected education. Education has been cut off from people's lives. Luke is an educated individual whose interest is to bring education not only to his land but also into politics. He believes that educated people should go into politics and make education serve people through politics. The electorate has in this case rejected education not just as a community but also as a driving force for politics. The people believe that politics should not be taken with the seriousness that Luke has given it. Politics should be fun. It is this that will make politics be responsive to the people.

The use of the axe has made Njelebata get close to the people. He has identified with the people and the people have accepted him. This is seen even in Luke's own father, a retired

politician, who has also positively responded to Njelebeta. Luke has therefore also been cut off from his father, his family using the axe.

The axe plays a huge role in this text. While it has been said to be used to build the village and provide food, it has also been used to *kill* the enemy. The same can be seen in Luangala's other story 'The Axe and the Blood' where the axe is central to the story except that in this case, it is the protagonist that uses it to a maximum effect when she kills her assailant.

In this story, the above three are the symbols that have been identified and explained in relation to their use in the context, in the story.

Conclusion

This paper endeavored to explore symbolism in Luangala's short story, 'On a Campaign Trail' in which he seems disappointed with modern day politics. While in one of the symbols Luangala seems to be a spokesperson for humanity and also humanity's own prophet, using the other symbols, he tries to examine modern day politics in terms of how relevant the people think it is to their lives and how they think it should benefit them. Through the same symbols, Luangala shares his philosophy on what makes successful politicians which is not only being a member of the community but also appealing to the immediate needs of the people. He shows that people seem more concerned with what related to their immediate environment. He further shows that if people do not understand something, it will not be accepted even if it is intended for their benefit. They would rather suffer than receive assistance that they do not understand.

In many instances, Luangala has not explicitly stated his philosophy. He has remained silent on several issues which are evoked in the reader upon encountering the symbols strategically placed in selected parts of the text. The silence in the text has only been broken by symbols that share more than would probably be anticipated by the reader.

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