

**CONSTRUCTING
WOMANHOOD IN ZIMBABWEAN LITERATURE: NOVIOLET
BULAWAYO AND PETINA GAPPAH**

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***Abstract:** Literature written in English in the former British colonies of Southern Africa has attracted the public's attention after the publication of Michael Chapman's "Southern African Literatures" (1996). The paper analyses the writings of two Zimbabwean authors - NoViolet Bulawayo (Elizabeth Zandile Tshele) and Petina Gappa – taking into account African feminist discourses.*

***Keywords:** identity, language, women's voices, Zimbabwe.*

1. Introduction

Zimbabwean literature written in English has been the centre of attention since Doris Lessing wrote about this part of Africa, which at the time was named South Rhodesia or Rhodesia (between 1923-1980). Later, in 1996, Michael Chapman published a history of Southern African literatures, focusing on Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Angola, Malawi, Zambia and Namibia, and observing that

in the literature of all the countries, there is the shared experience of colonialism in its abrasive, economic form attendant on strong, permanent settler populations. A consequence is the large theme of oppression and liberation with people in Zimbabwe, Angola, Mozambique, Namibia and South Africa having had to resort to bitter struggles against intransigent, white governments (Chapman 2003).

Since the beginning of the 21st century, Zimbabwean literature has changed focus from “urbanisation, where the old-versus-the-new or the rural-memory-versus-the-city- opportunity characterises forms of expression beyond any stronghold of language, race or nationality”

(Chapman 2003) to issues related to migration, exile, the position of women in society or the status of the writer in Zimbabwe.

The aim of the present study is to examine the particularities of contemporary Zimbabwean (Zim) literature focusing on two women writers whose novels and short stories are used as vehicles for social protests and as the voice of the silenced women: NoViolet Bulawayo and Petina Gappah. Due to the fact that contemporary Zim literature is mainly based on diaspora – which is not a new phenomenon in the relatively small body of Zim literature – Zimbabwe is depending on writers and publishers abroad in order to build its own literature corpus and to part ways with South African history. Numerous scholars point to the fact that Zim writers live “far from the madding crowds of Harare or Bulawayo” (“Diaspora influence on Zim Literature” 2014) raising the issue of the authors’ absence or even of availability of books to readers in their home country. Moreover, as all diaspora literature, the Zimbabwean diaspora narrative straddles two cultures, it is torn between home and exile, and reflects all the characteristics of this type of writing: strong attachment with the homeland, the impact of displacement both on the individual and on the homeland, the trauma lived by the marginalized other in the host country and the expressed attitude of rejection or acceptance.

As Oliver Nyambi (2015) notices, “some contemporary Zimbabwean literature demonstrates a discernible resistance thread. These literary works create fictional life-worlds in which the ambivalence of colonial land and economic injustices are exposed as potentially mutating and threatening the independent nation”. However, 21st century Zimbabwean literature is largely classified in two main categories: texts that form the postcolonial resistance literature and texts that recover the past in order to imagine alternative identities that are shaped after reconciliation with past traumas:

Storytelling is itself a ritual means to heal from trauma because it connects past and present, drawing upon the ancestors and their sacred power to restore harmony and health. Postcolonial fiction [...] demonstrates that trauma can be narrated with integrity. (Visser 2015:251)

Petina Gappah’s and NoViolet Bulawayo’s novels and short stories are written in English, published in Great Britain and are concerned with issues related to immigration, relocation, assertion of womanhood in the context of reconciling with a traumatic past. The Zim writers uncover the palimpsest of female identity in the various layers configured by socio-cultural conditioning and by the positions ascribed by society to construct identities that are

based on a healing process. Eventually, the construction of womanhood is based on insight, acceptance and redressing imbalances.

