VICTIMHOOD IN MUNGOSHI’S SHONA NOVELS: A CRITICAL STUDY.

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ABSTRACT.

The paper is a deliberate problematisation of the study of Mungoshi’s Shona literature with a view to initiate new critical perspectives absent in current Shona critical scholarship. We problematise the study of the author’s novels by advancing the argument that, while the author deals with the tragedy engendered largely by a crisis of identity, his novels are also in a similar crisis of identity. This crisis of identity manifests itself through the writer’s undeviating obsession with victimhood. It appears as if Mungoshi has become eloquent in visualising Shona experiential exigencies through the lenses of victimhood. However, we argue that such a position is not only culturally debilitating, it also constitutes a very narrow perspective of viewing family and cultural realities. We also problematise Mungoshi’s Shona literature by transcending the arguments raised by pioneer critics who include George Kahari and Emmanuel Mudhliwa Chiwome who tended to confine their analysis to the crisis of identity triggered by the clash between Shona and Western culture that the writer deals with. Their criticism is, therefore, celebratory.

Introduction

The central concern in this paper is victimhood in Mungoshi’s Shona novels, both as a problematic identity and an assumed philosophy of life. At the heart of this victimhood are Shona people, their culture and institutions particularly the family. Corroborative evidence is drawn from the writer’s three Shona novels which are *Makunun’unu Maodzamwoyo* (1970), *Ndiko Kupindana Kwamazuva* (1975) and *Kunyarara Hakusi Kutaura?* (1983). Our study has been inspired by the unmeandering consistency with which Mungoshi, a prolific Zimbabwean writer in both Shona and English seems to conceptualise Shona experiential exigencies through what appears to be the lenses of victimhood, and also ideas generated by some of the African scholars with African teachings at heart.

One such scholar who speaks on the importance of art and its inextricable connection with society, Milton Obote, the former Ugandan president states: “The soul of a nation is to be found in the temple of its arts” (P’bitek, 1986: vi). This is a crucial and deathless observation that centres art within the embankments of a people’s philosophy of life. Such a philosophy is a shared and cherished phenomenon.

However, problems arise when, as Arnold Kettle in a paper entitled, ‘Is literature a luxury?’ puts it, ‘all you put before us are victims, acting yourselves like helpless victims’. When all there is in literature is failure, suffering, conflict and victims,
questions arise as to whether or not victimhood is a celebrated way of life and if it leads to any hope for the future. Kahari (1980) talks of the search for a Zimbabwean identity. It is possible, at this point, to contend that such a search, whether in the past, present or future has, and is likely not to be inspired by a philosophy which premises inordinate premium on victimhood. Therefore, this discussion is part of the conveyor belt of such discourses committed to the interrogation of whether or not our literature contributes progressively to this dialogue.

Mungoshi, during an interview with Wild back in 1987, also once made an astute remark on writers whose works reflect a loss of faith, not only in themselves, but also in their characters. He said:

If you look at the work of Marechera or Mungoshi or Nyamufukudza - we are of the same age-group - the themes we wrote on are identical: people who can’t believe, who don’t feel that things are going to be all right (1992:192).

The interviewee, Mungoshi, who is the subject of this paper, is one of the most celebrated writers in Zimbabwe. His works are studied in secondary schools and at most national Universities that teach Shona literature and literature in English. A number of literary scholars have also descended on his works with ecstatic and salivating admiration and celebration of the author’s unrivalled creative prowess. He is a versatile writer who has articulated the Shona condition using various literary genres which include poetry, drama and the novel, both Shona and English.

As a result of the writer’s versatility, and also in order to do justice to the subject under exegesis, the scope of this paper is limited to the writer’s Shona novels. Since Mungoshi seems to have abandoned writing in Shona, it will be well worth the effort if this paper triggers and stimulates more writing and discussion of the author’s other works, particularly novels and short stories written in English, in order to assess whether there is any paradigm shift.

While the author deals with issues that relate to the tragic misalliance between Africa and Europe, which engendered a debilitating crisis of identity, this paper is a commitment to a reverse realisation that, Mungoshi’s Shona novels are themselves also in a similar crisis of identity. This crisis of identity finds revelation through the absolutisation, universalisation and institutionalisation of a culture of victimhood that reverberates with frighteningly predictable consistency in the novels under study.

**The Conceptual Construct of Victimhood**

The conceptual construct of victimhood is the realisation that humanity is divested of the vitality and vision to transform and direct life both as a process and a project. It is victim mentality in its totality. This entails the reduction of society into a lifeless and amorphous mass that lacks the mechanics and mechanisms to escalate and act with will and intent. It is acquiescence into the logic of defeat. The defining elements of victimhood include hopelessness, helplessness, meaninglessness, resignation and above all, negation of action and creation. A passive acceptance that conditions of life,
processes and systems are not transformable serves as a catalyst to the enhancement of victim philosophy. Victimhood is, therefore, a condition in which life becomes an overwhelmingly colossal force that threatens humanity. It acts on people instead of them acting on it. Literary creators who embrace this philosophy end up viewing everything as a victim - life, culture, people and institutions.

