

EDITORIAL ARTICLE

NAMWALI SERPELL'S *THE OLD DRIFT* AS A POSTCOLONIAL TEXT: A SEMIOTIC, LINGUISTIC AND ONOMASTIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract

*This essay analyses Namwali Serpell's seminal novel *The Old Drift* from a postcolonial perspective. In pursuing this goal, the essay utilises some aspects of postcolonial theory, semiotics, onomastics and linguistics. In particular, it looks at how Serpell reinterprets the history of colonial Zambia as projected and interpreted by colonial writers. The findings suggest that the novel epitomises a new drift in Zambian literature. The novel problematises the views of the imperial centre as exemplified in colonial literature and suggests that the colonisers used the gun, fraud, deception, language and names as some of the means of subjugating the local people and dispossessing them of their land. Therefore, the whole colonial enterprise was pursued for the benefit of the white settlers at the expense of the local people and was motivated by greed, selfishness and self-aggrandisement.*

Keywords: *Postcolonial Theory, History, Zambian Literature, Onomastics, Semiotics, Language, Colonisers*

Introduction

This essay is anchored on the argument that Zambia's biggest challenge is not the lack of writers but rather the lack of publishing opportunities. This has resulted, partly, in the proliferation of self-publishing on the part of some Zambian writers. Yet others have resorted to seeking publishing opportunities with companies outside Zambia and Namwali Serpell is one such writer.

The Old Drift (2019) Serpell's first novel, is the best-known of her works. It was published to international acclaim and critics have been generous in praising it. The novel is 563 pages long and covers many different themes apart from covering the past, the present and the future. This essay focuses mainly on the novel's treatment of Zambia's colonial past, that is, particularly the section dealing with 'Grandmothers'. Specifically, the essay is concerned with how Serpell's novel revisits and reinterprets Zambia's colonial memories from a postcolonial perspective.

The essay proceeds from a position of treating *The Old Drift* as a postcolonial text and applies principles of postcolonial criticism. In addition, the essay evokes aspects of semiotics and onomastics among the tools of analysis. Semiotics, as Copley and Jansz indicate, is ‘the analysis of signs or the study of the functioning of sign systems’ (1997, p.4). It is concerned with the meaning of signs for, as Clarke posits, a sign is ‘any object of interpretation, a thing or event that has significance for some interpreter’ (1990, p.1). Signs are things that bear significance to the interpreter and produce meaning through signification. Signs may, therefore, be verbal or non-verbal. In this essay, the focus is on non-verbal signs and their semiotic significance. For example, the eponymous Old Drift settlement and the dam.

Apart from signs, this essay also acknowledges the significance of names especially in the field of onomastics – the science of names and naming systems. While onomastics has many sub-disciplines because of its cross-cutting nature, this essay is concerned only with the significance of names of characters (anthroponyms) and geographical spaces (toponyms).

The essay explores the role of signs and names in *The Old Drift* as a postcolonial text. It proceeds from the premise that some anthroponyms and toponyms bear significance in relation to the overall meaning of the text of the novel. The essay also explores the role played by language in Serpell’s revisiting and reinterpretation of some historical events and spaces of cultural significance.

***The Old Drift* in Context**

The Old Drift largely represents a new drift in Zambian literature; an era of growing visibility of Zambian literature in English and of a growing number of talented Zambian women writers. The novel is a complex literary creation that has received glowing reviews from reviewers around the world, who have been impressed by the novel’s adventurous, if experimentalist, approach to style, characterisation and narration.

The Old Drift is part of a new drift in Zambian literature in English as we know it; a new breed of award-winning writers of international reach has come to the fore and it includes Serpell, Ellen Banda-Aaku, Mubanga Kalimamukwento and Mbozi Haimbe. However, Serpell appears to have pioneered a sub-drift within the main drift: the use of a variety of literary techniques associated with the experimentalism of modernistic writing. Before Serpell’s arrival, no published Zambian writer had attempted to write in this manner and with such a daring approach to the use of language and literary technique, peeling off layer after layer of Zambian history. Dominic Mulaisho, among other Zambian writers, has in the past used gems dug out of the soil of the Zambian past to write novels – with Mulaisho producing *The Tongue of the Dumb* (1971).

However, not even Mulaisho’s work comes close to equaling Serpell’s foray into Zambia’s past, not only in terms of extent but also in depth and approach, starting with the eponymous Old Drift near Livingstone to the colonisation of the territory, and then to the birth of independent Zambia. Additionally, Serpell delves into the contemporary period and beyond into the future. It is almost as if Serpell was time-travelling, in the process giving the reader a glimpse into the experiences encountered during the journey. In some respects, at least, in terms of some thematic threads related to the history and

development of the Kariba Dam, some parallels may be drawn between *The Old Drift* and Ruth Hartley's (2014) novel, *The Shaping of Water*.

That Serpell and *The Old Drift* have received such international accolades belies the fact that Zambian literature has for the most part of its existence remained anonymous on the international scene. The corpus of books in Zambian literature, additionally, has been and still remains small. Similarly, the corpus of critical works on Zambian literature remains small although steadily growing. Zambian literature is certainly a little more visible internationally now than it has ever been. Yet as recently as 1992, Roscoe and Msiska in their work, *The Quiet Chameleon: Modern Poetry from Central Africa*, stated thus: 'Zambia has generally been viewed as a literary desert' (1992, p.181). However, those who make this claim fail to indicate the nature of this barrenness and its cause or causes (Chilala, 2014). The lack of huge corpora of literary works in Zambian literature is more symptomatic of the lack of a robust local publishing industry than of a lack of literary talent.

In response to the dearth of publishing opportunities, Zambian writers have resorted to self-publishing (which appears to be easier). Hence, the new drift in Zambian literature is characterised by a high and growing number of self-published works with the remainder being published by local and foreign publishers. The quality of Serpell's works, including *The Old Drift* and her Caine Prize-winning short story, *The Sack* (2015), have gained her the trust of foreign publishers of repute. Perceptions of literary barrenness, however, are not peculiar to Zambia. In 1969, even when Ngugi wa Thiong'o had already published three novels (*Weep Not Child*, 1964; *The River Between*, 1965; and *A Grain of Wheat*, 1967) and a play (*The Black Hermit*, 1968), East Africa, in general, was viewed as a 'literary desert'. Taban Lo Liyong, a South Sudanese writer and academic who in 1969 was based in Uganda, was confronted with the argument that East Africa was a literary desert compared to West Africa. Hence, he asked the question, 'Can we correct literary barrenness in East Africa?' (Liyong, 1969, p. 23). At the time, it may be argued, few East Africans were published, but with the availability of more publishing avenues over the years, the situation changed.

The arrival of 'new drift' Zambian writers has helped make some Zambian works internationally visible, but the perception of literary barrenness still lingers. Banda-Aaku (2014, p. 610) states: 'As a Zambian writer living abroad, I am often asked whether Zambians write fiction at all. Although Zambian fiction in English may be somewhat sparse and obscure, Zambians have been writing fiction for many years'. She says of Mulaisho's first novel: '*The Tongue of the Dumb* is Zambia's first post-independence novel to achieve some degree of international exposure, although it did not fare well as Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.... What is of concern to me here is that more than 40 years since *The Tongue of the Dumb* was published, literature from Zambia has still not found solid ground beyond its borders' (2014, p. 611).

