

THE PAST AND THE PRESENT IN AFRICAN LITERATURE:
EXAMPLES FROM CONTEMPORARY ZIMBABWEAN FICTION.

In Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman (Methuen, 1975) Iyaloja rejoices that Elesin the King's Horseman will take her daughter as his bride and impregnate her before he dies:

The sap in the plantain does not dry. Let grain that will not feed the voyager at his passage drop here and take root as he steps beyond this earth and us. Oh you who fill the home from hearth to threshold with the voices of children, you who now bestride the hidden gulf and pause to draw the right foot across and into the resting-house of the great forebears, it is good that your loins be drained into the earth we know, that your last strength be ploughed back into the womb that gave you being. (p.22)

Elesin is about to enact a central belief of what Soyinka calls 'the universe of the Yoruba mind - the world of the living, the dead and the unborn' (p.7). His transition from life to death will be celebrated by the community because it will confirm that 'the resting house of the great forebears', 'the earth we know', the present, and the unborn child of the future share in the one metaphysical universe which is the Yoruba mind.

Cohherence, particularly of the past with the present, which finds expression in much African literature, is no less evident in Zimbabwe than elsewhere.¹ What is not so obvious is its presence in the fiction of Black Zimbabweans writing in English. Samkange, the notable exception, does make specific use of this cosmic view in both On Trial for My Country (Heinemann, 1967) and Year of the Uprising (Heinemann, 1978). More in the vein of the early Achebe and much of Ngugi he sees the past as a resource for guidance, evaluation, inspiration in the present. The two are

1. See for example M.F.C. Bourdillon, 'Traditional Religion in Shona Society', in Christianity South of the Zambezi, ed. A.J. Dachs (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1973), pp.11-24.

part of a single vision, and the pathos of much African literature turns on those moments, such as that for the Praise-Singer in Death and the King's Horseman, when the present is seen to be dislocated from the past. He says to Elosin, 'You sat with folded arms while evil strangers tilted the world from its course and crashed it beyond the edge of emptiness' (p.75). This statement is more striking at the end of the play because, as in Things Fall Apart, for example, the early part of the text was spent establishing the validity of this integrated universe now destroyed.

Little of what has been said ^{above} is found in Zimbabwean fiction written in the last ten years. Novels and short stories are set more deliberately in either the past or the present, and little connection is made between the two. The action takes place in one of three periods of Zimbabwean history, the pre-colonial, the colonial or Independence, with no significant overlap from one into the other. With the past or the present so strongly emphasised there is a much more noticeable concern about time itself than in East or West African novels.

*What this implies is that Zimbabwean fiction is less interested in the processes than in the manifestations of history. Writers seldom give historical names to characters and tribes, they often eschew place names, dates, and other detailed accoutrements normally associated with the fictional establishment of historical place and time. Yet on reading a passage of Zimbabwean fiction, as this paper aims to show, one can sense from other features which phase of history is under scrutiny. What the texts make explicit for the reader is not the turbulent flow of Zimbabwean history, rather it dwells on segments without that history, and thereby reflects what it meant to live at that moment within the country's history.

Given that the four texts below were written almost contemporaneously, within ten years of one another, it is interesting to see how the choice of time and setting markedly

affects the kind of fiction produced. [The techniques of Mutswairo's novel about pre-colonial Zimbabwe are quite distinct in character and effect from those of Mungoshi or Marechera writing about colonial Rhodesia. And these are different from Nyamfukudza's who sets his short stories in Independent ^{Zimbabwe} ~~Zimbabwe~~. Each writer encapsulates his characters in a given period, and though there are motifs in the fiction such as the bus journey¹, which might suggest a time shift, there is no explicit treatment of the past as a force for the present, nor movement from one period of history into another. It seems therefore proper to discuss the novels according to the periods they deal with. They are (a) Mutswairo's Feso (1984)² which could be complemented by Geoffrey Ndhlala's Jikinya (Macmillan, 1979), (b) Charles Mungoshi's Waiting for the Rain (Heinemann, 1975) and Dambudzo Marechera's House of Hunger (Heinemann, 1976), and (c) Stanley Nyamfukudza's latest work, a collection of short stories, Aftermaths (Harare: College Press, 1983).

