

Tinashe Mushakavanhu and David Nettleingham (eds), *State of The Nation: Contemporary Zimbabwean Poetry*, Kent, The Conversation Paper Press, 2009.

(A Book review by Memory Chirere)

When I received this book, ‘State of the Nation: Contemporary Zimbabwean poetry’, its very pointed title hinted that it is a project on Zimbabwe now as seen by its various poets.

I know that the state of our beloved but beleaguered nation, Zimbabwe is now well known. Now a term ‘Zimbabwean crisis’ has even been spawned. Whatever way you look at it, the Zimbabwean crisis is characterized by serious food shortages, lack of jobs, rampant underpaying of civil servants, acute brain drain and the general collapse of public amenities.

Definition(s) and causes of this crisis, in Zimbabwe, fall desperately and untidily too, between an oppositional view and the establishment/government view.

A particular incident associated with the genesis of this crisis is the giving out of hefty gratuities to the liberation veterans from ZANLA and ZIPRA, resulting in the first substantive fall of the Zimbabwean dollar in 1997.

In 1998 Zimbabwe intervened in the Congo war on the side of the government of Laurent Kabila against some rebels and this too had very negative impact on the Zimbabwean economy.

In 1999 the Zimbabwean government embarked on what its opponents in the opposition and the West have called the ‘chaotic land reform.’ The ‘new farmers’, as the land reform have come to be known in Zimbabwe, have not been able, within the interim; to produce enough for the nation to consume.

The West hit Zimbabwe with what they have been calling ‘targeted’ sanctions, stopping government leadership of Zimbabwe from traveling abroad. However in due course and as categorically admitted in Article IV of the Zimbabwe Global Political Agreement document of September 2008, the sanctions are not necessarily targeted (as Zimbabwe cannot receive the balance of payment from the IMF and institutions related to Britain.)

But the Zimbabwean government has always projected their own side of the story. First, they argue that the international diatribe against President Mugabe is basically because he took land from the former white settlers and distributed it to the African people to fulfill the long standing cause of the 1970’s war of liberation. They argue, further, that the British colonial policy

created the cases of social imbalances in Zimbabwe in the first place and that the problem in Zimbabwe is not about the rule of law because in some countries on the continent, worse methods of suppression have been used but the West has remained quiet. They also claim that the opposition is a puppet of the West meant to help further the disfranchisement of the black people of Zimbabwe and that through the invitation and persuasion of the opposition; the west has slammed Zimbabwe with sanctions.

Therefore, any book as this one, 'State of The Nation' that boldly positions itself to look at our woes in the eye, raises great expectations. Poets are seers and from them we want to know 'where and when the rain began to beat us.' The editors did well to ask the poets to start with each a testimony on what it means to be a poet, and sometimes a Zimbabwean poet. If you cannot read the poems, you go for the narratives and sometimes, as in the cases of Emmanuel Sigauke, Nhamo Mhiripiri, Ignatius Mabasa and Ruzvidzo Mupfudza, you go for both.

But then I must state that this cannot be an out and out book review because I know and am known to most of the poets in here. I know the fires that beget the red brick. Reading them is like meeting again in a new country under a new sky. To me, most of these are both poets and people.

Probably the most unique thing about this book is that it has poets from Zimbabwe who are still very active. For instance Christopher Mlalazi has just won an 'honourable mention' in the latest Noma awards with his book: *Dancing With Life: Tales from The Township*. Noma is a greatly prized literary award in all Africa. Mlalazi is also a recent winner of NAMA, a prestigious national award. When I wrote him to say congratulations for Noma and pointed that he has now won both Nama and Noma, he wrote back: "Ngiyabonga baba... Now I want MANA (money)." Even his poetry is like that, spontaneous and hard hitting. In 'A soundless song', a goat is described as 'mercilessly tearing at the petticoats of a tree unable to flee'.

I see that Ruzvidzo Mupfudza's personae have not, unlike us, left the bars. In the first two poems I see it and agree with Ruzvidzo that the thin board between wakefulness and sleep is a zone during which one sees further than the eye. At that moment, one's sins (and of those people behind and ahead of us) coagulate into one event. And, ah Ruzvidzo still sees Nehanda too!

Ignatius Mabasa's 'problem' about which language to use (or not to use) is not a problem. Good translations (as Mabasa has done with poems like 'Cavities' and 'Concrete and plastic') will serve us well. Having seen these poems before in the original Shona, I dare say they have even gained an extra amount of subtlety. Consider Mai Nyevero's 'tan thighs' and how

she 'laughs like a hyena.' I actually see her and suffer. Harare is teeming with such women. I wonder why Mabasa did not include a piece on 'baba vaNyevero'. Of course, I cannot run away from the fact that Mabasa's strong point is the Shona language, rendering him one of the more successful writers of our generation with his novels, *Mapenzi* and *Ndafa Here?*

Nhamo Mhiripiri and his wife Joyce Mutiti are Zimbabwe's writing couple. I do not know if we have another. We must have more. In college we saw them courting, writing and smoking together. We wondered why they didn't fall on each other and fight because discussions at the Students Union tended to end in fistfights. They didn't give us that opportunity. Nhamo's pen is conscious of ideology and theory. Joyce is private. Today you still see them together either at the Book fair or the book launches in Harare.

In his own testimony, John Eppel makes the crudest series of claims and accusations that I have ever heard from on Vera and a number of fellow Zimbabwean writers. First, Eppel says the late Yvonne Vera, 'like all Shona writers with ZANU PF sympathies (was) still in too much denial to tackle the shameful period' (of Gukurahundi) and therefore Vera's *The Stone Virgins* 'is abject cowardice.' Really?