While the work of Banda-Aaku, in particular, her award-winning novel *Patchwork* (2011), the work of Binwell Sinyangwe (particularly, *Quills of Desire*, 1993) and Mulaisho's *The Tongue of the Dumb* (1971) and *The Smoke that Thunders* (1979) have received scholarly attention outside Zambia, *The Old Drift* has attracted the greatest attention. It is a ground-breaking work. Banda-Aaku argues: 'Literature serves to reflect,

preserve, document and evaluate society' (2014, p. 612). *The Old Drift* does all this. It reflects on the Zambian past and present, preserves and documents some historical and cultural elements while at the same time, evaluating Zambia's past, present and future.

The emergence of Serpell and particularly, *The Old Drift* on the international scene, against the backdrop of a shrunken Zambian publishing industry, has certainly made the literary fraternity look at Zambia in a different light. Unlike countries like Nigeria, Zambia did not fully utilise the opportunities provided by the creation of the African Writers Series which was co-edited by Chinua Achebe. However, it was through the series that Mulaisho published *The Tongue of the Dumb* and another novel, *The Smoke that Thunders* (1979). The only other Zambian to get published in the series was Kenneth Kaunda with his autobiographical work, *Zambia Shall be Free* (1962).

One of the former editors of the series, James Currey, seems to suggest that efforts to publish some more Zambian works did not produce fruit. Describing Mulaisho as 'very much like the fast-rising young novelists in East Africa' (2008, p. 253), Currey states: 'We never found other Zambian works to include in the Series, although we received other manuscripts. Writing was certainly going on' (p. 256).

During the colonial period, very little literature in English was published within and outside Zambia. Within the colonial territory, the first novel written by an indigenous Zambian, Enock Kaavu, *Namu Siaya at the Mine*, was published by the Northern Rhodesia Literature Committee in 1946 (Chilala, 2013, p. 94). However, after independence, the Zambian Government established the Kenneth Kaunda Foundation (KKF) in 1966. The parastatal company was tasked to publish not only educational titles but also literary and other non-educational books.

It is critical to note, however, that the literary works that were produced by KKF under the NECZAM Library Series (NELISE) were male-dominated. The first work of fiction published by the company was Fwanyanga Mulikita's collection of short stories, *A Point of No Return* (1967) and it was followed in 1971 with the publication of the first novel, Andrey Masiye's *Before Dawn*. As elsewhere in the world, and particularly so in Zambia, women writers came on the scene rather late – a situation attributable in large measure to the fact that in the colonial period, parents sent boys to school more readily than they did girls whom they kept at home in preparation for marriage. Hence, the first female-written work of fiction published by KKF was Susan Chitabanta's *Behind the Closed Door* in 1988, twenty years – it must be noted – after the publication of Mulikita's short story anthology. Sumaili notes that Chitabanta 'occupies a special place in Zambian literature in English being the first women novelist published by the Kenneth Kaunda Foundation' (1991, p. 119). However, while Chitabanta might have blazed the trail for women writers, her contribution did not bear much significance beyond the acknowledgement that she takes the first spot on the list of published Zambian women writers of fiction in English.

By 1991, KKF was struggling to add new titles to the NELISE series with the situation deteriorating with the change of government from Kenneth Kaunda's United National Independence Party (UNIP) to Frederick Chiluba's Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD). In November of that year, in fact, the new government – eager to exorcise the company of the Kaunda legacy – changed its name to Zambia Educational Publishing House (ZEPH).

Not that publishing for women, let alone writing, had been any easier before the decline of ZEPH as a publishing force. Cultural challenges and even sexist biases were always there to militate against women who wished to write. Banda-Aaku accords us a glimpse into the challenges of being a woman writer: ‘I recall an occasion when I was presenting a seminar on being an African woman writer, and the fact that I was a wife and mother came to light. A surprised male student asked me how – given that I was a prolific writer who travelled often – I found the time to cook for my husband’ (2014, p. 609). This cultural challenge is alluded to by Professor Benedict Oramah in a foreword to Mizinga Melu’s motivational book, *Braving the Odds* (2021). He observes that one of the hindrances to the progress of women in Africa is ‘a culture that relegates women to the kitchen and most times, deprives them of opportunities to reach the zenith of their capabilities’ (Melu, p. x).

The new drift in Zambian literature is in part characterised by the writings of talented Zambian women who have refused to be confined to the kitchen or to have their passion for writing suppressed. In the earlier literary drift, which started after the dawn of independence and the creation of KKF and other publishing outlets, the stand-out name was Chitabanta, if for no other reason, then at least, because she was a pioneer. Other women followed Chitabanta’s path over the years, including Monde Sifuniso, Mubanga Kalimamukwento and Mbozi Haimbe, among others.

If Chitabanta epitomises the pioneering spirit, the women writers of the new drift epitomise the smashing of the ceiling, for it is they who have through their award-winning literary works drawn the eyes of the literary world in the direction of Zambia and Zambian literature.

It is worth noting, as a matter of fact, that true to biblical wisdom, the last have become first. Women writers came on the tail end of men writers in Zambia, but now they are on the frontline, riding the tide of the new drift with confidence and flying colors. They have won writing awards that male writers did not manage to win. It is the women writers, among them Namwali Serpell, that have made the world realise that Zambia may not have a vibrant and prolific publishing industry, but it does have an abundance of writing talent. *The Old Drift* is a living testament to this argument. No Zambian writer, male or female, has ever written a novel of such consequence and literary brilliance. It is a goldmine for literary scholars and critics, particularly, scholars of African literature in general and Zambian literature in particular.

Postcoloniality in *the Old Drift*

Revisiting History

The argument that *The Old Drift* is a postcolonial text should not be understood in the narrow sense of it being textually antithetical to colonial literature or ideologically counter to colonialist literature. *The Old Drift* does more than just counter the imperial center in terms of content and style and the interpretation and presentation of historical events affecting the territory that is now Zambia. In terms of the Gatesian theory of the Signifying Monkey, it might be argued that the text, in part, signifies the failures and pretensions of the British colonial enterprise in the area that became Northern Rhodesia and later Zambia.

It might further be argued, in Gatesian terms, that the novel thrives on repeating, albeit in a revised manner, some of the experiences of the colonial process (Gates, 1988, p. xiv). It is a display of history and its narration revisited and revised, of a panorama of events. It is a festival of intertextuality underlined by the rereading, revising and reworking of historical texts (Scholes, 1988, p. 129). The text should, therefore, be analysed as a text complete of and in itself, but also as a strand in a web of intertextuality.

A casual reading of *The Old Drift* reveals the postcolonial nature of the text. It scrutinises the colonial relationship between Zambians and colonised Africans in general, on the one hand, and the colonisers on the other. It challenges the dominant discourses of the imperial center and re-resemitotises the paradigms of the colonial enterprise; it questions the onomastic mission and vision of the colonisers. Serpell not only delved into the historical archives to read long-forgotten documents, she re-read from a postcolonial perspective, which is, as Ashcroft et al., posit, the type of ‘reading and re-reading texts of both metropolitan and colonial cultures to draw deliberate attention to the profound and inescapable effects of colonisation on literary production; anthropological accounts; historical records; administrative and scientific writing’ (2004, p. 192).