Mutswairo's Feso, one of the first Shona novels (1956), rewritten by him in English in 1974, is set in 17th century Mashonaland. Two tribes occupy the land between the Mazoe and the Zambezi, the disdainful, autocratic Vanyai ruled by Pfumojena (White Spear) and the peaceable Vahota, whose concern is to find a worthy bride for their chief Nyan'ombe (Cattle Owner). One of his military commanders^{also}, is detailed to woo Pfumojena's daughter for him. Although the mission is successful,

1. See for example, Wilson Katiyo, A Son of the Soil (Rex Collings, 1976) and Stanley Nyamfukudza, The Nong-Believer's Journey (Heinemann, 1980).
2. Solomon Mutswairo, Feso in Zimbabwe: Prose and Poetry in English (Washington: Three Continents Press, 1974), pp. 13-119.

Pfumojena's people are outraged by the audacity of their neighbours, and a war of retribution follows. The Vahota win, and Pfumojena and his Vanyai are absorbed into a new and peaceful socio-political order under Nyan'ombe and his bride. After a praise song the novel ends like this:

Thus sang Nyan'ombe and his warriors as they triumphantly returned to their own villages. They were met by women ululating, singing and dancing to meet their men - and some women warriors, too - in the procession.

The Vahota - now collectively called the Vatapa - built a new, even more prosperous and free society in peace, unimpeded by the threats and intrusions once imposed by the belligerent Vanyai. And many marriages brought the "cousins" together.

And so, Nyan'ombe and Chipo, his wife, and all the people of the new Vatapa nation, lived happily together ever after, eating well, sleeping well, welcoming each new day with quiet joy and sure hope for the future.¹

This happy ending with marriages, peace and plenty is in Western terms standard romance. The difficulties faced by the Vahota have been overcome by resolution, courage, perseverance fortified by a sense of moral justice. Societal values have been confirmed, the community has found fresh strength from its trials, and so its dignity and faith in its mores are endorsed.

This is a narrative without irony, in which the principal characters - Nyan'ombe, Feso, Pfumojena - typify the people they lead. Their sentiments express the thoughts and feelings of their followers. As is expected in pre-colonial African society, the community is greater than its particular individuals.² Nyan'ombe's song at the end expresses the joy of his warriors, and of the women who come from the villages to meet them. Despite the apparent historicity of the manner in the narrative, this is a context of myth and recurrent time. The ending suggests that Nyan'ombe's values lived on for centuries until touched by Europe. One only has to read the Zimbabwean historian Beath to realise the fancy of this.³ Yet Feso does

1. Feso in Zimbabwe: prose and poetry in English (Three Continents Press, 1974), p.119.

2. See Regina Amadi-Tshiwala, 'Critical Bearings in African Literature,' Presence Africaine, 115(1980), 148-149.

3. D. N. Beach, The Shona and Zimbabwe, 900-1850: An outline of Shona history (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1980), pp. 121-144.

project a vision of history. The individual is subsumed into a cultural context in which the community and its history are preeminent. The tone of the writing is celebratory. The society, its customs and cultural homogeneity are consolidated and mean so much more than any one of its individuals.

Why should a writer present this view of 17th century Shona society in the latter part of the 20th century? Patently it is untrue. Unlike Kunene's Zulu epic Emperor Shaka the Great (Heinemann, 1979) it does not claim to work with substantial oral sources, nor like John Pepper Clark's Ozidi (Oxford, 1966) is it a recreation of traditional myths or sagas. Mutswairo seems intent on fashioning a narrative that reflects cultural values which he considers typified the past and which contemporary Shona people have lost touch with. The pre-colonial past has been metamorphosed into a chivalric and pastoral vision which in the early years of the book's publication attracted the attention of Zimbabwe's black nationalists. Here was a book that showed the dignity of the Shona. In the early 1960s the appeal of lost splendour made it a political text that pointed up, not simply what had been lost since the arrival of Colonialism, but, in the victory of Nyan'ombe over the imperialist Pfumojena, the possibilities for liberation from oppressive enemies.¹

To offer similar features in a novel in post-independent Zimbabwe is to invite much more sceptical criticism. Ndhlala's Jikinya (Macmillan, 1979) tells the story of Shona villagers who in very early colonial days give hospitality to a white child found after a raid. The child, Jikinya, grows up among them enjoying a life-style innocent of racialism, colour and the ills of colonialism. 'Here was love, a sanctification of life, which was deeper than all the intricate philosophies of Europe could fathom; a peace which only the rarest of churchmen in Europe could comprehend. Here were Adams and Eves undiscovered' (p.88).