In this regard, victimhood is a state from which all groups need to recover in order to contribute and participate responsibly. A proper understanding of humanity remains remote in the context of victimhood, because it is a subversive identity. In the appreciation of Mungoshi’s Shona novels, we argue that, victimhood must be acknowledged as a problem and not an identity to be embraced and nurtured. When elevated to the status of an identity or a social label, it is rather subversive, unsustaining and unsustainable. Characters, images and ideas in Makunun’unu Maodzamwoyo, Ndiko Kupindana Kwamazuva and Kunyarara Hakusi Kutaura? are reflective of victimhood and in this case, it is almost an identity that towers majestically over life.

In Mungoshi’s Shona novels, the visualisation of life through the lenses of victimhood is part of modernist storytelling traditions. Such traditions celebrate acquiescence to defeat and the projection of human beings as victims. Armah aptly captures the general characteristics of such traditions, which he likens to an arid desert:

To the giving waters of your flowing it is not in the nature of the desert to return anything but destruction [and] your future…extinction…People headed after the setting sun, in that direction even the possibility of regeneration is dead. There the devotees of death take life, consume it, exhaust every living thing (1973: xi).

Literary works that draw from such traditions which celebrate victimhood stand in direct contradistinction with evidence from Shona and Ndebele oral traditions where the heroic figures of Mapondera, Nehanda, Lobengula, Mzilikazi, Chaminuka and others stand as forces of life and inspiration. Chivaura informs us that:

Heroes from African history and culture contrast sharply with the dwarfish, confused and morally sapped fictional absurdities…These are forged from the creative imaginations of European novels depicting lives spiritually exhausted by their insatiable [and] morally barren cultures (1998:108).

That victimhood is not an expression of Shona philosophy is indubitable. Proverbial sayings like kufa kwemurume hubuda ura; uswa hwenyati ndehuri pamuromo huri mudumbu inofa nahwo, serve to buttress the position that defeatism and surrender are not immediate options. P’bitek speaks in support of this philosophical disposition that negates surrender and victimhood when he says, “The African tradition, lived and lives in the thick of battle of life, here and now” (1986:21).

**Victimhood in Kunyarara Hakusi Kutaura? and Makunun’unu Maodza Mwoyo**
The most significant and conscious creator of characters and images of victims devoid of action and energy necessary for the transformation of life into a great feast of existence is Charles Mungoshi, a keen writer on the condition of the Shona family both in the colonial and contemporary dispensations. In his novels, Mungoshi is largely concerned with the devastating impact that westernism, urbanism and technologism have had on the integrity and balance of the Shona family. These factors have not only dismembered the Shona family but have also undermined agency, vision and wrestled even the minutest vitality necessary for survival. This has generated individuals who subsist on existential philosophies of lifelessness, fatalism, hopelessness and meaninglessness. Such individuals have lost confidence in themselves, in their potential and ultimately in their society and culture. They constitute victims who have been completely elbowed out of the process of meaningful living. They have been aborted by events and paralysed by life.

It is the unwavering consistency in depicting characters that are imbued with a sense of victimhood that makes us come to the conclusion that victimhood has been elevated into a new form of Shona cultural identity. A close and conscious reading of Mungoshi’s novels will reveal that he privileges victimhood and elevates it to the status of an identity to be nurtured. He fails to realise that victimhood is a problem that has to be overcome through a creative method that strikes a balance between suffering and the unbordered potentialities of human beings. It becomes too reductionist and subversive to present life as an ontological force that is totally untransformable and at the same time threatening. Thelwell is uncompromising on this aspect where humanity is registered as an amorphous, incapacitated and vulnerable mass of energy. He persuades us that:

An honest novel cannot proceed out of a glib, fashionable coffee house cynicism and unearned despair in which everything is beyond human effort. It is rather, predicated on the assumption that there is a future for which to struggle, that conditions however grim are not beyond the reach of people’s will, intelligence and decency, and that the writing and reading of such novels are not only testament to that faith, but are an integral and effective part of that struggle (1987:231).

Human beings achieve their status through acting on life rather than being acted upon by life processes and events. Thus, life is both a contest and a choice between fatalistic and life-affirming principles. Living responsibly means refusing to succumb to life threatening forces. Responsible living entails active repudiation and not an essentialisation of abdication and victimhood as options. This is the reason why Fredrick Douglass asserts that a man without force is without the essential dignity of humanity. Human nature is so constituted that it cannot honour a helpless man although it can pity him, and even this it cannot do for long if the signs of power do not arise.

In the three novels under exegesis, one is exposed to a dosage of discourses and images that enhance the philosophy which presents Shona people, the Shona family and also Shona culture as inevitable victims. The above ontological triumvirate seems to exist as things in an arid zone of non being. Powerfully contrived images concatenate to show that the Shona family has lost anchorage and rootedness in Shona epistemological foundations. It is this loss of celebrated Shona values that condemns individual family
members into vulnerability. Individuals make wrong moral decisions because they have been exposed to two irreconcilable cultural perspectives. Mungoshi’s victimhood is more elaborately stated in *Kunyarara Hakusi kutaura?* and *Makunun’unu Maodzamwoyo* than it is in *Ndiko Kupindana Kwamazuva*.