Serpell is wary of the fact that the existing corpora of colonial and colonialist literatures have cast Africa and Africans in a negative light, or simply presented African history and culture through European eyes. What Chaturvedi calls ‘the onslaught of colonialism’ (2004, p. 35) manifests in a variety of ways: historical and literary texts, documentation, cultural invasion which according to him also involves a supplanting of the legends and oracular idioms of the colonised by ‘eurocentric master discourses’ (p. 35), among others. Thus, Serpell endeavours, in her novel, to retell some stories from a postcolonial perspective, challenging the master discourses.

It is significant that Serpell begins her novel on the contested space of Zambia’s history from two perspectives: that of the once-dominant master script of the imperial center as told by the European explorer, settler and colonialist – the ‘muzungu’ as she refers to Europeans in the novel – on the one hand, and the perspective of the indigenous Zambian or African on the other. It is worth noting, in this regard, that Serpell uses the adventures of David Livingstone (‘a goodly Scottish doctor’, ‘our father unwitting,’ ‘our inadvertent pater *muzungu*’ as she refers to him in the prologue) as the starting point of the novel. Further, she writes in the prologue: ‘This is the story of a nation – not a kingdom or a people – so it begins, of course, with a white man’ (2019, p. 10).

As the above reference comes in the very first few lines of the novel, the author makes a form of declaration of intent: that what will follow is a story about Zambia – not the kingdoms or chiefdoms or free peoples that existed in the precolonial era. It is about the territory carved out of African soil through a colonial enterprise that was initially motivated by Livingstone, the *muzungu* who was wandering aimlessly in search of the source of the River Nile and then accidentally came across the beautiful falls he named Victoria in honor of the Queen of England. Hence, Zambia is ‘[n]either Oriental nor occidental, but accidental...’ (2019, p. 2)

By implication, Zambia as we know it was created by the *muzungu*, not by the indigenous people – an indictment on the 1885 Berlin Conference where the *muzungu* partitioned Africa, and this without the involvement of Africans. As Boahen notes, within

the short period of 1880 and 1900 ‘all of Africa except Liberia and Ethiopia was seized and occupied by the European imperial powers’ (1989, p. 27). The counter-narrator of the first part of *The Old Drift* narrated by Clark states: ‘...the bazungu who carved this territory into a colony, then a protectorate, then a federation, then a country came here only because Livingstone did. They drifted in and settled the land, drew arbitrary lines in the sand, and stole treaties from chiefs with a devious ruse: a ‘Royal Charter’ meant for business, but used for the state. Waving flags and guns and beads to trade with, they scrambled rabid for Africa and claimed it was Livingstone’s legacy’ (p. 2). The novel questions the process that led to the creation of colonial territories in general and of colonial Zambia, in particular.

In stating that the Zambian nation began with the story of Livingstone, the novel strikes at the hidden underbelly of the colonial enterprise – how the missionaries, explorers and settlers all laid the ground for the colonisation of Africa or the creation of colonial territories. Further, it implicates the Eurocentric historical presentation of Africa’s past or the presentation of the history of the oppressed through the eyes of the oppressor.

By stating that the story starts ‘with a white man’ the novel alludes to the once-prevalent Western notion that the history of Africa begins with the arrival of the white men on the continent. Indeed, some historians such as Trevor-Roper and Newton made that argument because, as the latter once argued, ‘History only begins when men take to writing’ (Fage, 1970, p. 3). *The Old Drift* says of Ronald, one of the African characters who acquires Western education: ‘During his time at university, Ronald had learned that “history” was the word the English used for the record every time a white man encountered something he had never seen and promptly claimed it as his own, often renaming it for good measure. History, in short, was the annals of the bully on the playground’ (2019, p. 98). As we shall later see, claiming and (re) naming were part of the colonisation agenda.

Considering the preoccupation with retelling some stories from the past, Serpell invests a significant portion of her text in a postcolonial enterprise that raises serious questions about the colonial past. While the text also delves into the past of post-independent Zambia and concerns itself also with the future, this essay is concerned with the novel’s treatment of the colonial enterprise. It interrogates the process of colonisation and the cultural and other disruptions suffered by Africa and Africans as a result. Further, it problematises the supplanting of African memory by Eurocentric memory not only through direct actions but also by means of the colonial and colonialist corpora of writings.

History is hardly objective and is even less objective when a person from one culture writes about the history of another culture. Feintuch puts it this way: ‘History is not the past; it is an artful assembly of materials from the past, designed for usefulness in the future’ (2003, p. 176). Thus, African history or colonial history as projected by the colonisers cannot and should not be accepted unquestioningly by African readers and writers. A postcolonial reading becomes necessary. Toni Morrison, whose preoccupation with black memory is central to her writing as eloquently demonstrated – among other works – by her historical novel *Beloved* (Raynaud, 2007, p. 46), indicates that memory weighs heavily in what she writes.

In bringing matters of memory to the fore in *The Old Drift*, Serpell is stepping on the same ground as Morrison. The difference, however, is that while the former is concerned with memory in relation to the people of Zambia, Morrison is concerned with memory as

it relates to the African-American experience. In a sense, Serpell engages in a process of what Ngugi calls 're-membering' of Africa after its 'dis-membering' through colonisation:

Europe has also planted its memory on the bodies of the colonised. This phenomenon is not peculiarly European but, rather, is in the nature of all colonial conquests and systems of foreign occupation. In his attempt to remake the land and its peoples in his image, the conqueror acquires and asserts the right to name the land and its subjects, demanding that the subjugated accept the names and culture of the conqueror....Names have everything to do with how we identify objects, classify them, and remember them (Ngugi, 2009, p. 6).

It might be argued that Zambia is not only a product of the dis-membering of Africa but also suffered dis-membering at the hands of the colonisers. The colonisers then proceeded to reshape the colonised lands after their own image culturally and politically. Hence, the colonising mission went hand in hand with the onomastic mission: the territory now named Zambia was named Rhodesia in honor of the man who stole it from the indigenous people, Cecil John Rhodes. This fact is epitomised by what the prologue says: that Livingstone, upon being shown the Mosi-oa-tunya falls by his guides, 'gave it the name of his queen' (Victoria).

Ngugi argues that the contact between Africa and Europe from the earliest times 'is characterised by dismemberment' (2009, p. 2), adding:

The dismemberment of Africa occurred in two stages. During the first of these, the African priesthood was divided into two halves: the continent and its diaspora. African slaves, the central commodity in the merchantile phase of capitalism, formed the basis of the sugar, cotton, and tobacco plantations in the Caribbean and American mainland. If we accept that slave trade and plantation slavery provided the primary accumulation of capital that made Europe's Industrial Revolution possible, we cannot escape the irony that the very needs of that Industrial Revolution – markets for finished goods, sources of raw materials, and strategic requirements in the defense of trade routes – led inexorably to the second stage of the dismemberment of the continent. The Berlin Conference of 1884 literally fragmented and reconstituted Africa into British, French, Portuguese, German, Belgian, and Spanish Africa. Just as the slave plantations were owned by various European powers, so post-Berlin Conference Africa was transformed into a series of colonial plantations owned by many of the same European powers (p. 3).