As in Plaatje's Mhudi (1930), parts of Achebe's Things Fall Apart (1958), and Ngugi's Petals of Blood (1977) the

1. The name Pfumojena (White Spear) linked to autocratic and élitist government was taken by readers as an analogue of rule by the Whites.

pre-colonial past is presented with a nostalgic lyricism. This is more marked in the Zimbabwean writers mentioned above, neither of whom has Achebe's firm details of the old rituals, seen for example when Okonkwo attends the Obierika wedding. Instead abstract nouns convey values and feelings and it is this assertiveness of the moral integrity of the past, supposedly destroyed by Colonialism, that draws a sceptical response now. The function of the mythopoeia is obvious enough, but in post-independent Zimbabwe where the society is responsible for a more accurate assessment of its past, that function falls away and the novels become objects more of literary as distinct from socio-political criticism. And they do not stand up to sustained scrutiny. Although Achebe does not tell the whole truth about pre-colonial Nigeria, about slavery or the role of women for example, he makes for a telling comparison because he shows a people applying the norms of their cultural system to old and new problems. The past is always being tested by the present. Another interesting comparison is the Francophone writer from Mali, Yanbo Coulibaly. Bound to Violence (1971), published more than a decade after Mali had become independent, rejects 'empty folklore' about the splendours of the past and offers an image of pre-colonial times that is both sordid and violent. Such a book in Zimbabwe so soon after independence would probably be unacceptable. The wounds of colonialism are still too fresh. Because pre-colonial history was neglected under colonial rule it is now a proper study in order to establish the historical identity of the people and restore the nation's continuity with its cultural past. It is thus increasingly difficult for a writer to engage with society through a pre-colonial setting because the temptation to mythologise will draw scepticism and the promptings to be realistic will be scorned as either unpatriotic or lacking spiritual authenticity.

Zimbabwe's best contemporary writing in English deals with the colonial era. Mungoshi's Waiting for the Rain and Marechera's House of Hunger, winner of the ^{GUARDIAN} ~~BOOKER~~ Prize in 1980,

convey by their titles the shift from an heroic and biographical mode to a more metaphoric fiction, in particular a metaphor of absence - the absence of rain and food. Sustenance has been denied by drought. The hunger has far reaching spiritual dimensions. The following passage from Marechera's title story demonstrates how different is this mode: the first person narrator is talking about an affair during which he described to his girl-friend a nervous breakdown he had had at school:

The air reeked of guilt. And shame. And outrage. And scandal. Mountains of argument ranged through my mind until the earthquake of those infernal voices brought them crushing down upon my toes. The absurd, the grotesque, it seemed, had come home to stay. Where are the bloody heroes? My fear of heights had not restrained me from climbing the cliffs of my nerves. And the demons, finding the House unattended, had calmly strutted in through the open door. Had I been a good atheist, perhaps. . . . The voices took out of my suitcase every little wrong I had done and derisively exhibited it before my eyes. Every evil thought - from lechery to vanity - was held up before my eyes, and I felt like a slimy worm. The objects, smells and presences around me seemed to contain at the centre of their lens the sharp details of those little teeth that were biting into my mind. I opened my mouth to give my defence plea but the voices had not only found me out, they had also taken over the inner chords of my own voice. I talked compulsively. My voice seemed to be contained by the refracting lattices of transparent stones. Little thrusts of swift lights, diamond sparks, spinning maddeningly, leaped through my mind until I could not bear the headache of it. My condition deteriorated: severe palpitations set in and I made it worse by reading all about heart disease in the Encyclopaedia Britannica. And I was cold; I have never been so cold in my life. The ice of it singed my very thoughts; my voice was breaking and the unusual sound of it made me jump irritably. It seemed to me something was taking over my body; the images and symbols I had for so long taken for granted had taken upon themselves a

strange hue; and I was losing my grasp of simple speech. I began to ramble, incoherently, in a disconnected manner. I was being severed from my own voice. I would listen to it as to a still, small voice coming from the huge distances of the mind. It was like this: English is my second language, Shona my first.¹

