

A CRITICAL RE-ENGAGEMENT WITH STULTIFYING GENDER BINARIES IN HIV AND AIDS RELATED SHONA NOVELISTIC DISCOURSES.

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SEMINAR PAPER: 8 MAY 2006

Abstract

The paper is an exposition and a critique of selected novelistic voices in Shona whose subject matter also includes HIV/AIDS. Yet, the informing philosophy on Aids in the novels is gender difference as the *modus operandi* and *sine qua non* of social existence. Such a conceptual mode leads the writers to place both genders on a grading scale to see which poses the greatest danger to society. The unequivocal position that emerges in the novels is that women are largely responsible for the transmission of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. However, we argue that such a vision is ideologically vapid and pedagogically subversive and disempowering in the contemporary African world where the fight against HIV/AIDS has assumed legendary levels. Creative writers are part of the legendary battle and as such must not duck their social obligations by arguing that their works are mere fiction that has little or no impact on society. Literary creators who discourse on HIV/AIDS cease to be mere ‘writers in fiction’ because these are incontrovertibly matters of life and death.

Introduction

A cursory glance at most novelistic creations in Zimbabwe’s indigenous languages, particularly Shona reveals works that are conspicuous in their lack of positive female symbolism. Such works foreground a motley array of debilitating female images that not only concretise the impossibility of the co-existence of male and female principles, but also draw our attention to the rabid chauvinism that leads to the absolute ‘thingification’ of the female principle. Imbedded in such artistic discourses is the absolutisation of gender difference as the *modus operandi* and *sine qua non* of the contemporary social (dis)order. Such a cognitive mode constitutes an obnoxious mansion of illusions. While Chinyowa (1998: 164) contends “that the politics of gender and development in Shona literature assumes an innovative trend with the attainment of political independence in Zimbabwe,” evidence in this paper points to the contrary. Shona male writers who constitute the majority of literary creators have remained unrepentant as they continue to blunder in their mutilation of what Hegel calls a ‘double significance’ in which seemingly opposite sites of agency are dependent on each other. In as much as the paper acknowledges the fact there are other factors apart from patriarchy that impact on gender

perceptions, the novels studied here provide evidence which advances a brazen patriarchal modality.

We seek to show in this paper that while most human societies are patriarchal, this institutionalised and fossilised vision is not wholly compatible with African conceptual cosmologies. African cosmologies underscore balance and unity. Therefore, the adaptation and adoption of uncompromising dichotomised perceptions of gender realities degenerate into a narrow and perilous perspective especially in recent years where the African continent is faced with the Aids pandemic. This pandemic stands as a menace to African posterity. The unmistakable trend in the novels under study is their ignominious association of HIV and AIDS, including a host of other sexually transmitted diseases with the female principle. It is our conviction in this paper that these novels generate images and ideas that are likely to ensure a form of sociological infrastructure that becomes the informing hallmark for gender relations and (non) participatory behaviours. Such affinity for the disenfranchisement and prosaic presentation of women deals a serious deathblow towards the realisation of a collective approach in containing the disease. Women are expected to play an important part in the struggle against HIV/AIDS because as the Shona people would say, *musha mukadzi* (the dignity of a home is in the woman). Their empowerment, not only in the media and other information sources, but also through images in literary discourses is tantamount to slaying two birds with one stone. It is the requisite condition for family and national development. It is precisely for this reason that our progenitors had been astute enough to acknowledge women as sanctuaries and centres for development. In this connection, it becomes an immediate challenge for contemporary African scholarly generations to exhume and disseminate such existential philosophies so that they function as a bulwark against the Aids pandemonium.

This study is a 're-engagement' because the issues concerning the images of women in Zimbabwean literature have been competently handled elsewhere by scholars like Chinyowa, Mashiri, Chimhundu and Gaidzanwa. Gaidzanwa (1985: 7) in her book titled *Images of Women in Zimbabwean Literature* hopes that her study "will be worth the effort if it stimulates more writing and discussion of works that will engender sensitive and positive portrayal of women in literature and other media." As a result, this is the inspiration of this paper.

The historicity of the logic of gender binaries

Although it is possible to identify practices of male dominance in most societies of the world, patriarchy, as an institutionalized value, as an intrinsic characteristic of utamaroho can be associated with Indo-European origins of western civilization (Ani, 1994:171).