2. Alternative identities

The writings of Petina Gappah and NoViolet Bulawayo highlight the multitude of female voices that challenge contemporary Zim narrative, “against the monolithic, authoritarian (and male) version of ‘patriotic’ history, by which the government defines Zimbabwe’s past and present” (Veit-Wild 2006). Past ambiguities and transformations become the ground for women who succeed in publicly asserting their identities and, thus, restoring the sense of belonging to a society that is used to pushing women to its margins.

In a 2004 interview, the writer Yvonne Vera raised the question of feminism in Zimbabwean literature, underlining that

if you write in a style which quickly tells the reader that you are situating yourself as a woman writer and that your act of writing perhaps is structured around a particular idea of [...] body, or structures in the society or independence; that you are making an argument about female identity – immediately that is seen as transporting foreign ideas. Yet the examples of women having to survive, because their men have left, either gone to the city or died, or just abandoned them... It’s so common [...] that it is just accepted. (Primorac 2004:159)

It is a fact that African activists have protested for decades against the idea of having a feminist agenda that can be subsumed under the Western one (Tripp 2017). Until the 1990s, African women’s struggle was eclipsed by the anti-Apartheid movement although there were some writers and activists who noted that the nationalist agenda should include women’s role and position in the Apartheid society. The beginning of the 21st century was marked by feminist movements that draw attention to the fact that African activists should voice a different message than European or American activists because “various images of women, from both colonial and postcolonial perspectives, yield a particular history of representations of African women” (Frenkel 2008:2). Moreover, women’s empowerment and inclusion in Southern Africa differs from their situation on other continents since “a sexualised narrative was projected onto African women in European representations from the Middle Ages onwards” (Frenkel 2008:2). Thus, terms such as ‘womanism’, ‘motherism’ and ‘humanism’ are considered as more appropriate for the interpretation of works by African women who emphasize the fact that feminism in Africa “encompasses distancing women from the idea and practice that they are insubordinate” (Nkealah 2006:132), while promoting the gender discourse and gender relations. Moreover,

Naomi N. Nkealah (2006:134) points out that African women writers who advocate “women’s emancipation as a springboard to socio-economic development” should be aware of the fact that this requires “a combination of personal experience of the injustices directed towards their sex and an innovative creative mind that speaks directly to the reader’s mind”.

The two Zimbabwean authors join the African feminist discourse as they sketch female characters inside and outside the African community, using their experiences as both insiders and outsiders to construct alternative identities starting from the intersection of gender, race and class. Their novels and short stories deal with issues that African feminism commonly addresses: victimhood and power, voice and silence, identity and language, family and culture, (re)presentation and perception.

2.1 Language and identity

Zimbabwean diaspora writers use English as main language, which is different from South African literature, due to the fact that South African writers have always had the possibility to write and publish books not only in English but also in Afrikaans, Zulu or Xhosa. Unlike South Africans, Zimbabwean writers feel the pressure of using the colonialists’ language because of economic and political conditions. As Michael Wines underlines,

In Southern Africa, a child’s name is chosen to convey a specific meaning...Increasingly, however, those traditional names are bestowed not in Ndebele, Sotho or some other local language, but in English, the world’s lingua franca. English names arrived with colonial rule, were further imposed by missionaries and, for some, became fashionable with the spread of Western culture. (Wines 2007)

Writers also combine Ndebele or Sotho with English and their characters juggle two languages: the ancient language – “the language of intimacy” and of their childhood – and English – “a language that we encountered in school”, used by the new generation in search of an alternative identity (Peschel 2015). As Bulawayo states in an interview, Zimbabwe is a space where language is alive and it is “an identity that comes from negotiating two cultures” (Peschel 2015).

In 2013 NoViolet Bulawayo attracted the attention of the literary community as her novel, *We Need New Names*, was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. Not only does she choose to use a pseudonym that combines English and Ndebele (her actual name is Elizabeth Tschele) but she also echoes the trend of giving children English names that reflect the situation of their birth, their personalities, and the tasks they assume. Her characters are named Mother

of Bones, Mother, MotherLove, Forgiveness, Kindness, Darling, Destiny, Whiteboy, Bastard, Godknows and Bornfree. Mother of Bones is the oldest and takes care of children when Mother is away from the village. MotherLove supplies villagers with alcohol, gathers people in her shack and looks after the children who become parents at a young age.