As the title of the story suggests, the traditional grass hut, image of home, domesticity, culture storehouse, is a metaphor for the mind of the narrator. It is a place of physical and spiritual hunger, of verbal violence, self-defeat, metaphysical conflict. The narrator is too withdrawn to have any engagement with his home. As in much Zimbabwean poetry, home has a privileged status in many a writer's imaginative world as a place of the past, now ravaged by change.² The image of home invaded by colonialism deranges the mind of the narrator. He becomes a victim of spiritual starvation, of deracination and alienation. Hence the thematic and imagistic irony of the title, 'The House of Hunger'. Adrift from society he communes only with himself, hence the centrality of the interior monologue and the inclination to write a narrative fragmented by diffuse memories of the past. Under colonialism the community has no voice, only individuals speak, and in their isolation they ironically give expression to the spiritual drought that grips the whole nation. In the Marechera monologue above, with its echoes of Beckett and Kafka, the narrator talks about his breakdown as a severance of psyche and language. The historical and cultural experience of colonialism leads to this cataclysmic moment of awareness: 'the images and symbols I had for so long taken for granted had taken upon themselves a strange hue; and I was losing my grasp of simple speech' (p.30). The past as a force within his imaginative life is erased: the present, as he remarks later, offers no compensation because 'nothing lasts long enough to make any sense'. (p.60).

Two points starkly different from the previous writers emerge here. One is that the ^{fiction} literature about colonialism

1. The House of Hunger (Heinemann, 1978), pp.29-30.

2. See K. Muchemwa (ed), Zimbabwean Poetry in English (Mambo Press, 1978).

demonstrates a society divided within itself about the significance of its cultural traditions. Marechera's narrator begins 'to ramble, incoherently, in a disconnected manner'. Images of cracking, of stains, and abrasive verbs of hurling, stretching, and dragging proliferate. No wonder the temptation to idealise the pre-colonial past. The second point is that for all the violence and protest in the book there is no communication within the narrative between the narrator and his society.

In stories where there seems to be a relationship, such as 'Burning in the Rain' - the two lovers, 'their arms tightened about each other', are imaged as fugitives from violence - or, as in 'The Slow Sound of his Feet', people ^{who are} drawn together in sympathy and affection are frustrated by an inability to speak. Silence becomes a spiritual void separating people from one another. Marechera's narrative frets to fill that void with the last weapon left to him - verbal violence.

Mungoshi in an ostensibly much less violent narrative uses silence to signify the collapse of communication, verbal aridity, the hopelessness of language. Whereas, as Lewis Mkosi argues, Ngugi's Grain of Wheat is a study of failure but not resignation to colonialism, Mungoshi's Waiting for the Rain - perhaps because written from within the colonial experience - is a much bleaker novel with no vision that colonialism will end. History here is not the process of change towards independence, but a blind alley of disintegration. As in any drought, the rain does not come. Historical events like Smith's UDI, the Land Apportionment Act, the Pearce Commission, the Indemnity Act, each of which closely impinged on people's lives, have no place in the narrative. They were in a sense part of the history which Whites fashioned and not Blacks. The fiction is no less historical for neglecting them. For the Blacks history was a story of denial. It was by and large an experience of cultural disintegration and Zimbabwean society has been made acutely aware of that not least by its literature. The central figure in Waiting for the Rain, Lucifer, is a man loath to speak, but the drama within and surrounding him emerges in subtle ironic language which is nowhere

1. Lewis Mkosi, Tracks and Marks: Themes and Styles of African Literature (Longman, 1981) p. 46.

to be seen in the assured public manner of Mutswairo and Ndhlala.

The story concerns Lusifer who returns home to his rural village for the week-end to say farewell to his family before going overseas on a scholarship to study Art. The family - grandparents, parents, children - is fraught with disagreement over Lucifer's plans. This ritual visit calls into question loyalties and traditions, customs, affections, expectations; it prompts envy, hate, and by implication poses the problem as to how free is Lucifer to turn his back on his home and all it demands of him. His mother Raina's question in its very understatement and sincerity carries ironic pathos: although his father Tongoona agrees that Lucifer should go:

Raina sighs. She looks up at Lucifer and says: 'I just wanted to know whether it is really necessary for you to go overseas. I mean, couldn't you do what you want to do just as well here?' (p.77).

