Zimbabwean Literature and Land
(Memory Chirere)

In a widely circulated website interview with Nordiska Afrikainstitutet of February 2004, Zimbabwean writer and critic based in South Africa, Robert Muponde argues that ‘Land is the text of Zimbabwean History and Literature.’ He refers closely to the centrality of Land in seminal Zimbabwean literature texts set in Rhodesia before independence. Some of them are Charles Mungoshi’s ‘Waiting for The Rain,’ Shimmer Chinodya’s ‘Dew In The Morning’ and Yvone Vera’s ‘Without a Name.’

In a very unprecedented show of insight Muponde even argues that Zimbabwean writers (at home and abroad) are currently lagging behind the politicians who have championed real activity on the land issue on the ground that the writers cannot tell whether the activities on the ground are akin to what the writer had called for before and just after independence.

Robert Muponde's actual words are: “…the writer who a year ago was urging the politician to seize land, even factories and shops belonging to white people (as suggested in Mujajati’s Victory), in the name of the people, now finds that the politician has not only outdone the writer in shouting the presence of inequalities in society. The politician has gone further. He has left the writer with two stark choices: the writer must endorse the politician’s and war veteran’s actions because that is what he was urging in his poems (in the case of musicians, in their songs), or he must condemn the actions as reckless, etc.”

Whether Muponde’s intention is to identify the irony of such a situation or not, his point here is interesting. Seminal Zimbabwean Literature set in Rhodesia portray a certain cultural symbiosis between indigenous Zimbabwean people and their land. More acute is the people’s hunger for land and space in fiction on colonial Rhodesia.

In Mungoshi’s ‘Waiting For The Rain’(1975) the following passage stands out on the reader's mind long after: “The sudden transition from the rolling ranches of Hampshire Estates, with their tall dry grass and the fertile soil under that grass, into the scorched nothing-between-here-and-the-horizon white lands of Manyane Tribal Trust Land, with the inevitable tattered scarecrow waving a silent dirge in an empty field, makes a funereal intrusion into the bus.”

In Dambudzo Marechera’s poem of 1973 called ‘Pledging My Soul,’ Land is described first as a potential sex partner:

When I was a boy
I climbed onto your granite breasts
Smooth and round....
I was yours
And you were mine.

And in spiritual terms much later in the poem:

Shall I not kneel to kiss the grains of your sand
To rise naked before you- a bowl of incense?
And the smoke of my nakedness shall be
An offering to you
Pledging my soul.

Another Zimbabwean scholar, Maurice Vambe, based in South Africa again, has also a widely circulated essay on Zimbabwean Literature and Land called ‘Celebrating Land Resistance.’ Although the tendency here is to categorically point out the moments when the Land issue appears in literary texts of Zimbabwe, Vambe is somehow convinced that the writer has ‘merely mentioned the matter.’ There is need to explore the issue further since Land has been central to political discourse from as far back as the wars of resistance in the 1890’s. There is need to reflect on the recent ‘very active, phase of the land reform. Have the writers gone dry?

In February 2005 a Zimbabwean journalist called Chris Gande published a novel based on the Zimbabwe land issue. This novel is called ‘Section 8.’ Again, Chris Gande lives in South Africa. His novel could be one of the very first few that uses The Zimbabwean land issue as a background. Of course one remembers Raymond Choto’s ‘Vavariro’ of 1990, which attempted to work on a land ‘invasion’ after 1980. Section 8 is apparently a Zimbabwean legal instrument used to notify white farmers that their former properties have been designated for compulsory acquisition by the Zimbabwean government. In ‘Section 8’ Thembal Moyo a twenty-year Minister’s son finds love across the racial divide and falls for Jane, the daughter of a white commercial farmer.

Members of Zimbabwe’s new writers organisation called ‘The Budding Writers Association Of Zimbabwe’ published a whole literary journal on the Land issue in 2004. This journal, which contains short stories and a novella, is called: ‘Exploding the myths about Land.’

The novella called ‘Weeping’ is by the late Martin Denenga. Up until 2004 ‘Weeping’ was the most incisive literary piece on land. ‘Weeping’ is about a conflict between a black community and a white farmer over the adjacent land to the farm and the farm itself. Denenga does not limit the land conflict to one historical epoch. This helps prove a historical fact that the animosity between blacks and whites over land is as old as colonialism itself. The writer presents complex characters, black and white and helps to dispel the myth about a
superior race. He feels deeply into the lives of ordinary farm folks, villagers and the white community.

There was general hope that ‘Weeping’ would later be published separately. There is pace, wit and thought here. There was also celebration and a feeling that more established Zimbabwean writers should take on the Land issue through their writings.

But for sometime there has been silence from major writers on the Land issue in the past decade. A very recent literary publication on the Land issue is by D.E. Mutasa called ‘Sekai Minda Tave Nayoe’. Dr D.E. Mutasa is the author of a popular book called ‘Nyambo DzeJoni’ which has been on the Zimbabwean school syllabus for sometime. He is a lecturer at the University of South Africa. ‘Sekai Minda Tave Nayoe’ could be, to date, the most direct and exhaustive literary piece on the Zimbabwean Land issue.

A highly experimental novel, it operates by way of letters written between and amongst Sekai and her former classmates and their families. The whole web of letters puts the land issue right at the centre of the discourse of a generation that is trying to come to terms with the revolution in Zimbabwe. Much more than any, this novel reminds one that the land issue in Zimbabwe is complex. Land has offered some people opportunity to be principled or ambiguous. In a wave of this magnitude there is celebration and even contradictions. More important, the rearrangement of land in Zimbabwe has not only operated at a physical level. The mass movement of people, goods and properties has also resulted in a radical evolvement of mindsets and attitudes.

Mutasa explores here, even ‘the Land reform in the mind.’ In this highly humorous novel, Sekai rises from rags to riches and what remains permanent here from girlhood to a degreed government agricultural officer is her understanding of ‘the real owners’ of the Zimbabwean Land.

However very recently the Zimbabwe Book Publishers Association Chief Judge, Dr Jairos Kangira bemoaned the absence of books on Land from Zimbabweans within Zimbabwe. He seemed, however to think that distance from home gives Zimbabwean writers and scholars in South Africa a ‘higher view of activities back home.’ He also expressed sadness at the fact that Mutasa’s novel, despite its high quality of vision cannot be entered for the Zimbabwe book annual competition because it was not published within Zimbabwe.

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