Parents force English names upon their children although they would not allow them to speak the coloniser's language at home. Some use Christian names but the large majority prefers to translate traditional names from Shona or Ndebele into English. The older generations perceive language as a visa for a new life their children may obtain: "the children of the land [...] leaving in droves. [...] Moving, running, emigrating, going, deserting, walking, quitting, flying, fleeing – to all over, to countries near and far, to countries unheard of, to countries whose names they cannot pronounce" (Bulawayo 2014:145). The name of the township that Darling and her friends inhabit is Paradise, the rich neighbourhood where they find food is called Budapest, whereas Detroit is called Destroyedmichygen by the child who struggles to learn English from her relatives in America.

We Need New Names is a call for moral revival and does not promote emigration, although Darling, the main character, manages to escape the slums and move to the USA. A part of Darling's identity is tied to the place that she leaves behind, to the language that she does not use anymore and to her friends who cannot accept her decision: "Why did you run off to America? Tell me, do you abandon your house because it's burning, or do you find water to put out the fire?" (Bulawayo 2014:286)

When in Detroit, Darling feels stranded and wants to go back home which would mean that she could not return to the USA as her visa has expired. Exile is a burden for her, since the new community is not welcoming, and the girl is skeptical about her ability to speak the new language properly. Moreover, Darling understands that it is impossible for her to transmit the stories and the traditions of her community to her children and she has to admit that even Ndebele, her mother tongue, is useless in the USA as her future family finds no need for it:

And with our parents gone [...], we have no home anymore, who would go to see that land we left behind? [Our children] they grew and we had to squint to see ourselves in them. They did not speak our language, they did not sound like us. [...] We told them stories about our country, they did not beg us for stories of the land we had left behind. They went to their computers and Googled and Googled and Googled. (Bulawayo 2014:248-249)

Darling views the changes in identity through the prism of languages that have to be spoken in order to remain alive. The English names that children receive at birth in Zimbabwe

are not perceived as a loss of traditional and cultural identity because they are mere translations of the Ndebele or Shona names. However, the Christian names that are forced upon locals by the coloniser mark the dislocation of a large segment of Zimbabwe's population and a fracture between generations:

we did not name our children after our parents, after ourselves; we feared if we did they would not be able to say their own names, that their friends and teachers would not know how to call them. We gave them names that would make them belong in America, names that did not mean anything to us: Aaron, Josh, Dana, Corey, Jack, Kathleen. (Bulawayo 2014:247)

The new names that are given not only to people but also to places in Zimbabwe point to a re-thinking of the African society that has fought a long and fierce battle to change the name Rhodesia (linked to the businessman Cecil Rhodes) into Zimbabwe (translated from Shona as "houses of stones"): "Back in 1890s when Cecil Rhodes and his band of marauders established Rhodesia by taking over the fertile land on the Mashonaland plateau, they dumped the people who lived there in the places they called native reserves" (Gappah 2016:59). Due to the unstable political and economic situation of the country, people look for alternative ways of life which is reflected in Zimbabwean diaspora narrative.

The title of Petina Gappah's volume, *Rotten Row*, is given by the street in Harare where the criminal courts are situated, a street which received its name during British colonisation and which is called "roton'ro" by the locals (Gappah 2016:ix). The title of her 2015 novel, *The Book of Memory*, is also a play on words as Memory is not only the common noun but also the name of a woman. Moreover, Gappah also explains the next step in redefining Zim identities: "The illogical order of Shona slang names for English and sort-of-English first names means that [...] all Philips become Fidza, all Ryans Ridza, all Davids Divha and all Jonathans Jonso" (Gappah 2016:15).