The tendency to foreground binaries as a philosophy of life and also to visualise realities in terms of dichotomies and splits is historically linked with European epistemological thought stretching far back to Plato's "metaphysical mistake in his philosophical system" (Ephraim, 2003:41). It is this Platonic influence that fashioned and conditioned the European style of speculative thought such that up to this day a host of European realities clearly

reflect minds trained from birth to think in terms of dichotomies or splits. The splits become irreconcilable, antagonistic opposites. Holistic conceptions become almost impossible given this mindset (ibid: 33).

Descartes' mind and body dichotomy later expanded to include reason and emotion, which is one of the most notorious and debilitating splits in the history of mankind was instrumental in the crystallisation of gender differences. The reason versus emotion binary was used as a paradigm of value and valuation in creating a world order defined in terms of good and bad, high and low. This cognitive modality placed high value on reason and low value on emotion. Correspondingly, reason was said to be associated with man while the woman was associated with emotion. It meant that reason (man), which is the higher principle, had control over the lower principle, emotion (woman). This deliberate dichotomisation and also the process of valuation provided and continues to provide the mechanics and mechanisms for control and domination. According to this conceptual scheme, social order can only be achieved when the higher principle controls the lower principle. This leads to a series of other dichotomies which are not the concern of this paper.

This guaranteed the creation and institutionalisation of a social order where women were permanently atrophied into an inferior status, only to be controlled by men. Ruether vindicates this European view which has been universalised as the divinely ordained social order. She says:

The male is seen essentially as the image of the male transcendent ego or God; woman is seen as the image of the lower, material nature... Gender becomes a primary symbol for the dualism of transcendence and immanence, spirit, matter (1983:53).

Today, this strange and divisive gender perspective has unfortunately come to be acknowledged as African culture because it is "part of the evil genius of Europe to drain the diseased pus of their political sores on the lands of other people. With consistency, they have tried to solve their problems at other people's expenses" (Clarke, 1994: xvi). The unpalatable combination of a western patriarchal system that is informed, and in fact built around the philosophy of total exclusion of the female principle, together with an African patriarchal system that revolves around the principle of inclusion and cosmos generates a hybridised and highly neurotic and bastardised form of patriarchy which is passed on as African patriarchy/African culture. It is this perspective that is adumbrated in indigenous literatures.

On the other hand, the African conceptual position towards gender is holistic, organic and inclusive. It is not inspired by dichotomies and binaries. At the same time as it is estimable that this position might be taken as an essentialised presentation of African realities, the fact remains that European colonialism is an "imperialism of patriarchy." This partly explains the absolute peripherisation of African women during the colonial period. The villagisation of African women triggered and exacerbated a gendered social order whose consequences on the psychosocial dynamics on gender were to remain permanent. Colonial political and economic policies impacted on gender and in the

process radically disvalued women. The social picture that emerged was a dichotomous modality which could possibly be read as rural/woman/dependant/inferior and urban/man/worker/superior. As stated above, since colonialism is a patriarchal system, it elevated African patriarchy through the legislation of policies that demoted African women. Such novel policies promoted a new form of cockeyed awareness among African men that they were the providers/man/superior taking care of the provided/woman/inferior. This scheme finds validation from Chinyowa when he says that, “colonialism’s inclination to prop up indigenous patriarchal authority over women created disparities in both power and privilege between the sexes” (66). The historical location and exegesis of gender is paramount because a number of Eurocentric scholars with Eurocentric teachings at heart have explained the gender riddle in the context of a misunderstood pre-colonial Africa.

The rationale, therefore, is that, in Africa both genders constitute a vital link in the chain of extricating humanity from the claustrophobic enclaves of a tapestry of adversity. This is corroborated by the realisation that everyone is a potential bread winner. Marimba Ani aptly describes the African attitude towards gender. She says:

What is to be learned from African and other non- European philosophies is the principle of oppositional complementarity. It is not a question of which gender dominates nor of whether everyone can become “male” (that is, take the dominant position), rather it is a question of whether our view of existence dictates the necessary cooperation of “female” and “male” principles for the success and continuance of the whole (243).

The conceptualisation of men as good and rational and women as bad and irrational is not in sync with this world view. Armah (1973: 17) also expresses the same position when he says:

The way is not the rule of men. The way is not the rule of women. The way is never women ruling men. The way is reciprocity.