In *Kunyarara Hakusi Kutaura?*, characters are force-marched out of the family as an institution. The family has been systematically edited out of the race of life. When the novel ends, nothing remains of the Chimbimu family. We are left with a wreckage that is dysfunctional. The Chimbimu family seems to have fallen victim to a host of subversive forces engendered largely by western education and western Christianity and suspicions among family members. The author’s vision degenerates into a neurotic disposition, particularly in this novel. We can hazard to say that the writer fails to function as a healer of the Shona family. Ngugi writes that African writers are supposed to be surgeons of the heart and souls of a community and not persons licensed to perform surgery (1981: vii).

The African artist is a keeper of sacred words; words that exude life, vitality and vibrancy. He is a spiritual fountain of society who teaches lived and liveable philosophy. Mungoshi’s obsession with the philosophy of victimhood makes him articulate a vision of life that is pathologically debilitating and decrepitating. One is tempted to wonder if such a vision that places at the centre the inevitability of the demise of the African family is indeed not congruous with the conceptual construct of western imperialism to pass a vote of no confidence in the so called cultural other.

The prologue in *Kunyarara Hakusi Kutaura?* is an emphatic testament of Mungoshi’s commitment to the visualisation of the Shona family through the lenses of victimhood. It depicts a severely tormented people who cannot operate as a well-coordinated mass of energy. It is a people who have completely lost any sense of direction, purpose and location. They cannot effectively identify and locate themselves on the map of human geography. The passage of daylight, which gives way to darkness, can invariably be interpreted as an inevitable loss of action and mobility. Again, the absence of a suitable and recognized sleeping place projects a people without home. Such a people have clearly degenerated to the lower levels of some wild animals. When a people have no home, they have no security. Home is the centre for development. The author asks the following question:

*Zuva ravira tinovatepi?*

*The sun has set, where do we sleep?*

The same is also expressed in *Ndiko Kupindana Kwamazuva* when Rex laments:

*Mumashure irima, mberi irima. Zuva ravira tondovatepi?*

*There is darkness behind and darkness ahead. The sun has set, where do we sleep?*

Shona people and Shona existential philosophy are presented as subsisting on diminishing dialogue when dialogue is a life-affirming project. In the absence of dialogue creative energy cannot be dispatched and received. The links that bind and connect
participants in a history and a culture in the chain of action and struggle for balance are severed. The failure to receive and dispatch creative energy undermines participation and contribution in the popular struggle to transform life into a great feast. This further undermines life-giving identities which are created on the arena of responsible action and contribution, thereby transforming the Shona society into a motley aggregate of anonymous and nameless beings. People become vulnerable and exposed. This finds expression in the words:

\[
\text{zvaunotaura handizvinzwi,} \\
\text{zvandinotaura hauzvinzwi,} \\
I \text{ cannot hear what you say} \\
\text{You cannot hear what I say}
\]

This prologue which emblematises the author’s vision and attitude towards the Shona family and Shona culture is a loud defiance of the logic of positive thinking and positive living, the logic that characterises rationality and life-inspiring values. Such a philosophy of life as expressed in this symbol-laden prologue can only be conceptualised in the context of modernist existential nihilism where the existential nihilist judges human existence to be pointless and absurd. It leads nowhere and adds to nothing. It is entirely gratuitous, in the sense that there is no justification for life, but also no reason not to live. Those who claim to find meaning in their lives are either dishonest or deluded. In either case, they fail to face up to the harsh reality of the human situation (Crosby, 1988:30).

In a society that is now a dondo (bush), the condition of modern Shona culture and family is summarised as, Haiwa, tadhakwa! Chokwadi tadhakwa (Oh! we are drunk. Really, we are drunk). Drunkenness entails both physical and spiritual inebriation. Dondo stands in opposition to musha (home). The implications are that the Shona people have degenerated to the level of social vagrants and itinerants without a place to stand and a space from which to articulate their version of reality. Dondo is also that place where one is not only likely to lose his or her bearings of life; it is also a place of heightened exposure and vulnerability.

In the novel, characters act out their roles as victims, tormented souls and isolated individuals. Mazarura, who is the eldest in the family and in Shona culture is supposed to be Baba vemusha (father of the home) is a visionless and lifeless character. He resembles Jeremiah in Nervous Conditions who is a caricature of a typical baba figure in an ideal Shona society. His entire life is defined by what appears to be a victim tag. Firstly, his father denies him permission to seek employment in the urban area like his age mates. When he gets betrothed to Ruth, a very strong woman like Rindai in Ndiko Kupindana Kwamazuva, his children die and the odium is laid on his step mother VaKwiripi and his father who at one point tries to rape Ruth. As a family man, Mazarura imbibes Christianity to the extent of degenerating into a neurotic figure. His blind following of
Christianity paralyses his role as father, befuddles his perception and confuses his thinking. VaNhanga refers to him as zigotsikotsi (dunderhead).