A look at English from the Shona linguistic perspective proves that other misunderstandings occur because of "the limitations of the English language to capture fully the fetid inventiveness of the Shona imagination" (Gappah 2016:61). Thus, a person whose name is Chikwambo has to carry the burden of being called Goblin, which is the usual translation of this word into English "when in fact it is a combination of a familiar, a good luck charm and a sort of unpaid messenger" (Gappah 2016:61). Although English is the official language in Zimbabwe and is seen as the means to access a better life, the idea of anyone willingly and voluntarily subjecting "himself to the constricting confines" (Gappah 2016:255)

of English and using the coloniser's language in the most intimate moments is completely rejected by traditional communities. Even writers or bloggers who use English on a regular basis, find it "particularly raw" to "write sex scenes and fantasies in other languages than English" (Gappah 2016:165).

The issues raised by adopting and adapting English in African communities are continuously multiplying especially since the phenomenon of colonisation was replaced by emigration. If English was considered a means of communication until the end of the 20th century, at present it is seen as an identity shaper. The colonised has turned towards the coloniser's communities, perceiving English as the means to escape poverty, to obtain access to information and to move into the coloniser's world, offering future generations the possibility to redefine identity and, thus, to integrate. An aphorism that Petina Gappah (2016:253) uses in her stories is "that if you want to hide something from an African, all you have to do is put it in a book". Unfortunately, access to knowledge is granted rather by using English than the Southern African dialects: "English will come alive on her tongue and she will spit it like it's burning her mouth, like it's poison, like it's the only language she has ever known" (Bulawayo 2014:198).

2.2 Women's voices

Although it has often been stated that African writers carry the burden of representation, due to the fact that the state of African countries still needs to be described and diagnosed in literary works, Bulawayo and Gappah manage to outline portraits of women that are defintory for the African communities. In their writings, Bulawayo and Gappah focus both on young girls and older women who are left home by their fathers or husbands when they go to work on South African diamond mines. The two writers focus on women's roles as organisers, caregivers, healers, creators and keepers of traditions as they are involved in organizing weddings and funerals and in assisting priests in exorcisms as they take care of their sick husbands or fathers, who usually return home infected with various diseases such as AIDS. They also have to deal with child pregnancy, attempts of abortion or murder of their beloved. Women gather the community around them "like sand" (Bulawayo 2014:71) in an attempt to protect everybody in that small part of the world named Paradise that "children will soon be leaving, like in the Bible, when those people left that terrible place" (Bulawayo 2014:72). Election day is the time when men and women sit together but only men talk about democracy and change: "their voices burn in the air, making smoke all over the place [...] and they laugh like they have swallowed thunder" (Bulawayo 2014:59). Women dress up and offer the young generation a representation

of cohesion and strength: their beauty makes us want to love them”. Women are the first who can show that change starts at an individual level: “Painted lips. Made-up hair. A pink ribbon. [...] Earrings made from colorful seeds” (Bulawayo 2014:59). They put their mark on men who become confident in the future, as female beauty influences men to “sit up straight and [...] hold their heads high”, to put their shirts on, comb their hair “and just look like real people again” (Bulawayo 2014:58).

Women are at the centre of almost all Petina Gappah’s stories, but they are not necessarily victims. The writer focuses on the issues that Zimbabwean women face in their small communities and on how they manage to defend themselves, to make their voice heard and their testimonies taken into consideration. In Gappah’s stories women are law students, feuding relatives, mistresses, commuters who are harassed on buses, wannabe feminists who oppress other women, and witnesses who voice the reality of domestic violence.