This cosmological perspective has not appealed to the creative faculties of most Zimbabwean writers in indigenous languages, particularly Shona writers. Instead, they opt for the alien and divisive philosophy which is paraded as a natural African social order. This is corroborated by evidence drawn from the selected novels discussed in this paper which are *Zvibaye Woga* (Self Torment) (1996) and *Mapenzi* (Fools/ Mad People) (1999).

Assumed Female Irrationality Syndrome

In the novels under study, the aetiology of assumed female neurosis is overwhelmingly projected as perverse irrationality and mental depravity, which subsequently degenerates into some form of pathology. We can guesstimate that the writers seem to advance this fictitious irrationality as the engine that propels women towards an insatiable propensity for destruction. Mukwazhi in *Zvibaye Woga* uses Cephas’ brother to articulate his vision and version of women. He says:

Unoona munin'ina chinhu chinonzi mukadzi chinonetsa kunzwisisa zvekuti ukateerera zvaanotaura nguva zhinji unoparadzana nehama dzako ukasara wave woga...Zvino iwe uri murume unofanira kufunga pachirume (7).

You see my young brother, a woman is a very difficult thing to understand and if you take what she says, you will be separated from your relatives. Now, you are a man and you must think like one.

Similar statements are found in Shona novels written by Chakaipa, Zvarevashe, Kuimba and many others. This position paints a society that is peopled by two incongruent genders which generate irreconcilable thought systems. One is advanced and therefore rational and balanced. This is the male system that is said to possess the ability to analyse and understand women. The other one represented by the woman, is irrational and unbalanced. As a consequence, for harmony and balance to be realised, there is a fundamental need to control by any means necessary the irrational and potentially dangerous section of society - women. In addition, such a conceptual position is premised on the thingification and 'objectification' of women. Both are necessary for control because they entail enormous devaluation of the so called 'Other'. The assumed irrationality of women also leads to what the author visualises as an inherent and universal irresponsibility. Cephas in *Zvibaye Woga* soliloquises thus:

Asi chaizvo nyika iri kuenda kupi. Vasikana vamazuva ano vave kunetsa kunzwisisa, kuda ndicho chirungu chakati kuuya ichi. Matyira chaiwo havachisina, tsika vakarasa imbwa dzikanhonga hadzo, ukamunyenga haakurambi, mumba mako anongopinda pasina kana mubvunzo...Umhandara neunhu hwake akatengesa kare kwazvo sakani varume vasisadi kuroora mazuvano (79).

Where are we going as a nation? Today's girls are difficult to understand. May be it is due to the influence of western culture. They have lost all sense of fear and cultural dignity because when you propose to them, they do not refuse. In your room, she just enters without any question. Virginity and dignity were sold long back and this is the reason why men no longer want to marry.

The insinuation in the above excerpt is that men are responsible because they are endowed with reason. In the eyes of Cephas who is the author's voice of reason, such behaviour is irrational. It is this kind of behaviour particularly by women that leads to the spread of HIV and Aids. As pointed out before, the difference between men and women is underlined above. Cephas is convinced that men who constitute the rational majority are renegeing on marriages because women have become imponderably irresponsible.

Vasikana vashoma kwazvo vanoita zvekukumbirwa. Vazhinji vave kungoita zvekutizira ivo vave nenhumbu kare vopinda mumudungwe wemvana dzadai kutekeshera nenyika (107).

Very few girls today are properly married. The majority simply elope on discovering that they are pregnant joining the long line of deflowered women who have been rejected by men.

This overgeneralisation and oversimplification of women's behaviour is rather too reductionist. It is premised on the general yet misguided assumption that their actions are not informed by reason. The wholesale condemnation of such women who are in fact victims of irresponsible and bastardised African patriarchy is a mechanism for the absolution of promiscuous men like Cephass Tsvangirai.

The same also finds obtains in Mabasa's *Mapenzi*. However, unlike Mukwazhi Mabasa locates female irrationality within the broad context of economic forces. It is such forces that plunge female characters into the scheme of things where irrationality becomes logos. This aspect is largely shown through Saru, Maud, Magi and Kundai. It is in his presentation of Heaven that the author adopts a modality which projects women as blatantly irrational. She sexually abuses young Reuben and infects him with a sexually transmitted disease. The only reason that we get from the novel is that Heaven is rather a loony character.

Female sexuality, a cursed sexuality?