By this point the novel has established that 'home', 'here' - 'a heap of dust and rubble - white impenetrable heat on the sweltering land' (p.52) - is a place for the dead. On the bus approaching Manyema Tribal land Lucifer notices how, 'the people lean out of the windows to point out homes in a uniformly dead landscape' (p.39). And later towards the end, walking through the scrub, Lucifer tries to sum up his relationship with this place where he was born: 'At home the worms set to work on you on the very day you are conceived. And home is where the rain comes late, if it does come at all, and the animals simply drop dead and the old folk are abandoned to await the black messiah with a curse on their twisted lips' (p.163). Unlike Joyce's Stephen Daedalus Lucifer has no desire to forge the conscience of his race. He wants to escape the living death he sees around him, and in the end he is collected by the missionary who has arranged his scholarship. Lucifer 'watches his home disappear behind a cloud of dust' (p.180). Any relationship or bond that did exist between him and his home has dried up. The final image stresses the lack of communication: 'Lucifer leans back and tries to look at his country through the eyes of an impartial tourist' (p.180). Time is static and the dust suggests the spiritual aridity of the place.

The domestic focus of the book belies its engagement with the irony that colonialism is to do with anti-history. The texture of the writing pushes the reader beyond the events of the moment onto a metaphysical plane. The use of the present tense seems to deny any significance to the past but, at the risk of being paradoxical, asserts an atemporal dimension in which the present is all embracing of the past and the future. Under colonialism perception itself has become alienated from the chronology of history. In a sense the past tense has become meaningless. Take for example the meeting between Lucifer and his older brother Garabha who has more rapport with the elders and tradition than most characters in the book. His work is making drums, and he is not interested in leaving home for the city. He goes to Lucifer's hut to greet him. 'How are you?' he asks.

Lucifer stubs out his cigarette, turns over a page or two, dog-ears the page he has been reading and says: 'I am all right. And you?' 'Fine - ' Garabha stops himself in time from asking the usual banal: 'How is job?' Already he can taste the falseness of it. So he waits for Lucifer to commit himself. It's much easier here to answer questions than trying to fill in the emptiness with unasked-for talk. This decision releases him from that sense of older-brother obligation he always feels with Lucifer.

So, inch by inch, Garabha settles back into the chair. And one by one, his muscles relax. He is looking at Lucifer intently, without being aware of really looking at him.

And this staring - so it seems to Lucifer who is waiting resignedly for Garabha to start his drunken tales of village brawls - throws the burden on to Lucifer. He can feel the silence cracking with the stretching. He casts Garabha a glance and Garabha returns it with a steady gaze. Lucifer looks away. What can I talk about with him? What does he know? He opens the book, tries to read, but the print looks white. He shuts it again, turns to Garabha and asks: 'When did you arrive?'

'Early this morning.'

'Have you had anything to eat yet?'

'Yes.'

Silence. Lucifer looks at his watch. He

never had a watch before, Garabha remembers, it must be new. And sensing that he is meant to comment on it, Garabha remains quiet, amused.

Getting no reaction out of Garabha, Lucifer remembers that this was a game they used to play when they were still children: showing off. He feels disgusted with himself for stooping so low, and annoyed with Garabha for remaining so superiorly unmoved as if he is saying: Don't be so childish.¹

Drawn together by custom the two brothers have nothing to say to one another. The only common ground to provide a basis for conversation, the past, irritates Lucifer. There is no connection between Garabha's world of Manyene and Lucifer's Salisbury, between Lucifer's annoyance with Garabha's 'drunken tales of village brawls' and Garabha's amusement at Lucifer's new watch, images of lively if violent sociability and of cold individualism.

Garabha's relation with time is contextual, Lucifer's is artificial, impersonal. Between them is 'emptiness', 'silence cracking with the stretching'. Part of the experience of Colonialism is that shift from Garabha's world to Lucifer's, and in the latter there is no significant time.

This absence of significance is accented by Lucifer's unwillingness or inability to talk. Much more evident in the text are his feelings and restless thoughts. The novel shows him in a dualistic world; the external which comprises meetings, supposed conversations, visits to members of the family; and the internal which in fact carries the burden of the fiction. The more the prose individualises Lucifer the more alienated he appears. To be an individual in the context of traditional Shona society is to be different from, alienated from the community, and this shows itself by techniques of internalisation, particularly monologues, and a language of feelings and attitudes. So although little is said and silence fills the gaps as each attempted conversation collapses, the energy of the writing is maintained in the internal responses of Lucifer. Hence the appositeness of the present tense. As in Marechera's House of Hunger this is the fiction of a state of mind, a mind in the

1. Waiting for the Rain (Heinemann, 1975), pp. 107-108.

presence of its past with the attendant attitudes and values calling out for recognition, yet severed from them. Lucifer's emotional rejection lives side by side with the necessity to go through the empty gestures of greeting and saying farewell.

