

Musaemura Zimunya: ever read his prose?

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Despite its special place in the Zimbabwean short story canon, Musaemura Zimunya's 'Night shift and other stories' will always need a bold footnote. Appearing in 1993, it is the only creative prose book by a man who has always written and published poetry alone since the late 1960's.

Musaemura Zimunya is clearly Zimbabwe's leading poet. He is the most anthologized of all Zimbabwean poets. He writes poetry both in English and the Shona languages and is also a prominent scholar of Zimbabwean literature. His 'Those years of Drought and Hunger' is considered a pathfinder text on Zimbabwean literature in English.

He broke into print gradually in the 1970's in periodicals like Two-Tone and Chirimo. Later, he appeared more emphatically in group anthologies like Gwinyambira (1979) and Kizito Muchemwa's Zimbabwean Poetry in English (1978).

Afterwards the floodgates opened in such a record breaking way for Zimunya. He published (and sometimes editing) the following books of poetry: And Now The Poets Speak (1981), Thought Tracks (1982), Kingfisher, Jikinya and other Poems (1982), Country Dawns and City Lights (1985), Samora! (co-authored in 1987), Chakarira Chindunduma (co-authored and edited it in 1985), Birthright (1989), The fate of Vultures (1989), Perfect Poise (1994), Selected Poems of Zimunya (published in a Serbian language and in English in 1995).

In an 'afterword' to the Serbian/English version of his collected poems in 1995, Zimunya describes his poetry thus: " When you read these poems, it is my cherished hope that you will gain some insight... into the brutality of colonialism, the vagaries of growing up permanently dispossessed in a racially structured society, the tortuous quest for reconciliation of a shattered old culture with a hostile and spiritless new world cultivated to disadvantage the African and... the undying quest for harmony with nature... And then also you may wonder about the chaos artistic rhythms and traditions forever tussling for my creative attention."

Indeed Zimunya's poems over the past three decades reflect on the physical beauty of his country, his people's struggles against settler occupation and racism, the meaning of African myths and traditions and the meaning of freedom to the individual. His most enduring poems include The Valley of Mawewe, Zimbabwe (after the ruins), Zimbabwe bird, The Mountain, To be young, Kisimiso and No songs. One of these has been adopted by the curio shop at the Great Zimbabwe monument as a theme poem. It must be to do with the poem's evocation of the spirit in rock and the seeming silence of traditions that have deep roots.

It is important to remember that Zimunya like Henry Pote, Kizito Muchemwa and others, emerged at a time when the challenge was to forge a believable black African poetic sensibility in an environment that often persuaded

the black poet to imitate wholesomely the poets of empire. Zimunya refers to this in an essay as 'the jacaranda-piccaniny-musasa-culture'.

So after a compact and long poetic stretch, Zimunya broke into short story in 1993 with 'Nightshift and Other stories'. Although this book might never win the war against the books of poetry by the same author, it breathed and still breathes fresh air into the Zimbabwean short story.

Dominated, until very recently, by Stanley Nyamfukudza and Charles Mungoshi, the Zimbabwean short story tends to be an exercise in the use of the technique of understatement. It tends also to be about the underdog against the 'bigger' society. The narrative tends to alternate conversation with description of action. There is almost always the use of realism – man in the everyday tangible environment. There is also the twist in/of the tail/tale that recalls the works of foreign masters like Hemingway, Poe and others.

Zimunya's short stories, especially the more endearing ones, tend to explore reality as it relates with the vast underworld. There is also exploration of the functions and sometimes dysfunctions of myths and traditions. Zimunya goes for what is generally not visible in men and women, their other deep-seated realities much more than any other writer has done with the Zimbabwean short story. Thankfully, he does that to show the link between the spiritual and the physical and not as an exercise in dabbling with empty superstition.

In the Mbira Player, Hakuna's relations and conversations with his father and his totem, the monkey/baboon, is real. As he plays the mbira in an auditorium in wintry London, Hakuna sees 'the moving shadow of a baboon ambling with that superior grace and defiant air which only baboons are capable of. As it did so, it turned and cast one long gaze at him and then suddenly began to run towards Murehwa mountains.'

In The Peach Tree a sickly grandmother almost manages, rather unwillingly too, to bring her wrath upon her daughter when a branch of a tree that she is lying under falls onto and injures her daughter. She is shocked by what she can cause to happen through her wishful thinking. In that story reality and religion are one and the same thing. Prayer too is portrayed as not always conscious and positive. The electricity within the being is part of the being's character.

In Tambu, a village girl is obsessed with water that she is constantly going down to the well to fetch it even when there is lots of it in the home already! She is in touch with njuzu the underwater goddess. She provokes fear and sly whispering in the village and nobody wants to marry her. But when Tambu is rapped by an unknown assailant- some suspect that it is by her demented father- the village well dries. The message here, maybe, is to do with the fall of the African people after the great rape at the moment of conquest. The metaphor is monstrous and far reaching.

The magical powers in central characters in stories like Mother and Crocodile Bile raise the issue of domestic sacrilege that becomes national sacrilege. The killing of fathers and mothers by their sons and daughters point at a people who strike down all connections with history and in place worship at the

alter of empty anger and pride. Inversely the story points at the fact that elders need to conduct themselves with care so as to safeguard prosperity. If you see a son picking an axe and chasing his mother in order to hack her down, to injure her or to rape her, there must be something going wrong in the universe. The short story called Mother makes good reading but it leaves you with genuine fears of the world and of relations that we have often taken for granted.

Zimunya's short stories, even those that are based on realism, shift from the technique of 'description and dialogue' to one where the narrator seems to know something you need to know now-now, telling the story as if it were happening in a dream inside a dream. Therefore Zimunya allows you to fly away from three dimensional reality and see 'what was' or 'what could be', more like the effect of folk tale.

As writers reach a high level of maturity as in Zimunya, indeed the tendency is to go for that area that had been put aside as Myth in order to mine classic meanings to life. A reading of Ngugi Wathiongo shows the same development. After having duels with ideology all his career, Ngugi reawakens useful myth with the novel Matigari where the make-believe Matigari is actually standing for that undying desire amongst Kenyans to come to terms with their space. In the case of Zimunya, one hopes that there could be another prose collection before he returns to his beloved poetry.

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