Writers discussed in this section emphatically declare heterosexual relationships as the dominant method of HIV and Aids transmission. Their centralisation of the sexual encounter is out of the realisation that it is critical to humanity. Sex is celebration of life and acknowledgement of presence. Among African communities, the sexual encounter affords identity and other social labels and titles. These are important as they mark personal and group development. One becomes wife, husband, mother, father, mother in law, father in law, son in law, daughter in law through giving and receiving sex. Active and determined participation in the sexual act is considered an indisputable duty. In other words, the ability to responsibly give and receive sex is a virtue. It is against this socio-cultural backdrop that it towers as the dominant mode of transmission. However, the writers are conspicuous in their adoption of an axiological paradigm that is premised on narrow-gendering of the transmission of the deadly disease. Female sexuality towers majestically as a threat to the survival of mankind. It is against the backdrop of such a conceptual modality that we contend that such a position petrifies and stultifies collective attempts to contain the disease.

I refer to this proclivity by most indigenous writers to think along narrow gender lines as the creative pathology of a 'borrowed' and 'bastardised' patriarchy which is nothing but a cosmology of illusions, a fictitious and mind-dependent set up that is passed on as a divinely ordained state of affairs. In the words of Ama Ata Aidoo, it is merely "a warmed up leftover from colonization" (1998:47). Mukwazhi, in *Zvibaye Woga*, pontificates on HIV and Aids through the image of Cephass Tsvangirai, who is his central character. Cephass, the author's voice of reason is characteristically deployed and thrust at the nexus as a gigantic tarantula whose Herculean and gargantuan sexual exploits enable him to circumvent, and slalom tantalisingly past '*gukurahundi remukondombera - Aids, chirwere chisingarapike icho chinoparadzirwa kunyanya nemabasa eupfambi* (130). (*The storm of destruction-Aids, the incurable disease that is*

spread through prostitution). His insatiable sexual appetite is whetted by a community of easy-to-bed girls who include Miriro, Belinda, Florina, Lucy, Mercy and a host of others who are not mentioned by name. We are made aware of their existence through Florina who says that:

Ipo pano pane zakwatira rezvisikana zvokuti zvimwe zvana zvechikoro ndakambozvinyorerera tsamba. Iko zvino kana mutownship umu hazvisiviki zvichitya. Chimwe chacho chinotengesa muchitoro ndakachipa yambiro (62).

Here he has a lot of girls and some of them are school children I once wrote to. Today they are so afraid that they seldom come to this township. I have also warned another girl who works at the local store.

Amazingly, Cephas is exonerated of any wrong doing by the author. The multivariate conundrums that he faces are said to be a consequence of female sexuality, a putative cursed sexuality.

The author's understanding of promiscuity is biased against women. This can be observed in his depiction and description of *pfambi* (prostitute).

Pfambi munhu anorarama nekutengesa muviri wake kwete nokuti anoda asi kuti uyu munhu asina kukwana zvekare nokuti anovenga vakadzi vose vane dzimba dzavo nokuti vanochengetedza varume vavo zvinova zvinomuradza nenzara ashaya anomupa mari...Pasi rose rapfugamiswa negukurahundi remukondombera...chirwere chinoparadzirwa kunyanya nemabasa eupfambi. Izvi pfambi dzacho dzinozviziva... (13).

A prostitute is a person who survives by selling his body not out of choice. This is an insane person who hates all women because they lead settled lives and protect their husbands. This does not augur well with her because she cannot buy food after failing to get ready clients. The whole world has been brought down on its knees by this storm of destruction, AIDS, which is spread largely through prostitution. Yet, the prostitutes are fully aware of this...

Reference to *pfambi* is also witnessed in Mabasa's *Mapenzi* where the dehumanising nature of Harare, the capital city, is likened to what the author sees as the destructive potential of women. He says:

Harare zipfambi rakazvipenda penda zvakadarikidza mwero (32).

Harare resembles a female prostitute that has over applied make up.

Among the Shona people the term *pfambi* (promiscuous person) has never been myopically used to refer to women alone. It is gender neutral. In *Duramazwi ReChiShona* (Shona dictionary) edited by Chimhundu (1996), the term *pfambi* is defined as:

Mukadzi anorara nevarume vakawanda kana murume anorara nevakadzi vakawanda...378.

A woman who sleeps around with many men or a man who sleeps around with many women.