In illustrating the onomastic aspect of the dismemberment, Ngugi posits that renaming is part of declaration of ownership:

Their own names and naming systems once again were seen as a barrier to the intended amnesia. So, break up their names. Give them the names of the owners of the plantations to signify their being the property of Brown or Smith or Williams. The English were not alone in carrying out this program, for we find the same story in the French, Dutch, and Spanish zones. It was as if all of them were reading from the same manual. The result was that everyone in the African diaspora, from the tiniest Caribbean and Pacific Island to the American mainland, lost their names: Their bodies became branded with a European memory. This program was reimported into the African continent (p. 10).

In revisiting the Eurocentric historical narratives, Serpell joins a long list of African writers who have used history or some specific historical anecdotes as a resource for writing novels, among them Sembene Ousmane who fictionalised a 1947-8 railway strike on the Dakar-Niger line, Peter Abrahams who attempts to recreate the Great Trek of South Africa, or even Zambian novelist Dominic Mulaisho who draws on history for some of the aspects of his seminal novel *The Tongue of the Dumb*. However, as Nkosi indicates when discussing the role of history as a ‘hero’ of some African novels, the novelist does not present to us pure historical facts but with ‘fact transformed into myth’ (1981, p. 32). That is to say, the writers use the raw materials of history to write fiction.

Serpell’s *The Old Drift* exhibits a postcolonial perspective in terms of its treatment of memory in the context of the colonial relationship. In peeling off layers of colonial history regarding the nation of Zambia, the novel also recasts the historical narratives from the perspective of the colonised. That aside, the novel also challenges the colonial ideologies that informed and shaped the perspective of the imperial centre.

Thus, for example, the portrayal of David Livingstone as a benign God-fearing man in colonial literature is subjected to subtle scrutiny by Serpell. The text suggests that his main mission and obsession was to locate the source of ‘his beloved Nile’ and that in his ‘doddering’, he wandered around in circles ‘dragging his black bearers with him’ (2019, p. ix). Further, the text suggests that his greatest motivation was not the Christianisation of the peoples of Africa but establishing ties for commerce and raising his own personal profile. Thus, as is expected of postcolonial texts, the foregrounding of the clash of cultures between the coloniser and the colonised is a key characteristic of the novel. In challenging the perspectives of the imperial centre, *The Old Drift* springs from the fundamental postcolonial view that rejects the claims of universalism made on behalf of canonical Western or colonial literature. Thus, for example, the style is often characterised by cases of translanguaging.

Language in *The Old Drift*

As Ashcroft et al., posit in *The Empire Writes Back*, language is one of the major tools used by colonisers to entrench colonial rule: ‘One of the main features of imperial oppression is control over language’ (2004, p. 7). The coloniser not only imposes their language on the colonised but also prescribes *how* the language should be used. As Ashcroft et al., (ibid), the colonial education system imposed ‘standard’ versions of the metropolitan language

as the norm and treated all ‘variants’ as ‘impurities’ (p. 7). It was part of ‘othering’ the colonised people.

Post-colonial writers, however, tend to challenge the approach of ‘worshipping’ the standards of the imperial centre. Thus, just like other African postcolonial writers who have preceded her – chief among them Achebe – Serpell occasionally resorts to the use of expressions from Zambian languages. For example, the use of the term ‘muzungu’ to refer to a white person. She also elects to use the term ‘movious’ (1) – which in Zambian English suggests ‘moving about too much or aimlessly’ – instead of a more conventional English term.

However, Serpell also uses some English terms as they were used or would be used by native English speakers in their interaction with, or in their characterisation of, the local people of Northern Rhodesia. This includes, among others, ‘primitive’ (p. 4), ‘kaffir’ (p. 5), ‘nigger’ (p. 16). These terms portray the local people negatively. However, even ‘innocent’ terms like ‘natives’ to refer to the local people is used with a negative connotation – that is, it suggests inferiority or otherness just as the other terms that are more pronouncedly racist. Thus, for example, Clark states that ‘natives were not allowed to use the front entrance’ (p. 17). They were considered too inferior to use the same entrance as the white settler. Even the police, if ‘native,’ had no authority over a white civilian, as is eloquently illustrated by Clark’s refusal to obey orders from black policemen sent to take him to the police station after shooting a local boy: ‘Native police are never sent to take in a white man’ (p. 17).

Serpell suggests that the only real difference between the ‘natives’ and the white master, was the skin pigment. The white people in the text, whether the pioneers at The Old Drift or the ones involved in building the railway line, the bridge and the Kariba dam, exhibit the same human traits as the ‘natives’: greed, fear, dishonesty, drunkenness, ignorance, foolishness, and selfishness, among others. This view is further amplified by Frederico’s stream of thoughts as he ponders the infiltration of the interior of Africa by Western settlers: ‘The West *had* arrived in the interior, but it had brought its worst tendencies with it: bureaucracy, venality, banality. The European labourers drank local beer and smoked bush pipes. They hunted for food rather than for sport. They walked around with their shirts off, insulting and ordering and punishing *i negri* to fluff their egos’ (p. 68).

The contention that the West came to Africa with its ‘worst tendencies’ problematises the claim, by the settlers, that they were morally better than the local people. The Westerners could not claim to be different from the local people; their behaviour was not new to the local people – it was banal. That they ‘drank local beer and smoked bush pipes’ made them no different from the local people. They loved the beer brewed by the people they demeaned. The settlers were also known to have sexual relationships with local women, except the ‘unwritten’ rule was that they were not expected to marry the women.

Clark highlights this point, euphemistically stating that the settlers, among them, the missionaries, ‘never went full native’ (p. 11); that is, they never married the local women: ‘That sort of consorting was frowned upon’ (p. 11). He adds that a Jewish trader who married four native women and had children with them (‘salt-and-pepper children’) was regarded as ‘pretty low down’ (p. 11). However, the settlers would not allow local men

to have any form of relationship with their women because that would lead to 'racial contamination' (p. 11).

The Old Drift, therefore, exposes the hypocrisy of the Western settlers. While, on the one hand, they despised the local people and their culture, on the other hand, they drank local beer and had sexual relations with local women. The beer and the local women in this context epitomise the banality and venality of the Western settlers in comparison to the local people. Only their skin pigment made them think of themselves as superior but the reality hurt their egos. To claim the place of superiority they resorted to insulting and oppressing the local people.

The irony of the discriminatory attitude to the natives is that even among themselves, the white people discriminated against each other on grounds of ethnicity and status. The white men working on the bridge, for example, were considered to be of lower status, an inferior breed, compared to other white men such as Clark. The apartheid among white people is illustrated at the Victoria Falls Hotel where the white workmen working on the bridge were not allowed to drink from inside the hotel: 'While the bridge was being built, an outside bar called the Iron and Timber was set up for the workmen. A rough lot, even for the wilds, and they made the hotel uncomfortable for those more sedate and worldly' (p. 11).