Mazarura becomes a typical embodiment of what Mungoshi refers to as tenge tadhakwa (as if we are drunk). He represents the victim philosophy that is by definition an expression of the state of Shona culture and the Shona family. His wife Ruth reminisces:

> Usiku hwese wakararirochema: he, hama dzangu hapana anondida ...zvezvenge kugara nemhute mumbazve? Dzimwe nguva ndinombofunga kuti kunamata kwako kunenge kwati pindiridzi. (12&13)

> You cried the whole night complaining that your relatives don’t like you. Now, it appears as if I am staying with mist. At times I think that your obsession with Christianity has become excessive.

Sharon also says:

> Iye manje dzinongoita sedzakabhureya bhureya, haunganyatsodzoni zvamushe. Dzinenge dzinongobvunda bvunda. (20)

> These days he behaves like a foolish person, you cannot exactly judge what he is like. He is always nervous.

Characters like Mazarura represent the assumed victimhood of conventional representations of black existential life. Such characters are haunted by philosophical and psychological turmoils. Mazarura’s somniferous state symbolises what the author acknowledges as the state of the Shona family and Shona culture in the modern era. The total absence of bilateral and multi-lateral interaction among members of the Chimbimu family renders the whole family institution a victim. It ceases to be a platform for normal human development and a source for comfort and regeneration. Mazarura cannot talk with his wife in a manner that guarantees harmony and peace. When he talks with his daughter, Sharon, it is through a whip. He is afraid of Eric his young brother who also fails to connect with him because:

> Upenyu hwake nehwangu hwasiyana sesadza nesimende. (45)

> Our lives have become as different as Sadza and cement.

In such a scenario, chances of survival for the Shona family are remote.

In *Makunun’unu Maodzamwoyo*, the Mushayazano family is a replica of the Chimbimu family. The Mushayazano family is a caricature of an ideal Shona family. It is a hopelessly dismembered organization that is in need of an urgent re-membering antidote. VaChingweru, the wife, is in an abrasive relationship with her husband VaMushayazano because of her clandestine and surreptitious manoeuvres. She
thoroughly despises Tendai one of her daughters, accusing her of being a witch and a prostitute. VaMushayazano who is like the old man in *Waiting for the Rain* has been decrepitated through old age and disease. He relates with his family from a distance and with an aura of resignation. Tendai has resigned to Chivhu where she leads a solitary life. Monica who stays with her parents seems to be the reservoir of all the family’s problems.

As pointed before, what comes out clearly in *Kunyarara Hakusi Kutaura* and *Makunun’unu Maodzamwoyo* is the painful realisation that individuals are pushed out of the family institution. This institution, therefore, becomes unsustaining and unsustainable. Its continued existence functions as a threat to the maturation of human talent and freedom. It is presented as a besieged and marooned institution where westernism becomes a kind of war against all humanity. In turn, it threatens Shona people. It is both a threatened and threatening organisation. Characters in these novels constitute unrelated individuals where each member is a theatre for the dramatisation and concretisation of victimhood not only as an inevitable state of each individual member of the Shona family, but more importantly as an incontrovertible condition of the modern Shona family.

But most worrying is Mungoshi’s consistent presentation of victimhood as his conceptual and creative position. This stretches from 1970 when *Makunun’unu Maodzamwoyo* was published, then 1975, which marks the publication of *Ndiko Kupindana Kwamazuva* extending to *Kunyarara Hakusi Kutaura* which is a post independence publication, 1983. It would have been understandable if the first two novels preoccupied themselves with the projection of the Shona family and culture as irredeemable victims. But to perpetuate this culturally vapid and ideologically subversive trend into post independence Zimbabwe is very unfair of Mungoshi. It smacks of a modicum of imperialist gestures both in sensibility, commitment, orientation and aesthetic direction. A good work of art from an Afrocentered perspective is expected to strike a balance between despair and celebration, death and life. Literature demanded by the situation in Zimbabwe today is that which contributes in making life meaningful to the majority of Zimbabweans. As a result of the proliferation of images and discourses of victimhood, one is tempted to label Mungoshi’s novels spectator literature. John Henrik Clarke says that, if literature and criticism are not about nation building then it’s about anything. We need to liberate both the psychic and physical spaces and, once again, make functional our institutions. As Zulu Sofola argues,

> The creative artist and inventor will always endeavour to engage in the creative act for a given purpose driven by the creative force. This may take the following directions: to heal and restore the life of ailing humanity, to create a new vision for the edification and betterment of man; to mobilize a collective conscience for a particular desired objective. Art is a force, which brings forth a new state of being, be it negative or positive (1996:43).

In this regard, the ideas that artists generate have the potential to direct or misdirect consciousness and action.