Images of the landscape, dust, birds, metamorphose into landmarks on a spiritual terrain. As in myth, time is static. The barren landscape reflects this. The recurring images of death suggest a community living out a dead culture. The past is past and does not relate to Lucifer's present. And his alienated present has no future, as his mother's question ironically suggests. Everything in the book works against the making of history, for Lucifer or his family or, implicitly, Zimbabwean Blacks.

What then is the relation between this novel and its society in contemporary Zimbabwe? Unlike so many African novels on the same subject, it was published five years before Independence. At the time it received attention as a poignant analysis of the collapse of Shona family life. As time passes it has come to be regarded as much more than that. It swings ~~directly~~ at remarkably few abuses. The missionary at the end is the only obvious whipping-boy. Yet it is a strong indictment of the Colonial era. Part of its force lies in the multiple oppositions - not simply between obvious poles like elders and children, tradition and change - but it explores more complex paradoxes within the crumbling society itself, for example the clash between Lucifer's father Tongoona and his brother Garabha. Neither the father nor Lucifer, for different reasons, accepts Garabha, yet in the novel's terms Garabha with his drums is closer to the life energies of the land and the community than either of them - 'with the drums there is a sense of quiet strength' (p.85). Also the restraint in the feelings, often reacting against the context in which they are placed, and so much less dramatic than in Things Fall Apart because more confined, marks off the novel as a languid enervated statement that waiting for the rain is a hopeless task.

Since Independence in Zimbabwe, publishers, readers and critics have waited eagerly for what has not come: a convincing

novel about the guerilla war, something like say Sassine's Warriyamu (Heinemann, 1980). Nyamfukudza's The Non-believer's Journey (Heinemann, 1980) with its hero sceptical about politics, positively unwilling to be drawn into the war, but caught up by it, was too ambiguous to merit much attention at a time when the people only had the war to thank for ~~their~~ Independence.¹ And Edmund Chipamaunga's novel A Fighter for Freedom (Queen: Mambo Ken, 1983) is too leaden to take seriously.²

So far writers have been slow to set their narratives in this phase of Zimbabwe's history. The early traumas of division between Mugabe's ZANU(PF) and Nkomo's ZAPU parties, the public rhetoric for a one party state, and the time it has taken for the society to witness the effects, the changes, the fleshing out of promises which Independence has led people to expect have meant a fluid and uncertain few years coloured by both public pride and private disillusion. Ngugi's Grain of Wheat which deals with Kenya through Mau Mau up to Independence was published four years after the event, Perhaps Zimbabwean writers need at least as long a time ^{lapse} ~~time~~ to set their perspectives. Yet there are already signs of both evasion of and engagement with the new society. Chinsoro's Nothing is Impossible (Longman, 1983) is hack biographical fiction about a determined young Black who survives colonialism, its racial prejudices and especially its educational inequalities, to become a successful businessman. There is no attempt to analyse or show in a new way the contradictions within the changing society. The message is, as the title ^{indicates} ~~is~~, simplistically moral. Nyamfukudza's latest work however, a collection of short stories, Aftermaths (College Press, 1983), does probe delicately and ironically into the experience of living in Zimbabwe after the war. Most of the stories are about aftermaths of the Liberation War - disillusion, failed expectations, and the pain of adjusting to the present. Like Mungoshi, Nyamfukudza is seldom explicitly political and

1. The novel did however win the P.E.N. award in Zimbabwe in 1982.

2. See ^{also} ~~for example~~ the review in Moto, 20, 9:3 1984, p. 20.

always intensely personal. There is nothing of the bold satire of Achebe's A Man of the People or the historical sweep of Ngugi's Petals of Blood, both written several years after Independence. The title story concerns a young man who returns to the familiar streets of his childhood in Harare after the war. He meets an old playmate Farai, now a prostitute. The place, like the people, has run down. The setting has a significant temporal dimension. She takes him to her sordid room where as the narrator says, 'I felt robbed, childishly but painfully. Still Farai would soothe some of that. I felt tremendously at home ⁱⁿ there. We ate and made love and when the booze came we were ready for it and got drunk' (pp.54-55). Although the war had killed off close friends they had known in their childhood - 'Well, they freed us,' says the narrator - the vapid present is so much more obtrusive in the story than the past. The past is not a significant shaping force for the present, but something deserving only lip-service. The attrition of the past has been self-destructive.