The differences in class are also epitomised in the difference in spelling between the name Clark and Clarke. When the former first comes across the 'mud and pole store' that served as a hotel, he discovered that it was owned by a man bearing the same surname as his, but there is a difference in spelling which in itself suggests a difference in class. The other man spells his surname as 'Clarke' with an 'e' being indicative of belonging to the aristocratic class (p. 4).

However, the white-on-white discrimination does not come anywhere close to the white-on-black discrimination as the colonisers entrench themselves on the fraudulently acquired land. The colonisers dehumanise the local people, equating them to animals and, sometimes, even treating them worse than animals; a situation demonstrated by the launch of Operation Noah to save animals from the flood while at the same time, driving the Tonga people to infertile land in the name of protecting them from the coming floods. When Clark 'accidentally' shoots a local person, he equates him to a pig (p. 16). He is not even bothered by the shooting and is enthused to learn that the name of the boy he shoots is 'N'gulubu' – meaning pig (p. 17). However, *The Old Drift* suggests that if Africans were 'brutes' as the Colonel calls the Mau Mau (p. 61), then the settlers too were brutes as the reference to Clark as a 'brute' (p. 19) implies.

Apart from 'animalising' the local people, there is also in the use of language, the tendency to portray them as immature. Grown African men would be referred to as 'boys'. Sir Stewart Gore-Browne, notably, says of the Bemba among whom he settled and to whom he outwardly showed a semblance of respect: 'I suppose the Bemba are like children, easy to please and so open with their emotions. I have always loved to hear them singing as they work. A harmony that matches La Bohème in sophistication. They just need to get beyond their mud-hut mentality' (p. 107). Similarly, Frederico says, emphatically: 'The natives *are* children....Children playing house' (p. 61). Ironically, however, Frederico later wonders to himself while thinking about the dam project and the

injustices it wrought on the Tonga people: ‘Why did the British keep treating the natives like wayward children?’ (p. 73).

Gore-Browne signifies another form of the hypocritical attitude of the white settlers: appearing to love the local people but in reality, and especially in private conversations, using unsavoury language to describe them. There are those, like Gore-Browne’s butler Henry Mulenga who – if for no other reason than at least, in order to continue picking up the crumbs from the table of white privilege – echo the racist views of their white masters. He echoes the thoughts of his master when he says ‘you are correct, us Bemba, we are lazy’ (p. 107). Ronald realises rather late that despite the generosity of Gore-Browne, and despite Ronald’s acquisition of Western education, they are not integrated into the racist white society of Northern Rhodesia. He cannot even openly be acknowledged as the husband of Agnes because it is illegal for a black man to marry a white woman. Instead of introducing himself as her husband while staying at Shiwa Ng’andu, he introduces himself as her ‘protégé’ (p. 113).

It might be argued that Serpell creates the likes of Ronald Banda for the same reason as Ferdinand Oyono creates Toundi, to illustrate the poignant and shameless hypocrisy of the colonialists; making some Africans feel that they are special and are integrated into the white community when in fact, not. They are not equals. In the mansion at Shiwa Ng’andu, there is no real difference in status between the educated Ronald and the less educated buffoon Henry Mulenga whose character is a reminder of the Nigerian buffoon in Cary’s *Mister Johnson*. Ultimately, therefore, both Mulenga and Ronald are victims of white racism even if they may not be openly addressed as ‘nigger’ or ‘kaffir’.

The Falls and the Dam

Serpell peels away some layers of the palimpsest of history by using a settler, Percy M Clark, as the narrator. In other words, the story is narrated through the eyes of this white man who is a real historical figure because Serpell wants to use a colonial or white settler’s perspective and in the process, demonstrate the prejudices and cultural bias. The use of the first person point of view in this section of the novel is an apt innovation because it allows the author to explore the Western mind or more specifically, the mind of the settler.

Clark came to this part of the world in 1903 and upon seeing the falls for the first time, he said: ‘...I set eyes on that African wonder named for an English queen and became as beguiled as the next man’ (2019, p. 3). For Clark, as with many other settlers, it was not enough to merely see the falls and their magic: ‘I came for the falls, and stayed for them, too.’ This is very telling because it captures the approach and mission of the settlers: the *coming* followed by the *staying*. They were not invited to come and not invited to stay. That is the process of colonisation: coming then staying, and it is the staying part that led to dis-memberment, cultural erosion, suppression, grabbing of land and stealing of resources; and the establishment of colonial government. It is the staying that led to the partitioning of Africa.

The coming and staying happened courtesy of the pioneering journeys of David Livingstone who first came to Africa in 1841 at the age of twenty-eight. For the first eleven years of his work (1841-1852), he focused on preaching the gospel. However, from 1852 till his death in 1873, his focus shifted to explorations. It was during these explorations

that he saw the falls then named them after Queen Victoria. Rotberg writes: ‘Livingstone became obsessed with the desire to open up the interior of tropical Africa to new forms of commerce and Christianity in order to end the slave trade, foster missionary endeavours, and destroy ignorance, poverty and isolation – all obstacles to the ‘civilisation’ of Africa’ (p. 4). However, as Fagan notes, Livingstone was not the first European to penetrate the Central African interior. He was preceded by a number of Portuguese nationals who, however, were not missionaries: ‘They looked for slaves, ivory or precious metals, not for souls.’ He adds that any evangelisation was only ‘incidental to the trade’ (p. 130).

Livingstone, therefore, prepared the way for the settlers and colonisers that followed. They were all drawn by Africa’s natural wonders: the animals and natural phenomena like the falls, and the human and natural resources such as minerals. For yet others, like Clark, there was an added element of adventure, greed and the obsession with pioneering.

From the semiotic perspective, Clark is significant in that he signifies the white settlers and colonisers who came to Zambia but ended up staying; and in staying they looted, pillaged, dispossessed the indigenous people, disenfranchised them, dehumanised them and even killed them. They only saw Africa as a place with resources, both human and non-human, to be exploited. Even the falls were not just a marvelous display of nature but also something to be claimed and possessed. It is this sense of ownership that made Clark spend thirty-two years in the vicinity of the falls (p. 3).

The settlers and colonisers that came to the area of Africa where Zambia is now located were in part inspired by Livingstone’s travels. They heard about his exploits, came to see what he saw and then decided to stay. The ‘staying’ was largely facilitated by the use of force and imposition of Western culture, values and religion. The use of force is signified by the gun. In this regard, therefore, Clark’s Martini rifle (p. 6) bears semiotic significance. To stay for as long as he wanted, and to be able to pioneer and wander around, he needed a gun, a vastly superior weapon to the spears and other weapons used by the indigenous people. It is illustrative that the gun was used to subdue the stubborn Tonga villagers who resisted the order to vacate their village in order to allow for finalisation of the project to build the Kariba Dam. They were against the resettlement scheme devised by the colonial authorities, which would have seen them leave Chisamu village in the Chipepo area of Gwembe to be resettled in an infertile area (Hartley, 2014, p. 20).