The above mentioned duty of the African artist is what drives Achebe to argue that one of the most important responsibilities of the African writer is to restore celebration of the African philosophy. He or she celebrates the world and the life lived in
it through artistic images. Celebration according to Achebe encompasses “significant encounters, which [men and women make in their] journey through life, especially new, unaccustomed, and thus potentially threatening encounter. To the [African] mentality art must, among other uses domesticate that which is wild; like it must act like a lightning conductor [sic] which arrests destructive electrical potentials and channels them harmlessly to the earth…” (1990:3). *Kunyarara Hakusi Kutaura?* and *Makunun’unu Maodzamwoyo* cannot be viewed as novels that restore celebration.

In *Ndiko Kupindana Kwamazuva* the author tries to restore balance and celebration into the African family as an institution. The section entitled *Wadzanai* (unite), gives the reader some hope that the Shona family will survive though in a shaken state.

A close exegesis of the three novels reveals that Mungoshi, like other Zimbabwean writers who include Nyamufukudza, Marechera, Hove, Vera and others chooses not to capture the hope and life in our people but captures the hopelessness and lifelessness. The danger is that he presents this as typical of all Zimbabweans. The hopelessness, lifelessness and pessimism that under girds his novelistic creations tend to be manufactured in the mind of the writer. He does not see the energy. Chiwome observes that, in

*Kunyarara Hakusi Kutaura?* (1983), he [Mungoshi] further experiments with symbolism and interior monologue to move away from existentialism towards deeper pessimism. The pessimism is alien to Shona art as well as the very outlook reflected in Shona art (1996:240).

Mungoshi tends to translate this existential nihilism from other cultures and impose it on us. Literature is not an individual paradise. It embodies our mentality, that is, how we think. Massive distortion of literature entails massive distortion of African life and philosophy. In vindication of the problematics that under gird the victim philosophy as projected in Mungoshi’s Shona novels, Chiwome evaluates Mungoshi’s success against the backdrop of avant-gardism. He says, “however, Mungoshi achieves greater psychic realism than all writers to date. He dispenses with the conventional concept of plot which was initially regarded by some bureau editors as formless” (Chiwome: 243). This is a testimony that his vision remains largely incompatible with Shona existential philosophy.

**Victimhood in *Ndiko Kupindana Kwamazuva***

*Ndiko Kupindana Kwamazuva* is a novel about Rex who gets overwhelmed by the pleasures in Harare. He gradually abandons his strong willed wife, Rindai, in pursuit of beer and women. The friction between pleasure and responsibility leads to family disintegration. Chiwome describes the problems in *Ndiko Kupindana Kwamazuva* as emanating from
the conflict between the ideals of the Shona who lead subsistence life in the
country and the lifestyle which they assume when they settle temporarily in the
city. Rex, the tragic hero agonises over two moral choices, namely, the enjoyment
of urban pleasures and the fulfilment of family obligations (Chiwome: 227).

As a result of this conflict, the novel becomes a theatre where people are mere
spectators who are thoroughly and permanently outpaced by the passage of days and life
processes. Characters like Rex and Magi do not possess any form of existential energy to
direct and redirect events. They are conscious of the fact that their relationship is
unacceptable but they cannot do anything to change it. It appears as if life is bigger than
them as they are only acted upon rather than acting upon it. Rex is also aware that beer is
responsible for most of the wrong choices and decisions that he makes. However, he
lacks the spirit to quit it because Harare is always beckoning. The power that Harare has
over individuals almost makes it a major character in the novel. The descriptive attention
that it gets from Rex presents it as a formidable ontological force whose existence
completely eclipses agency and responsible participation. As a consequence, the
majority of the characters are victims of the subversive nature of Harare. Rex soliloquises
about Harare in the following words:

Harare. Chimboita huro imwe yeHarare tione mukasavika gumi. (138)_

_That is Harare. Harare is like a person’s heart. Harare. They don’t sleep. There
is no sleep. Harare. Try to have one sip and see if you won’t end up with ten sips._

This position is also in danger of swallowing Mungoshi into the scheme of writers
who have become proficient and prolific in the art of presenting Africans in urban areas
as victims. Such writers participate and contribute to the conveyor belt of myths which
present towns and cities as inhabitable.

Through Rex, Mungoshi identifies the growth of urban life with the process of
industrial capitalist development as a kind of war against humanity. In such a context, it
is theoretically and philosophically impossible to determine the essence of human
existence. Characters live their lives going backward and not forward. The present stands
as a menace to human integrity. The future is completely unrealisable. It stands as a
mirage. Rex awakens to the fact of his powerlessness and helplessness in the city. He
subjects himself to serious interior monologue by observing that:

_Mangwana, nhasi nanezuro ngoma inongova imwe imweyo, dakara tife (103)._  

_Tomorrow, today and yesterday, it’s all routine until we die._

In Mungoshi’s three novels under study, life is not visualised as a progressive
process. Rather, it is retrogressive and barren. Characters cannot confront and engage the
world creatively. The possibility of transforming life and transcending acrimonious
realities of life is depicted as improbable. The most consistent theme in life, _CHANGE_,
is subdued and turned into a far fetched possibility. This entails human entrapment and
containment. Such a conceptual scheme is not compatible with the African project of life. In opposition to defeatism, P’bitek observes:

The ascetic tradition, the attempted fleeing from life, from full participation in the tremendous and deepest challenges of the life-process with its risks and dangers, with its joys of success and brief sorrows of failure and loss… is wholly meaningless in African thought (1986:21).