“A Kind of Justice” (Gappah 2016:133) introduces Pepukai, a young Zimbabwean woman who lives in London and has “armed herself” with several law degrees, convinced that she can fight for justice and win. She starts her legal career with the strong belief that she has the power “to influence what happened in the world”, to bring justice to an unjust world. She reads some of the reports of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission describing the crimes of war committed in Rhodesia/ Zimbabwe by soldiers and containing 230 pages of “names or non-names of the victims who were displaced, enslaved, killed, raped, abducted, amputated or forcibly conscripted” (Gappah 2016:150). Fatoma, Ayena, Keni, Anne become victim 1, victim 2, girl 4, girl 500. After reading the reports and finishing her studies “she had come to realise that she had only the power of anger, that her agony for a just world was no more than the powerless cry of the child who first realizes that the world is not good and loving at all, but unjust, unequal, unfair and unkind. She had come to accept that the only power she had, if she had any at all, was that of witness” (Gappah 2016:145).

Rotten Row has several female characters who are abused by husbands or fathers and manage to escape them. One example is the wife of “In the Matter between Goto and Goto” (Gappah 2016:263), who is raped by her husband and manages to divorce him based on a recent law in Zimbabwe that makes it illegal for husbands to sexually assault their wives: “while he believes that the act of forcing himself on his wife was nothing more than ‘taking what was his’ by conjugal right, the law sees the matter entirely differently” (Gappah 2016:277).

The construction of womanhood also implies the rise of unappealing female characters that Gappah introduces in her volume. Mrs. Chikombe in “The Old Familiar Faces” (Gappah 2016:79) is the ultimate fighter for women’s rights whose voice is so loud that it oppresses and

stifles women in her organization instead of helping them find their own voice: she proclaims herself the “Born Again Feminist”, and feminism becomes “an activity, not a philosophy [...] a civil society activity that requires workshopping and resourcing, [...] an income-generating activity in the NGO sector, just as human rights is an income-generating activity” (Gappah 2016:90). Although Gappah addresses the issue of wannabe feminists in a witty manner, the clear and present danger of such self-proclaimed “gatekeepers and sentinels who stand guard at the gates to Feminism” (Gappah 2016:91) is that women can also become persecutors and intimidators.

Another example is the female character in “A Small House in Borrowdale Brooke” (Gappah 2016:285) who graduates University only because experience teaches her that education is “not about knowledge or enhancing her understanding of the world and her place in it or expanding the mind. It was primarily to enable the accumulation of material things” (Gappah 2016:287). When she understands that she cannot get a better job or at least a promotion, she decides to be ‘a small house’ the Zimbabwean expression that is used to describe an extramarital affair or as Gappah explains “not a proper wife but an official mistress and more elevated than a girlfriend” (Gappah 2016:289). She returns to ancient traditions – sorcery and incantations – to force her lover to get a divorce and marry her. The story offers an excellent insight into how deeply connected women are with traditions and ancient beliefs.

Petina Gappah removes her women characters from their domestic setting and places them into contexts that offer them the opportunity to speak for themselves, to voice their opinions and fight against traditional ways of perceiving women. The common factor that both Gappah and Bulawayo identify is education as the foundation of the construction of womanhood in Zimbabwe.

3. Conclusions

It is a well-known fact that diaspora narrative has always been regarded circumspectly in the authors’ homeland especially because writers at home feel that they are condemned to live in poorer economic conditions, to suffer different forms of persecution and to have their writings censored in order to be closer to their readers. The situation is even more difficult for Zimbabwean diaspora writers since they write in English instead of Ndebele or Shona. As Jeanne-Marie Jackson (2018) underlines: “it’s not easy to be a Zimbabwean writer abroad: in addition to having to answer familiar questions about who speaks for whom, writes to whom, and by whom their books are published, writers in the diaspora have to negotiate citizenship from a distance. And the line between ‘here’ and ‘there’ is unusually blurry for Zimbabweans.”

NoViolet Bulawayo and Petina Gappah construct women characters that are representative for the contemporary Zim society. They have to balance the feminist discourse with the social and political discourse in order to reveal various female identities that are buried under layers of conditioning socio-cultural factors. Their female characters assume unconventional and distinct roles despite the multitude of circumstances that are supposed to delineate their identity. Their writings address issues that are common to African feminism, such as victims versus perpetrators, women's voices and silences, identity and language and representations of women inside and outside their cultural and familial context.

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