In Hartley’s *The Shaping of Water*, the district officer by the name of Tom Holmes ‘expressed concern about the increasing resistance by the Tonga to the plans for their resettlement’ (2014, p.15). To force matters, the gun was used despite the fact that the villagers did not have guns and were, therefore, no match for the police. In a conversation with Frederico, Smith the District Officer says of the confrontation that saw the death of eight men:

The villagers beat drums and threw rocks. They nailed misspelt manifestos to trees. They marched up and down in bare feet, imitating our police squadron, carrying spears on their shoulders as we carry rifles. Do you know how many spears were thrown? Hundreds! Not one policeman was injured. But eight bullets found their mark in the civilians (p. 76).

The British colonisers decided that a dam would be built on the Zambezi. They did not need the permission of the local people to do so, neither did they need their consent with regard to where they would be resettled upon being extracted, by force, from the valley.

The text of *The Old Drift* reads: ‘Omens unheeded, the *bazungu* proceeded with their foolish and damnable plan. They rescued the animals – “Operation Noah” – then drove the Tonga off in tightly packed lorries. The people were banished from the homes to a land with no marshes, no water – the soil full of lead, the wood full of smoke, the ground as hard as rock’ (p. 78). Joseph, one of the characters in *The Old Drift*, adds more detail to the challenges faced by the displaced villagers: ‘It must have seemed like the end of the world, the soil full of lead, wood that burns too much the smoke, ground hard as a rock. Chased from the Zambezi, without stores, under orders. No river banks, no marshes, no trees. The Tonga became scavengers, nothing to eat for a fishing culture, nothing but dirty water to drink. No *bukoko* beer, no escape. Scattered, a people lost in a wilderness, like a needle in a stack of hay. Cold, swamp, storms, disease, isolation. Death skulking in the air, in the water, in the bush. People dropping like flies’ (p. 547).

The picture could not be more vivid. The experience could not be more painful. The ‘civilised’ *bazungu* placed a higher premium of value on animals than human beings; the Tonga were driven from the fertile valley into the arid and infertile higher ground, leaving behind the gardens, homes and ancestral shrines and graves.

By including the construction of the dam in the novel, Serpell subtly demonstrates the ugly side of the colonial enterprise: that even with ‘good’ intentions such as the building of a dam to generate electricity for Southern and Northern Rhodesia, the colonisers did so without caring about the people whose land they had grabbed. In any case, even the two territories to benefit from the electricity project were products of force and fraud on the part of the British South Africa Company owned by Cecil John Rhodes – hence, the two twin territories were eponymously named Northern and Southern Rhodesia. In referring to the separation of the two territories, Clark says ‘the two lands were finally divvied up’ (p. 18).

That Clark opts to use the more informal expression ‘divvied up’ instead of more formal language encapsulates the casual manner in which the dis-memberment and pillaging of land was undertaken. It was, one would argue, fashionable for the Western settlers to grab land from the local people. Roland Banda, one of the African characters in *The Old Drift*, says of Rhodes’ dubious and fraudulent ‘purchase’ of native land through his British South Africa Company (BSAC): ‘Rhodes is the one who bought the land from our chiefs. Many of them did not understand these bargains. They gave away their mineral rights for trifles: blankets and guns mostly’ (p. 100). The land grabbing and developments in the new territories were primarily meant to benefit the white settler community and not the local people. As long as the objections came from the local people, there was no problem with imposing the project.

Witkamp (2013, p. 122) indicates that the imposition of the construction of the dam on the Tonga led to a ‘rupture’ in their lives and culture, adding that the local people were subjected to ‘political and economic interests over which they had very little control’ (p. 122). Mary Ndlovu described what happened to the Tonga as a disaster: ‘When displacement did occur, in the 1950s, it arrived suddenly and catastrophically, and with

traumatic consequences for the people who like calling themselves “basilwizi”- people of the great river’ (1981, p. 1).

Both the falls and dam, therefore, bear as much semiotic significance in the novel as they do in the historical context. Both signify the greed and selfishness that characterised the colonial enterprise; all this in the name of civilising and helping the local people. However, there are slight differences in the semiotic significance of the falls and the dam, the former being a natural phenomenon and the latter, a man-made one. The falls semiotise the pioneering mission of the Europeans that came to this part of the world, and indeed, Clark sees himself as a pioneer, a wanderer motivated by the desire to be ‘the first to follow the Zambesi from the Falls, all the way to the coast’ (p. 5). To pioneer, in this context, was to conduct a Livingstone-esque exploration of the interior, what Clark aptly refers to as ‘imperial exploration’ (p. 8). To pioneer was to explore the vast natural resources of this part of the world with a view to exploiting or claiming them. Hence, the falls were claimed for Queen Victoria while the mineral resources were exploited mainly for the benefit of the coloniser – all at the expense of the local people. The dam, on the other hand, semiotises the imposition of Western culture and ideas on the local people and environment; an imposition to the detriment of local interests and concerns. All Western structures in the colonial period find their signification in the construction of the dam: the Victoria Falls Hotel, the founding of Livingstone town, *inter alia*.

The Old Drift exposes the selfish and nefarious motives that steered the imperial exploration and pioneering. The exploration itself was haphazard, driven only by greed and the preoccupation with discovering some hitherto unknown natural phenomenon and, therefore, like Livingstone, being touted as a hero or great explorer. Clark admits as much, stating that for a year he ‘journeyed in a go-as-you-please sort of style with my petty fleet of dug-outs’ (p. 6). Similarly, Livingstone set out to locate the source of the Nile river, motivated by the desire to be the first to do so. Yet because he was wandering about aimlessly with the hope of stumbling upon the source of the Nile the ‘godly Scotch doc’ (p. 2) instead found ‘a gash in the ground full of massed, tumbling water’ – that is, the falls (p. 1). The explorer was, therefore, ‘searching for the Nile in the wrong spot’ (p. 2).

The pioneering missions, therefore, were largely characterised by ignorance – hence, the aimless movement. Serpell underlines this point further by means of wordplay on the term ‘muzungu’ which in its simplest sense means a white person. Hence, the reference to Livingstone as ‘father muzungu’ (p. 1). The text says of the word ‘muzungu’: ‘The word means white man, but it describes not the skin, but a tendency. A *muzungu* is one who will *zunguluka* – wander aimlessly – until they end up in circles. And so, our movious *muzungu* pitched up here again, dragging his black bearers with him’ (p. 1). Livingstone’s movements and explorations, therefore, were not guided by any clear knowledge but the desire for fame, the obsession with being a pioneer. Hence, while Livingstone characterised his journeys into the interior of Africa as driven by what he called the three C’s (Commerce, Christianity and Civilisation), Serpell adds three other elements: adventure, disaster and fame (p. 1).

In *The Old Drift*, Serpell questions the narrative of the imperial centre – the idea that Livingstone and the other Western explorers were motivated only by selfless motives. From the perspective of a postcolonial reading of history and the narratives of the imperial

quest, whatever the colonisers and their trailblazers did in this part of Africa was marred by ulterior motives. Even the commerce that Livingstone emphasised was meant to benefit England, not the local people.