Vera's *The Stone Virgins* is about the civil war in Matabelaland and the Midlands provinces in the 1980's which resulted in thousands of civilian deaths. There cannot be one super way of writing about it all. There cannot be any one heroic or cowardly way of writing about it.

Maurice Vambe argues that this novel employs reportage because of reportage's ability to unravel potential discrepancies between facts outside the text and reality imaginatively constructed. These are indeed a multiplicity of narrative voices, all vying to capture the problematics of representing a civil war that can never be complete when uttered from one side or position.

I have quietly noticed, over the years, that John Eppel is decidedly anti Shona. Most of his bad characters have to be Shona! Everywhere Eppel's Shonas are senselessly clobbering and haranguing either a white man or a hapless Ndebele.

Eppel also says that nobody includes him in the bibliography of Zimbabwean writers. He even claims that no contemporary of his; Mungoshi, Zimunya, Hove, Chinodya, Dangarebga, Chirikure... ever notices him except Julius Chingono! As I make this review, Zimunya is worried that Eppel has told the world that Zimunya does not accept Eppel as a fellow writer! Why should Zimunya give Eppel a stamp of acceptance, Zimunya is asking. Why is Eppel too keen to be accepted, Zimunya adds.

But then Eppel admits, strategically too: 'generalisation is a tool of the

satirist.' Maybe.

The five poems by Charles Mungoshi crawl all over you like ants from the underworld. As you read his poems you have a feeling that you are working your difficult way around boulders, towards some treasure. In 'A Kind of Drought' the spirit is weak because one has been lied to, cheated and finally deserted by fellow humans (and maybe especially by the leaders) and what remains are roads, because they do not lie and trees too, because they remain the same old faithful parents and one can do many things with trees, including going round and round and finally dying safely under them. And as the spirit wanders, you wish you could come to a river.

Dambudzo Marechera's poems, given to the editors by one Betina Schmidt, are dedicated to Betina and are about Betina. They remind one of Marechera's earlier poems, the Amelia poems. Of them Marechera once said: 'Amelia's presence in the flat inspired me to write the sonnets. When she had been in the flat and then left, I would still feel her presence, and any item she had touched could give me the first line for a poem. Or just the emptiness... the flat felt so completely empty, and it is this emptiness which is all around me which I have to grab by the collar and put into a poem.'

Nearly all the poems about exile in this book seem to insist on the fact that exile is more dangerous than home. These poems seem to be in the majority with the outstanding being Chenjerai Hove's 'Identity', NOViolet Bulawayo's 'Diaspora', Tinashe Mushakavanhu's "Tomorrow is long coming', Kristina Rungano's 'Alien somebody' and Amanda Hammar's 'Exiles'. If it is not the loneliness, it is the anxiety or the downright confusion that comes close to declaring that one has no country because things are currently unwell in one's country.

Amanda Hammar's reminiscence is the most uplifting narrative in this book, if you do not get confused easily. What is a Zimbabwean poet, Kizito Muchemwa once asked Amanda Hammar in Uppsala in 2009. 'Does location matter; does exile/proximity make one less or more Zimbabwean; what it is we can or should, or should not, write about, or should that even be a question at all?' And Amanda Hammar's answer, which comes after a long search is: 'I am no longer solely defined by my Zimbabweanness. While for some, such a condition may seem unremarkable, for me it is both a new sensation and a big and painful admission.'

Then you realize that this book is also about identity. In Europe, Mushakavanhu's persona feels like 'a dark presence' and his 'coal black hand tightly clasping' the long white fingers of a half desired white wench cause heads to turn on the streets of Europe.

In her narrative, Jennifer Armstrong says she writes as a poet and not

as a white girl. She says 'the black white history of Zimbabwe (and Rhodesia)' has given us 'the remarkable and highly dubious gifts of race and gender.' And her shortest poem goes:

I don't think
my race
will win
this race
although it might
come second

It is refreshing to come across the new voices; Beavan Tapureta, Tinashe Muchuri, Batsirai Chigama, Josephine Muganiwa... voices associated with the spoken word at the Book Cafe and the Zimbabwe-Germany society.

Maybe Emmanuel Sigauke's poems stand out for not going necessarily for the 'state of the nation'. They are not about what I need from my country and government but are about what I did and may do. His poems as in his book 'Forever Let Me Go' are about personal journeys from the past to the present. Poems about what could I have been had I not been married to you and about the dramatic happenings in distant villages and the zinc roofed houses that we didn't and have forgotten to build.

My worry though with most Zimbabwean poetry since *And Now The Poets Speak* of 1982, is the prevalence of melancholy. Our poets are yet to find an idiom that redeems, regardless of the well known woes. The poetry of Jorge Rebelo and Jose Craveirinha are an example of poets who, while chronicling the ills of their society, reflected also on what they should offer. They went beyond the realm of 'look what they have done to me' and began to show 'what we have to do about it'. I honestly believe that Zimbabwe is not the worst and last place God made. We shall overcome.

Nevertheless, Poets Tinashe Mushakavanhu and David Nettleingham have done well to put together the first major anthology of Zimbabwean poets writing in English since *And Now The Poets Speak*. And in both cases, the poets are concerned about the state of their nation. Mushakavanhu walks with a spring, head up, chest out and before he talks, he rubs his hands together like the soothsayer that he is. Somewhere in some uncomfortable weather we once talked about how, one day, he is to become Zimbabwe's youngest publisher.

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