Rex also says:

Ndakanga ndangova mumwe wevechidiki vaive navakadzi. Ndizvozvo chete. Pakanga pasisina chimwe chokutarisira mune ramangwana. Ndaiziva kuti upenyu hwaizongoramba hwakadaro dakara tichembedzane saVaMbaimbai naVaKwiripi… (103)

I was one of those young people who had wives. Just that. There was nothing good to anticipate in the future. I knew life would continue to be the same until we reached old age, just like Vakwiripi and VaMbaimbai.

Life is projected as a Golgotha of crucified dreams and aborted beginnings. Modernist sensibilities tend to obfuscate Mungoshi’s creative vision. Such a conceptual position is too reductionist. Life transcends mere stasis and being a passage of events. Shona people have at different historical periods wielded some resilience and creativity that has enabled them to transcend the acrimonious conditions of life. While Mungoshi circumvents the obnoxious tendency of blaming individuals, the impression that one obviously gets is that systems loom larger than people. Individual characters experience a life of regret. When they look at their historical experiences they are further plunged into the claustrophobic enclaves of helplessness and hopelessness. The relationship between the individual and history is that of regret, dislocation and despair. It is both a conscious and an unconscious reflection that crushes both the present and the future. The dynamics of the past have burdened the present and reduced life into a great human desert. Thus, Rex asks himself questions about his relationship with Rindai:

Asi ini ndasanduka. Kureva kuti ndakanganwa musi uyu here? Kureva kuti idi kuti vanwe tinoroora tisati toda kuroora - pamusana pokutya vabereki, nyika kana kuti tingazoshaya vakadzi vokuroora? (90)

Does it mean that I have changed? Could it be that I have forgotten this day? Then, does it mean that some of us marry before we are ready - simply because we are afraid of our parents, the community or that we might fail to find suitable partners?

The interaction between history and the present exacerbates the torture that Rex experiences. Such excessive mental trauma is what triggers victimhood. While victimhood that emanates from such a disposition is understandable, the author seems to be too preoccupied with it to such an extent that it becomes an identity especially for
temporary urban dwellers like Rex. Such images run with frighteningly predictable consistency in Mungoshi’s Shona novels. Furusa writes against this established trend of victimhood in Zimbabwean literature when he says:

We cannot accept this social barrenness and sterility with its individualism and [victimhood] as our philosophy of life (2000:3).

Ranga is reduced to a victim at a very tender age. The same also applies to Rindai who now lives her life as a nightmare. Just like Rex, she also reflects on her historical experiences with a lot of regret. This dialectical tension between past experiences and her tormented present condition leads her into unconscious and unexpected emotional outbursts:

Asi kuti - kana kuti IYE MAGI NAREX...! ‘Hazvingamboitika!!’ Rindai haana kuziva kuti akanga adaidzira pfungwa dzake. (35)

Could it be that MAGI AND REX are in love! Impossible!! Rindai had not noticed that she was thinking loudly.

The confinement of dialogue to the individual enables Mungoshi to offer a penetrative insightful revelation of events that traumatise his characters without him speaking for them.

The Shona family as victim

One indicator of the visibility of any group’s identity is the characteristics of its social and economic institutions. The family as an institution is of particular importance in this regard, and the historical and contemporary assaults on its structure and functioning have had devastating effects on efforts by [Africans] to sustain a wholesome collective psyche (Stewart, J. B, 2004:viii)

The family is an institution that interacts with other institutions forming a social network. Against this backdrop, the Shona family in Mungoshi’s novels is presented as the typical Shona family in the context of modernity. Such a conclusion is triggered by the realisation that the author gives no other family that runs in contraposition to the fragmenting and highly problematic one in the novels. Again, the writer is predictably consistent in his visualisation of such a family. Right from 1970 when Makunun’unu Maodzamwoyo was published up to 1983 when we get Kunyarara Hakusi Kutauro? the condition of the Shona family remains the same. Therefore, one is forced to contend that Mungoshi envisages such a family as the typical Shona family. The Chimbiimu family in Kunyarara Hakusi Kutauro? the Mushayazano family as well as Rex Mbare’s family in Makunun’unu Maodzamwoyo and Ndiko Kupindana Kwamazuva respectively are all threatened with extinction. The writer’s vision of the modern African family is that of permanent death.
As mentioned before, Shona families as projected in these novels cannot produce an individual who can be of use to the nation. At this point, we can estimate that the family which is faced with two irreconcilable and unrelated ontological systems ceases to be an institution whose existential space is adequate for nurturing an effective and functioning citizen with the capacity to contribute to nation building and also to the transformation of life into a great feast of existence. The family, as far as Mungoshi is concerned has become a veritable battlefield in which no one emerges victorious. It is no longer a redoubtable bastion for nourishing and life-giving values but a virtual penitentiary that subverts both individual and group autonomy. One wonders if Zimbabwe would have been where it is today if such fragmentation and neurosis characterised the average Shona family.