It is significant and worth noting that the text of *The Old Drift*, as indicated above, says that in his wandering, Livingstone was ‘dragging his black bearers with him’ (p. 1). The pioneering journey was Livingstone’s – was all about Livingstone’s interests – while the black people merely carried his belongings. They were merely ‘dragged’ along possibly against their will. They had no choice but to carry his belongings in much the same way that the villagers of Chisamu village in Gwembe Valley had no choice but to accept the resettlement plan.

The idea that the colonisation process was at the expense of the local people, that the local people were compelled to comply with the wishes and plans of the coloniser, is a prominent motif in the part of *The Old Drift* dealing with the colonial period. Like Livingstone before him, Clark is accompanied by local bearers and guides in his falls-to-coast pioneering mission. It was the local Barotse who paddled his ‘petty fleet of dug-outs’ (p. 6). Unlike Livingstone, however, Clark mistreats his bearers.

It might be argued that in drawing our attention to the bearer guides, both in the cases of Livingstone and Clark, Serpell indirectly but perhaps subtly addresses the claims made by Western explorers: that they were the first to ‘discover’ something and should, therefore, be seen as heroes. Yet such discovery is questionable because the ‘discovered’ places existed long before the arrival of the ‘discoverer’. In any case, the ‘discoverer’ depended on the guidance of the local guide-bearers. When the local bearers took Livingstone to the falls, they told him the falls were known as Mosi-oa-tunya, but upon seeing the falls, he claimed to have ‘discovered’ them and named them for his queen (p. 1).

Names and Naming in the Colonial Enterprise

One of the means by which the colonising power enforces its control over the colonised is by imposing names on them; not only anthroponyms but also toponyms. Land would be grabbed, claimed, then named or renamed, as the situation dictated. The white pioneer would, upon coming across something he had not seen before, would claim it as his own, ‘often renaming it for good measure’ (p. 98). When Livingstone was led to the falls by local guides, he was overwhelmed by the sight in much the same way that Clark was mesmerised by his first encounter with the falls. ‘I shall never forget it,’ he said of the encounter (p. 3).

However, Livingstone was not content with the beauty of the falls: ‘His bearers called it Mosi-oa-tunya, which means The Smoke That Thunders, but he gave it the name of his queen’ (p. 1). Livingstone ignored the local name. He had ‘discovered’ the falls for queen and country and went on to name them for his queen as a way of claiming them for the British empire. The falls were no longer the preserve of the local people; they were now part of British imperial territory. Had he the British flag with him, he might have planted it at the site.

There is another event of semiotic significance regarding the use of names – that is when Clark first saw the falls. It was at night and he was overwhelmed by the sight of the falls. However, he proceeded to etch his name into a baobab tree – a very significant

act that signifies the use of names to claim ownership of territory. ‘The next morning, I marked the occasion of my first encounter by carving my name and the date into the baobab tree: Percy M Clark. 8 May 1903’ (p. 4).

The baobab signifies, from a semiotic perspective, the wealth of Africa or Zambia, which the colonisers and Western settlers claimed as their own and etched their names on them. The names of the coloniser were etched on many aspects of traditional or indigenous life and culture. It is a way of erasing indigenous memory or replacing it with Western memory. This draws attention to onomastic aspects such as the giving of European names to indigenous people at baptism or upon conversion to Christianity. It also reflects what Rhodes did; naming the territory after himself, Northern and Southern Rhodesia. In this case, we have Clark crossing the Zambezi into North-western Rhodesia (p. 4).

Worth noting from the onomastic perspective, however, is the fact that Clark names one of his sons Victor for no other reason other than ‘to record our association with the Falls’ (p. 16), presumably because Victor is the masculine version of Victoria. In his mind and that of other settlers, the falls were an embodiment – an extension of sorts, even – of the person of Queen Victoria of England. The name made the falls English, a part of the Great British empire!

Agnes, one of the characters in *The Old Drift*, gives us another perspective to the issue of names and colonialism: ‘*Northern Rhodesia*. A storybook land. Named after the great Cecil Rhodes. They may as well have called it *Northern Cecilia*, she thought hysterically’ (p. 104). Using Agnes’ thought process, Serpell satirises the name-and-claim obsession that characterised the colonial enterprise and the processes leading up to it. Using the first name of the land-grabber, Cecil to call the stolen land ‘Cecilia’ would have served the same purpose as using the surname and calling it ‘Rhodesia’. The name, in other words, would not change the fact that the land was obtained through fraudulence and force.

The British South Africa Company was the instrument Rhodes used to dispossess the local people of their land and claim it as his own. What Clark says is revealing: ‘The British South Africa Company – Rhodes’ imperial machine – owned The Old Drift and decided to move it to a sandy ridge six miles away. A drier, healthier spot, to be sure, but more importantly, closer to the rail. They renamed the town Livingstone, marked out 200 stands, some for government and some for settlers and christened it the capital of North-western Rhodesia’ (p.14). Since the claim to ownership was questionable and misleading in view of the fact that the company used fraud and force to obtain the land, it had no right to share out or sell the land to settlers. Further, the decision to rename the settlement after Livingstone was another act of name-and-claim.

At the time, settlers and adventurers intending to cross into North-western Rhodesia used a spot where the Zambezi was ‘at its deepest and narrowest for hundreds of miles’ (p. 4). The place of crossing was initially called Sekute’s Drift after the Leya chief whose subjects helped settlers cross from Southern Rhodesia into North-western Rhodesia. However, when the first white settler in the area Fred ‘Mopane’ Clarke came, the name of the spot was changed to Clarke’s Drift ‘after the first white settler’ (p. 4) whom Clark later met.

Later, it became known as ‘The Old Drift’ and according to Clark ‘no one knows’ when the name changed (p. 4). What is evident, however, is that the association of the

spot with the local chief faded away when it was named after Clarke. In a sense, the 'ownership' of this part of the Zambezi changed from Sekute, the chief indigenous to the area, to Clarke the settler. The name likely changed to *The Old Drift* after the death of Clarke, who as Phillipson indicates 'arrived in 1898 and set himself up as a trader, hotel-keeper and forwarding agent' (p. 67).

Thus, in the colonisation scheme, names were key as they were not only a way of marking off a piece of land or structure as being 'owned' by the colonisers but were also a means of declaring colonial presence in the territory. To imperialists like Rhodes, having entire nations named after them not only projected their power but also presented the named territories as trophies of the coloniser.

To some extent the naming and renaming of physical spaces in the course of the colonisation of this part of Africa amounted to onomastic erasure. As Pfukwa and Mamvura (2016) argue, 'giving Europe-an names to the African landscape was an act of erasure, an attempt to delete an existing identify' (p.262). They add that the colonial names 'came along with their histories and cultures wiping away the existing ones' (p.262). Pfukwa and Mamvura (2016), suggest that James Cook and other European explores 'erased' a whole history of the South Pacific by giving English names to the Australian coastline and some islands (p.262).

The Old Drift

The Old Drift, which lends its name to the title of the novel, is of profound semiotic and symbolic significance to the process of colonisation of the Zambian territory since it was the first European settlement of the area now called Livingstone. As Phillipson states, only a cemetery remains of the settlement (p. 86).