Surprisingly, writers who are supposed to be the “sensitive point of the community” and are “supposed to march right in front” decide to mutilate the indiscriminate usage of the term. This conscious creative attempt, in which women are the only gender that is burdened with the anti-social label *pfambi*, dispatches a powerful statement where they stand as the sole transmitters of HIV and Aids. There could hardly be a plainer social picture of women as representing the symptomatology of destruction than this. This is to say the image of women we are given increasingly makes it difficult to distinguish between them and HIV and Aids. These writers are no more to be trusted than the early generation of Shona writers like Chakaipa, Zvarevashe and Chidzero who were the avowed enemies of the Shona people actively engaged in the nullification of Shona culture and history. In a profound sense they have shown themselves to be highly susceptible to value delusions. The fight against HIV/Aids is trammelled by such literary blundering which occupies itself with a pathological subversion of positive and balanced presentation of gender relations.

No great imagination is necessary in order to recognise that Mukwazhi is on a mission to incriminate the female principle for the numerous problems that contemporary Zimbabwean society faces. His canonisation of women as responsible for the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases and the virus which causes Aids is seen in his depiction of the relationship between Cephas and one of his girl friends, Belinda. A few days after sleeping with Belinda, Cephas remarks:

Kuzoti muzuva repiri Belinda aenda ndakatanga kunzwa muviri wangu kurwadza zvandainge ndisati ndambonzwa nokudaro ndakabva ndaenda kwachiremba (80).

A few days after Belinda had left I began to experience some strange pains in my body and I consulted a medical doctor.

Cephas is told by the doctor that:

Anyway, Mr. Tsvangirai, mhezi dziri panhengo dzemuviri wenyu dzinotaridza kuti mune chirwere chenjovhera chakaipa kwazvo chinonzi gonorrhoea (80).

Anyway, Mr. Tsvangirai, the sores on your private parts indicate that you have a very dangerous sexually transmitted disease known as gonorrhoea.

The author uses the above sentiments to underscore the fact that, while female sexuality is desirable, it is a cursed sexuality. Men are victims of this sexuality. We argue thus because despite his many sexual relationships, Cephas is not accused of spreading any diseases. This is despite the fact that he has unprotected sex with all of his sexual

partners. Instead, he accuses Belinda saying, *izvozvi uri kungofamba uchingokusha chirwere chako kuvarume vakawanda vasina chavanofungira (82). (Right now you are simply spreading your disease to innocent and unsuspecting men)*

In this regard, the writer constructs a subversive binary where female characters stand for social death while men are only blighted by women. Mukwazhi subscribes to the myths and “inbuilt biases against women in relation to STDs and other sexually related problems. In [postcolonial] Africa, STDs, still carry the double stigma of being sexually related as well as being believed to be a woman’s disease” (1992:159). While McFadden does not explain the historicity of such inbuilt biases, this dichotomised social order based on bad and good principles is not the best in coming up with a functional and sustainable HIV and Aids policy. Cephas is equally capable of transmitting STDs as Belinda and any other woman. This blame game cannot solve our problems. The HIV and Aids puzzle commands collective effort where both genders assume responsibility. Literature is not an individual paradise. It is meant for public consumption. The images that are generated in literature are likely to have a bearing on decision making, social relationships as well as socialisation. Images that only present women as active and potential carriers and spreaders of deadly maladies are unhealthy for national development and nation building. Such images have the capacity to become, in a profound sense, compulsions which severely inhibit the individual’s growth as a person, rendering her psychologically and even intellectually inflexible. Since they are a reflection of an individual’s place in the world, they mark her way of life as fundamentally truncated and putrefying. The point that we are emphasising, for instance, is that such literature has durable psychological effects not only on the young girl but indeed on any woman who finds herself continuously presented and represented as a potential carrier of social problems and deadly diseases. Ephraim (2003: 75) equates such images to definitions which have the capacity to delimit an individual’s sphere of influence. He informs us that:

...to name and define before hand the nature of things, is at once remarkable and enviable...For to be able to name and define things is, in a lordly sense, to hold power over them.

Eventually Belinda contracts Aids. The contrastive discourse used to describe Belinda and Cephas is carefully constructed marking the author’s commitment to the visualisation of society and HIV/Aids through the lenses of gender difference and dichotomies. Cephas describes Belinda in the following words:

Kuonda kwaainge aita kwaitotyisa. Shaya dzose dzainge dzanyura iro bvudzi ave marangwanda chaiwo. Kana ari maoko dzainge dzave tsostso zvekuti wainyatsoona kuti mabhonzoz ega zvawo asara asisina nyama .Meso ainge awira mumakomba iwo acheneruka kuti mbu-u (124).