In many of the stories particular experiences of the war leave Blacks and Whites permanently maimed. In 'The Visitation' Klopas van Heerden goes slowly mad haunted as he is by a shooting incident during the war while on duty in the Police Reserve: the memory of it is a psychological visitation that takes over his whole consciousness. In 'A Fresh Start' Kabesa's sister, an attractive woman who had been a teacher during the war, is now infantile and dumb as a result of rape by either soldiers or guerillas. 'God only knows', says Tonde, 'the terrible scars some of us carry. Well, let's get back to work. That was the war' (p.67).

The harrowing irony in such stories is distinct from much of what has come out of East and West Africa because so often the irony works against the narrator. The point is not that the narrator is naive or unreliable, as in Beti's The Poor Christ of Bomba, or inadequate for the task like Odili in A Man of the People, and thus becomes at times an object of satire. Here both the narrator and the text set up plausible expectations which are subsequently undermined by their failure

and the reader's ignorance to realise that the present is victim to the past. The war has not changed that relation: it has accentuated it. To say of the guerillas, 'they freed us', is to mouth empty words, or as Mungoshi's Garabha puts it, 'to fill in the emptiness with unasked for talk' (p.107). Liberation is not a word Nyamfukudza uses because his fiction is strongly rooted in the view that history does not move in sudden and glorious transformations: he prefers a phrase like 'time's ravages and conquests' (p.55). Characters in his fiction end up bruised by their own weaknesses. Unaware of their vulnerability they find at the close of the story that life is decidedly less full of promise than they had anticipated. History is a process of disillusion.

Much of Zimbabwean fiction is a refutation of the argument that colonialism was but a discordant interlude in a larger movement towards the harmony of the African historical experience.¹ Nyamfukudza's work, avoiding the historical and Socialist vision of Ngugi and the satirical confidence of Achebe or Cologues, rests in a corrosive pessimism, so there is no question of redemption from the past. Characters relate to the past in many of these stories in so far as they realise that it has destroyed something in them. Continuities are a matter of memories together with the collapse of feelings associated with memories. The present becomes a world adrift, not unlike the raft in John Pepper Clark's play of that name.

Implicit in much of what has been said above is an argument that the contemporary African writer, whichever phase of history he turns to, has to decide what significance to give to time. If he turns to the early phase, time tends to be cyclical or recurrent, emphasizing the homogeneity and perpetuity of established cultural mores. Thus the fiction is marked by romance,³ legend, or myth. In the Colonial phase the present and the past are at odds, a discordance which is not presented as dialectical * but, as Mungoshi shows, as self-destructive friction. Time is measured rather by degrees of alienation than by events. In the Independence phase, the problem of time is more acute for writers

1. See D.S. Bebbaye, 'Time in the African Novel', Journal of Commonwealth Literature, XVII, no.1(1982), p.85.

who choose not to be satirists. If the writer regards the individual as a product of history - the corrupt Nanga in A Man of the People or Munira in Petals of Blood - or as an ideologue, a self-conscious maker of history like Karega, past time impinges on the present in a dynamic way that Nyamfukudza does not accept.

The consequences of colonialism, the loss of dignity, alienation, betrayal of the past, beg several questions about how a character can find a convincing identity with post-colonial Africa. As many African novels show, death threatens both those who search and those who are prepared to compromise. Although his word lives on, Okolo in The Voice ends up like debris floating aimlessly down the river. Udómo in Abraham's novel is murdered in a savage ritual. The past is both resistant and destructive. Ngugi suggests not. He writes, "For what has been ... is intimately bound up with what might be; our vision of the future, of diverse possibilities of life and human potential, has roots in our experience of the past."¹ He is on the side of Achebe's desire, "to help my society regain belief in itself."² Writers in Zimbabwe have yet to show that they mean to do the same. If Nyamfukudza is any indication they will try first to help society be honest with itself about the present. That might be a more difficult and subversive task, but it is part of the enmity which has always existed between a serious writer and his society.

1. "The Writer and his Past" in Homecoming (Heinemann, 1972), p. 39.
2. Op.cit., p. 44.

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