The Old Drift also signifies the link between the two territories of Northern Rhodesia and Southern Rhodesia. When settlers travelled from the southern territory, they crossed into the northern territory via the Old Drift. It, therefore, also epitomises the expansionist efforts and Cape-to-Cairo dream conjured by Cecil John Rhodes. The dream included 'a railway that would run vertically up the continent' (Serpell, 2019, p.10). The proximity of The Old Drift to the falls also accorded it extra significance. Prior to the construction of the railway in the early part of the 1900s, all goods imported into Northwestern Rhodesia were carried by ox or mule-drawn wagons and then ferried across the Zambezi in the area around the Old Drift (Phillipson, 1972, p. 67). According to Phillipson, the site of the Old Drift was 'flat, marshy and malaria infested' (p. 67) leading to the deaths of many settlers: 'In most years, some twenty per cent of the settlers died and in 1903, the figure was considerably higher' (p. 67).

However, the adventure and quest for fame and wealth motivated the settlers to stay on, and when some died, others still came. Thus, as Phillipson states, from the time Clarke arrived in 1898, the population of white people at the Old Drift had grown to sixty-eight – including women and children – by 1903. Clark narrates that at the time of his arrival in 1903 the Old Drift 'was then a small settlement of a half-dozen men – there were only about a hundred white men in all the territory at the time' (p. 4), an observation which confirms the fact that the population of the settlement was small.

Serpell is careful not to falsify some historical facts as she fictionalises history, hence, the historical content of the novel generally agrees with the historical records. The narrative surrounding, The Old Drift is generally harmonised with historical events. Worth noting, however, is Clark's statement: 'I made my headquarters at the, The Old Drift for the time being' (p. 8). This, in itself, bears semiotic significance because figuratively and in actuality, Old Drift was, for a while, the headquarters of those who were involved in or benefited from the colonial enterprise spearheaded by Rhodes. So-called pioneers, including 'accidental' ones like Clark ('I became a pioneer by default,' p. 8) saw the Old Drift as a springboard to the pursuit of their selfish dreams.

The significance of the Old Drift grew with time and with the population of white settlers. Clark says of the growth (p. 8): 'A year had passed since my first visit and the population was now fivefold but the place was still a mere trading post: a few wood and iron buildings and twice as many wattle and daub Kaffir huts. The crowd, however, had become practically cosmopolitan.' Clark also indicates that the settlement was a place of danger and misery, so the men there tried to entertain themselves with drinks at make-shift bars. 'There was a lot of drink at The Old Drift – understandable, what with the boredom and the savagery to keep at bay, to say nothing of the competitive sports, gambling, prospecting, surviving' (p. 10).

In a sense, the Old Drift was a place for drifters – men looking for fortune wherever and, however, it could be found. Clark says of the place (p. 9): 'Men came and went. Those who stayed tended to die. The dry season heat was oppressive, and the thirst it engendered required a sedulous slaking. During the rains, from November to March, the place was a right swamp. The mosquitos gathered in hordes, humming like a German band, their stings sharp enough to penetrate an elephant's hide...Fever was so prevalent at The Old Drift, no particular attention was given to anyone down with it' (p. 9). The pioneers suffered and died in large numbers and at some point, as Clark says, there was 'a loss of seventy per cent' (p. 10) and the settlers nicknamed the settlement Deadrock because, in his words, 'there was a funeral about once a week' (p. 10). Hence, he says: 'Pioneering isn't all lavender' (p. 10).

When the railway from Bulawayo reached the area in April 1904, a bridge was built linking the southern and northern territories. The settlers then moved from the site of the Old Drift by the end of 1904 to a place further away from the falls, in part, to reduce cases of malaria and established a township that became the site of the present-day Livingstone. In present-day Livingstone, the Old Drift Cemetery is little more than a tourist site.

When the settlers abandoned the Old Drift, only the cemetery remained. The cemetery in this regard signifies the overwhelming power of greed and the dangers faced by Clark and other settlers in their quest to engage in pioneering journeys into the interior of Africa. In another sense, the cemetery at the Old Drift signifies the futility of the colonial enterprise: that no matter how long it took, the colonial efforts would perish. The early settlers like Clarke and Clark perished – as did the colonial enterprise.

The Old Drift also signifies the stubborn determination of the pioneers that made many of them risk and sacrifice their lives. Buried together with the bodies of the pioneers

at the Old Drift cemetery is one big question: Was it worth it, was it worth dying for? Serpell's novel suggests that the power of greed and personal gain was greater than the sanctity of life; not only the life of the pioneer but also of the local people who stood in the way of the pioneer and, ultimately, the coloniser.

Conclusion

The core purpose of this essay was to examine *The Old Drift* as a postcolonial text written by a postcolonial writer. In pursuing this objective, however, the essay confined itself to the first part of the novel which deals with the history of Zambia in the period of the colonisation of the territory that is now Zambia. Part of it deals with a portion of what is now Zimbabwe; that is, Victoria Falls town. The essay, therefore, was not concerned with content dealing with the post-independence period of Zambia or the part dealing with futuristic events.

In examining how Serpell's *The Old Drift* re-examines Zambia's colonial past and how it is portrayed from a Western perspective, the essay applies some principles of postcolonial criticism, onomastics and semiotics. It narrows its analysis to the significance of the use of language in the novel and the role of names and naming in the colonisation process, as well as the semiotic significance of the Victoria Falls, Kariba Dam, the Old Drift settlement and some selected characters such as Clark and Ronald Banda.

Based on its findings, the essay argues that *The Old Drift* is part of the 'new drift' in Zambian literature; an era characterised in part by the rise of the number of Zambian women writers on the national and international scene. Serpell is among the women who have raised the profile of Zambian literature on the international stage through their award-winning literary works.

Further, the essay argues that *The Old Drift* is characterised by an experimentalist style, which refuses to conform to the 'conventional' use of language. Additionally, the essay postulates that the language of the colonisers betrays their overt and covert motives in the way they related to local people. Language was used as a tool of dehumanising the local people.

The essay also argues that the Western settlers and colonisers used Western names and a tool for claiming ownership of the land they obtained fraudulently. The colonialists were not concerned about the welfare of the people from whom they grabbed the land as is demonstrated, in part, by how they treat the local people in the process of constructing the Kariba dam. Thus, the places the colonisers named and claimed as well as the infrastructure they built on 'stolen' land semiotise their greed, deceitfulness, callousness and brutality.

Finally, the essay argues that *The Old Drift* problematises the assumptions and narratives of the imperial centre regarding the culture and history of the colonised people of Northern Rhodesia. It further argues that Serpell's novel suggests that even what the West portrayed as a positive side of their mission, such as the preaching of the gospel was ultimately meant for selfish gain. It was a mission pursued at the expense of, and to the detriment of, the local people; a mission characterised by profound hypocrisy. The coloniser's claim to moral superiority is brought into question by the fact that in many ways, the coloniser behaved in the same way as the colonised. The original settlement for white people, the eponymous Old Drift, signifies everything that was wrong and evil about the colonial enterprise.

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