The manner in which she had lost weight was just appalling. The cheek bones had sunk and the hair had vanished. The hands had become mere sticks and one could see that nothing was left except fleshless bones. The eyes had sunk into their sockets.

On the other hand, Cephas is healthy and strong. Belinda even expresses shock on discovering that Cephas is very healthy. She asks:

Ha-a ndiwe zvako Cephas? Ko, kusimba kudaro uri kudyei zvako mugoni? (124)

Oh!, it's you Cephas? What is it that you are feeding on which makes you so healthy?

While it is possible to estimate that Cephas might not have contracted the disease, the contrast between the two generates the impression that men are not at high risk. It is only women who undergo massive psycho-physiological devastation. This is wrong and unacceptable. A writer's creative vision must not be distorted by what might turn out to be a personal disregard of the female sex. In Ngugi's words, it appears as if Mukwazhi is trying to persuade us, to make us view not only a certain kind of reality, but also from a certain angle of vision... (1981:6). Responsible acts of literary creation must be informed by a people's world view. The African world view emphasises harmony, balance and unity of purpose. This is what is demanded by the challenges facing Zimbabwean society today. It is a philosophically and pedagogically fatal mistake for African writers to embrace a polarised cognitive mode, especially in the contemporary context that is fraught with HIV and Aids. In the words of Baldwin, "in the 1990s and beyond [our writers] must be about developing basic models of the human condition that are consistent with the African world view" (1992:56).

Miriro, too, suffers the same fate as Belinda. *Nokuda kwekupera muviri kwainge aita ndainge ndatotadza kumuziva...* (p.127). (*Because of the excessive loss of weight, I had almost failed to recognise her*). Although the author has some attention-grabbing insights on HIV and Aids, his psycho-intellectual manoeuvres lead him to place both genders on a linear scale to see which poses the greatest danger to society. Such dichotomous gradation leads him to make wrong moral conclusions that nihilate his contributions towards HIV and Aids education. Firstly, it is only women who experience both the physical and psychological traumas associated with HIV and Aids. Secondly, despite his promiscuity, Cephas is portrayed as a hero who only experiences a modicum of psychical torment triggered by his suspicions that he might have contracted the disease. All female characters, far from being depicted as sexual heroines become helpless victims of the very sexual encounter which affords characters like Cephas social greatness and sexual hero status. When it comes to the sexual encounter, we state that both genders are consummately and complementarily heroic. Mukwazhi's projection of sexual heroism creates a dangerous social impression where male promiscuity becomes permissible because it does not lead to Aids. *Nhai mwari dai ndangorega kuva muchitima chisingadzikwi ichi. Zvino ndazodzidza chidzidzo (129)* (*My God, I wish I am not in the same train where one cannot disembark. Now I have learnt a lesson*).

However, when the novel ends, Cephas is happy and is leading a settled life with Mercy, a young school girl who is one of his erstwhile sexual partners. In this regard, it can be noted that the author's unbalanced understanding of gender in the African context compels him to foreground Cephas as a paradigm of sexual heroism. He becomes a standard of value and valuation. For all his careless sexual shenanigans, he is given a second chance and is even rewarded with a young school girl for a wife. On the other

hand, all women characters are eliminated from the scene through HIV and Aids. Some of them include Belinda and Mirirro. While Florina might not have contracted the disease, she has been wasted and elbowed out of active life. Mukwazhi's novelistic effort is not likely to be helpful in the fight against HIV and Aids. It sends wrong signals that have the potential to mislead. Since literature written in Zimbabwe's indigenous languages is accessible to many people, young and old, it becomes very dangerous to generate such dysfunctional images and messages. The biggest consumer is the education sector, particularly secondary schools where the Shona novel is a compulsory element in the curriculum. Young readers are most likely to be invited and shepherded into a dangerous and straitjacketed conceptual and existential trajectory where the male reader thinks it is normal to have a pluriformity of sexual relationships because he can get away with it. This conception of heroism is dangerous in a context where such typologies of conquering and domination are at high risk of contracting and spreading HIV and Aids.