Fragmentation, dislocation and disintegration are presented as the universal qualities of a modern Shona family. It is a family that is conveniently split into permanently atrophied individuals. Family experiences never coalesce into any form of meaningful existence. As a result, the family becomes the greatest victim. Human factor content in Mungoshi’s novels discussed in this article, particularly as relates to the family is damaging. A nation achieves its integrity through the aggregate of all families put together. Adjibolosoo’s description of human factor can be extended to the family as:

A spectrum of personality characteristics and other dimensions of human performance that enable social, economic and political institutions to function and remain functional over time (1993:142).

The above concretises the position that all important national institutions are nourished by the family. The family is the nucleus of the nation. In Cabral’s words, a family is to a nation what a flower is to a plant (1980:142). A plant that does not generate healthy flowers is guaranteed of extinction. In the same vein, a nation with unhealthy, conflicting and hopelessly dichotomised families can never realise its potential. It is, therefore, Mungoshi’s unbending consistency in the presentation of family victimhood that is worrying. The Chimbimu family is hopelessly divided and leads a conflictual and abrasive life. Mazarura fails to make individual choices because his father imposes rigid sanctions that obviate him from seeking employment. Sharon, too, grows under the heavy handedness of Mazarura, a father who cannot exhort his children and young brother in a manner that is empowering.

Such a scheme manifests a hierachised picture of the oppressiveness and restrictiveness of the Shona family. At the end, the family crushes into smithereens before Sharon has fully developed into a responsible adult. She says:

_Tenge mhuka dzesango. Baba mujeri, mai ndivo vari kungonetsekana nambuya kumusha uku, avawo tete Norika pavakangozvinzwa vakabva vatizira kwavo Hwedza...Zvokuti pachine musha handichinei nazvo. Yangova waziva zvake waziva zvake._ (134)

_We are now like wild animals. Father is in prison, mother is struggling with grandmother in the rural areas while auntie Norika left for Hwedza the moment_
she got wind of what had happened. Whether or not there is a home anymore, I no longer care. Let every one head in his or her own direction.

In *Makun’unu Maodzamwoyo*, the family institution threatens both Monica and Tendai. Instead of functioning as a source for spiritual, emotional and physical comfort, it generates a lot of existential discomfiture. This is because of their mother VaChingweru who is obsessed with material things such that she makes it her duty to find husbands for her daughters. VaMushayazano is too sick and too old to restore balance and order in the family. The name Mushayazano (a person bereft of ideas) bears testimony to the victimhood that runs throughout the novel. He is a mental victim who cannot make use of the brain. Apart from Monica and Tendai, both VaChingweru and VaMushayazano are also victims of the family institution.

Tendai turns away to Chivhu because her mother falsely accuses her of being a prostitute and a witch. Her reckless mother who is concerned more with personal prestige and western material things exposes Monica to Mujubheki. As a result of this nonchalance, Mujubheki rapes her. The friction that exists between Monica and her mother after the former falls in love with Timothy completely renders the family a cantankerously vitiating and vituperative circle where there is only one option for survival – leaving.

*Zvokugara pamusha zvakanga zvisisamufadzi. Aimborangarira zvokutoda kutiza.*

(28)
She no longer liked staying at home. At times she would contemplate running away.

VaMushayazano is scalded with hot water and eventually dies from the wounds.

In *Ndiko Kupindana Kwamazuva*, Ranga falls victim to the problems that exist between her mother and father. Her school performance drops too. Eventually, she is run over by a car as a result of the family feud. Rangarirai’s death, which is not only a physical death, symbolises the death of the Shona family in this novel. The argument is that, the family serves as a catalyst to Ranga’s death since it has lost its protective powers. Rindai also degenerates into a psychopathic figure because most of the time she finds herself talking alone. The family context is psychologically and physically traumatising. While Mungoshi blames urbanisation for the supernumerary conundrums that the modern Shona family faces, the impression that one gets is that the family, together with its members, constitutes a hapless victim. Its future is bleak, even that of the nation. Thus we pose this question to Mungoshi:

What sort of world are you building for us? (Cesaire, 1959:152)

While we do not dismiss the glaring realities of family disintegration and other subversive identities, we remain resolute that these three novels by Mungoshi make these realities seem more pervasive and insurmountable. There is an obtrusive absence of
perceptions of the ideal model toward which family patterns should be evolving. Through a flood of images about how nihilistic and fragmented the Shona family has become, it appears victimhood is Mungoshi’s claimed interpretive space from where he articulates the unenviable position of the Shona family. Characters are cast in a unique and peculiar role as cultural hostages in an alienated and alienating world. Mungoshi becomes a writer who conceptualises the family institution through the lenses of victimhood. Such a philosophy and attitude towards life is pathologically debilitating. It generates anti-intellectualism and non-participatory behaviours. Thelwell points out that “the cultural and historical situation of the Black world demands entirely different aesthetic, artistic and literary imperatives and purposes at this time” (1987:229). Mungoshi’s novelistic creations are emblazoned with Euro-modernist sensibilities and aesthetics. Chiwome supports this position in the following words:

As a result of his wide reading, Mungoshi’s work resembles the writings of Virginia Woolf, James Joyce and William Faulkner, in which characters are depicted as emotional battlefields and puzzles (1996:226).