Mapenzi is a novel which reflects what the author characterises as mass neurosis in post-independence Zimbabwe. The story is narrated through various neurotic voices that stand for different forms of social neurosis. The neurosis is triggered by a number of problems that people face in the contemporary dispensation, particularly the faltering economy. It is in the depiction of this universalised neurosis that the author raises some intriguing perspectives with regard to issues of HIV and Aids and other sexually transmitted diseases. This dimension is shown through Bunny, a male character who experiences severe psychopathology as a result of his relationship with the late Maud. Maud is a widowed woman who draws Bunny into the deadly affair. Heaven is also another woman who brings out this theme. Unlike Mukwazhi, Mabasa, to some extent, attempts to strike a balance in his discussion of the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases even though this is not very palpable. He juxtaposes irresponsible male characters with neurotically constituted female characters and blames them for the problems in society.

Firstly, Mabasa depicts Sabha an irresponsible and promiscuous male character like Cephaz in *Zvibaye Woga*. He is married but brings different female prostitutes to his home and sleeps with them in the presence of his wife. As a consequence, he infects his wife with a sexually transmitted infection.

*Chokwadi kana ini ndikafa ndinenge ndaurayiswa nemurume wangu.
Chokwadi here asikana, mukore uno nemamiriro awo munhu ungapewo
mukadzi wako chirwere chenjovera? (100)*

Honestly, if I die it is all because of my husband. How can someone infect his wife with an STI in today's world?

However, this incident is not given much descriptive attention in the novel. It is mentioned in passing.

Rather, a lot of descriptive attention is given to the Maud and Bunny affair. The attention extended to this affair is just overwhelming. In this affair, it is Maud's sexual cunningness that wins Bunny and lands him into life-threatening problems. We are told that:

Kana kuti ndizive kuti chavaindinetsera chii nekundipa miyedzo yakadaro zvinotonetsa kunzwisisa...vakataura vakasimudza rimwe gumbo voriturikidza pamusoro perimwe. Vakabva vangosara zvavo vayanika zvidya zvese panze. Ndakarohwa nehana. Ndakadikitira. Vaive vandibata- bata kusingapukutiki neruoko. Vaive vanokora mwoyo wangu netsinga dzose (41 & 78).

I do not even know why she was giving me such temptations... She talked while purposefully lifting one of her legs and placed it on top of the other. As a result, all her thighs were exposed. My heart beat fast. I sweated. She had just snatched my heart with all its arteries.

As a result of her behaviour, Maud is portrayed as a wanton and dangerous temptress who takes advantage of Bunny's desperate situation. Maud's actions are a defiance of logic, the logic that characterises rationality. She is aware that Bunny has a girl friend that he intends to marry but proceeds, in the words of Chinweizu, to act like a murderer tasked to perform surgery on a patient. All the psychological problems that Bunny eventually faces after realising that Maud had died of HIV and Aids are connected to this event. His performance at work is grossly undermined such that he has to be rested. He loses all balance and sanity. While Mabasa is showing the psychological effects of HIV and Aids on those who are not sure of whether or not they have contracted it, the broad picture is that it is precisely the female principle that is to blame.

The message, therefore, is that men are supposed to guard against this dangerous section of humanity. In this regard, Maud falls into the same category of characters like Belinda and Miriro whose propensity for destruction is insatiable. Mabasa seems to adopt the same creative method as Mukwazhi in that women characters that spread the disease to unassuming men are quickly edited out of the process while the male characters are given the benefit of the doubt. For instance, both novels end with Cephas and Bunny effervescent and preparing to start again. While starting afresh is not a problem at all, the problem lies in that this benevolent creative gesture is only extended to male characters alone, **WHY?** In the case of Bunny, there are prospects that he will settle down with young Charity as we are told by Magi, Bunny's sister that:

I suspect kuti Bunny ari kuda Charity chete. Asi ndakamuudza kuti asazove irresponsible nemwana wevaridzi (166).

I suspect that Bunny loves Charity. However, I told him that he will have to be responsible.

The same dimension comes out in *Zvibaye Woga* where cephas comments that:

Rechimangwana ini nemhuri yangu takafumorova nzira todzokera, iwo mufaro riri jawi. Takafamba hedu zvakanakisisa (154).

The following morning my family and I went back filled with happiness. We had a splendid journey.

He is now leading a settled and disease free life with Mercy who remarks that:

Upenyu inzira mudiwa, unombosangana nezvimhingamupinyi, makwidza nemateru, ndiko kurarama (154).

Life is a journey. You encounter various obstacles, steep ascents and descents. That is life.

Mabasa also manifests this tradition of visualising women as dangerous through Heaven, Maud's cousin.

Ndakatarisa mubhurukwa maRueben ndikaona chinhu chemwana chapera basa netupundu twainge maronda (144).

I looked into Heaven's shorts where I discovered that his penis had been covered with some rushes which looked like sores.

When being examined by Charity, his mother's young sister, Rueben confesses that, *ndiHeaven aitamba nechinhu changu achichiisa pane chake* (p.144) (*It is Heaven who was playing with my thing while placing it on hers*). While Heaven's behaviour is attributed to a deep-seated neurosis or *upenzi*, the fact that the author juxtaposes a woman and a 'man' is enough evidence for us to identify a common trend in the novel in which women are potentially destructive and irresponsible.

While Mabasa might have intended to portray the neuroses in contemporary Zimbabwe, he unconsciously contributes to a growing deleterious proclivity in Zimbabwean literature in indigenous languages to generate discourses that conceptualise existential realities in terms of gender difference and binaries. Again, Mabasa tends to pay too much attention on the University of Zimbabwe's female students. These are presented through Magi and Maud. Emphasis is largely on their sexuality, which poses a danger to the nation as Hamundigone says with reference to Kundai: *Kubva moshanda zvakanaka nhai chimhandara, asi musatiurayire nyika* (31) (*We wish you work well but do not destroy our country*).

Male characters are said to be *mapenzi* (foolish people) because they have adopted strange names like Castle Great. During one of his numerous visits to the University of Zimbabwe, Vincent observes that:

Upenzi hwevakomana ndewekupedzera mari kudoro. Vamwe vakomana vakazenge votopiwa sadza kuclinic kupera kweimwe term vasisina mari? Ivavo dzakanga dziri shasha dzekunwa doro paUniveristy. Vaitove nemazita avo edoro: mumwe ainzi Mascud mumwe achinzi Castle Great (86).

The boys' madness lies in the manner in which they waste money on beer. At one point some of them had to be given sadza at the clinic after they had squandered their money. These were well known for drinking beer at the University. Some of them had names of beer brands: one was MaScud and the other was Castle Great.

In as much as deriving identity from brands of local beer is said to be a reflection of *upenzi*, one can hazard to say that the names are underlined by a sense of greatness, particularly Castle Great. The disparities in the nature of *upenzi* are explained in terms of gender. Male students are social neurotics largely because they are irresponsible and lack proper planning skills. According to the author, this behaviour has nothing to do with HIV and Aids. On the other hand, female students are *mapenzi* (foolish people) because their behaviour has the greatest potential of causing Aids. Although this variation might be an unconscious act by the author, he, nevertheless is articulating a stultifying gender modality.

Conclusion

In this day and age, the threat posed by HIV and Aids has ceased to be a preserve for laboratory scientists and medical professionals. It has become a political, social, economic, cultural, intellectual and ideological problem. McFadden observes that the medicalisation of the HIV/Aids problem was a debilitating and subversive conceptual error. She says that:

Virtually all literature on the subject was premised on the assumption that this was a problem for the health system to resolve. This resulted in several important consequences which should really be spelt out more clearly in a critique of the relationship between medicine/health, gender and class in Africa, especially with reference to the problem of Aids (159).

Literature, because of its fluidity and flexibility in the social theatre is well positioned to collapse these fields together since it is part of the daily dialogues that people conduct among themselves. Creative artists must be conscious enough to effectively play their part by generating functional messages. Writers who choose to discourse on matters like Aids whose gravity is a matter of life and death must bear in mind that they have transcended the thin line between 'fiction' and society. Theirs ceases to be 'fiction'. They are dealing with lived and liveable experiences whose repercussions on society can not be underestimated.

It is also absorbing to note that writers discussed in this paper are all male writers pontificating on national issues that embrace women. The images they create and the conclusions they draw with regard to gender problematise the field particularly with regard to the politics of gender representation. Preoccupation with stereotypical images of women trammels and delays national triumph over the dangers posed by HIV and Aids. It is for this reason that Furusa (1998:79) points out that, "Africa will only develop when her men and women pick up hoes and shovels, mix mortar and mould bricks that lead to their vision of the future." In this regard, the Aids riddle mandates new creative methods and levels of conceptualisation that transcend narrow gender stereotypes.

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