The above constitute a cross section of some of the luminaries of modernism. As argued before, such a vision that centralises victimhood is reflective of modernist sensibilities. A non discriminatory application of modernist parlance, especially in this part of the world, is to suggest that we are at the same historical point with the West in terms of cultural development. As Africans, we are evolving, forming, and creating a vital cultural and literary tradition while similar traditions in the west are clearly degenerating. We are tirelessly looking for works that allegorise collective consciousness and engagement and weave together practical and theoretical imperatives for the good of our institutions.

Such theoretical imperatives are nourished and sustained by African knowledge systems and attitudes towards life. Victimhood has never been an option in such theoretical imperatives. Through both a conscious and an unconscious adoption and adaptation of Euro-modernist aesthetics, our writers become eloquent in preaching and parading social sleeping sickness as the standard, as the new paradigm of value and valuation. However, such a scheme is culturally debilitating as Ephraim observes, “a sick group can so infect others as to transform a healthy culture into a very sick society which unwittingly sees itself as normal” (2003:70).

In a context where African people have been exposed to a relentless cultural and psychological rape and exploitation, cultural reconstruction becomes an immediate challenge and project. Artists, through their creative works and because they are rulers, need to restore and generate images and ideas that recognise people’s ability to act with will and intent and in their own interest. The truth is that we are all ‘intellectuals and potential visionaries’ (Ani: 1994:1). Images, whether heroic or anti-heroic are not mere labels but are designations which have an impact on perception. Literature that disregards this duty and continues in the direction of perceiving our culture and institutions as constituted for inevitable perdition misses a point or two. Molefi Asante writes in defiance of such a conceptual scheme:

It is unreasonable to expect [African writers] to divest themselves of culture when such unilateral divestiture is neither required nor expected of other cultural
groups. Imbedded in the suggestion is a notion of power and hierarchy according to which only communities considered of low status are required to abandon their essential characteristics, while others seek to preserve their [institutions] for generations yet unborn (1998:13).

It is important, therefore, for African people to retrieve themselves from the spiritual wreckage, cultural and historical paralysis resulting from colonialism and its attendants. Our position is that we have already suffered imponderable damage of our institutions at the hands of our detractors and as such we cannot afford the luxury of taking a backseat while we continue to lose more. Stewart advises of the need to have “a generation of scholar activists who have a vested interest in the development of black families as part and parcel of the elevation of peoples of African descent…” (Stewart: 144). Writers cannot be exonerated from this scheme.

Conclusion

Charles Mungoshi is a writer whose penetrative vision profoundly unravels the subtle psychological and ideological ramifications that strangulate and asphyxiate the Shona family. However, in the three novels discussed here, he visualises and conceptualises such realities through victimhood which invariably stands as his informing philosophy. He universalises and valorises victimhood to the extent that it becomes a permanent attribute of the Shona family both in the colonial and contemporary dispensations. The presentation of three unrelated families in varying historical periods and also families that live in different geographical locations can be interpreted as random sampling which affords the author an opportunity to emerge with an archetype. Such conscious or unconscious universalisation and absolutisation of victimhood problematises the author’s cultural vision. While the novels grapple with issues that relate to the crisis of identity ushered by colonialism and urbanisation, they are in danger of being caught up in a similar situation. Thelwell warns that such novelistic creations are in danger of bypassing maturity and plunging directly from infancy into decadence (1987:225). By over-emphasising victimhood in his narratives, the author fails to capture and deploy the energies that abound in African people. Therefore, it appears plausible to contend that the author has not been able to fully understand or redeem the Shona family that he depicts in his Shona novels. Fanon challenges African literary scholars to engage in thoroughgoing research so as to honestly and responsibly address communal realities. He contends that:

Yes, the first duty of the native poet is to see clearly the people he has chosen as the subject of his work of art. He cannot go forward resolutely unless he first realises the extent of his estrangement from them (1963:182).
It is against this backdrop that we contend, in this discussion, that “the search for a Zimbabwean identity” and the projected destiny of Shona people including their institutions, cannot be premised on victimhood, a rather subversive and debilitating identity. Victimhood is part of the mechanics of the psycho-technology of encirclement because it operates in such a way that, it passes a vote of no confidence in any possibilities of transcendence. It is both a narrow and narrowing experience such that we run the danger of being choked by it. It muzzles and truncates channels and options in life instead of diversifying them when such diversification is an inescapable condition for re-humanisation and survival.

Works Cited


