

## Rethinking Survival: Metaphors of Hope and Peaceful Conflict Resolution Methods during Crisis Times

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### Abstract

*This paper examines the role of imaginative literature in offering insights into various peace-oriented conflict resolution methods. Through a critical analysis of three short stories set in a dystopian Zimbabwean context of extreme difficulties, the paper argues that hope is ubiquitous and fictions of our time offer subtle and strategic pointers to probable solutions. Through the presentation of the lived experiences of ordinary citizens, the short stories analysed ultimately point to a realisable vision of the future which has pointers which are suggestive of life beyond survival.*

**Key words:** survival, resilience, creativity, political crisis, dystopian hope, coping mechanisms, peaceful, emancipation, resistance

### Introduction

This paper is about the literary representation of the persistence of hope during times of political repression and ways of negotiating survival, as well as peacefully coping with perceived tyrannical regimes. As a form of rhetoric of hope and a way of imagining a peaceful future, the paper assumes an ideologically progressive strand that questions the status quo and yet invites the reader through exposure to the short stories, to consider alternatives to the existing order as a means of coping. The paper explores how short, imaginative narratives mirror the desirability of peace, the innovative ways to prevent violence and the democratisation processes ordinary people hope for. The axiom which states that the pen is mightier than the sword finds home in the form of literary analyses like the one attempted in this paper. This remark is particularly insightful in the wake of the Arab spring uprisings that have rocked North Africa, the Kenyan post-election violence and the incessant wars in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Sudan, to mention but a few. The present analysis can be understood to be falling into the realm of progressive literature, which is a way of interrogating life and its attendant contradictions in a hopeful manner. This form of literary analysis is ultimately valorising peaceful and peace-oriented coping mechanisms, though at the same time without silencing activism, as these short stories demonstrate.

In the words of a renowned critic of Zimbabwean and African literature, Ngara (n.d), creativity and responsibility are Siamese twins in art. Taking the thread of argument from Ngara, therefore, the submission being made here is also that in the literature explored in this paper, what we see is a commitment by the writers to boldly and critically examine the political ground in troubled Zimbabwe and to do so with plausibility, passion and responsibility. The underlying principle is couched on how people devise mechanisms to survive, which can be summed up by the popular expression of the day *tofira mutrial*. This is a popular colloquialism which, when literally translated, means "we will die trying". This has become the *de facto modus operandi* and in this paper the central concern is on how the people cope with and survive the political onslaught they face.

In other words the major concern in this paper is on protest literature and its relevance in times of political crisis as the Zimbabwean one in question, inviting the reader to experience moments of recognition, revelation, protest and rebellion alongside the characters, and thereby participate in that rebellion through the act of reading.

To fully explore and appreciate what these short stories are communicating in the context of the political survival and coping mechanisms of the ordinary people, there is a need to briefly explain what chronotope means. The chronotope emphasises the interpretation of texts as determined, shaped and informed by the



time and space interplay in the story. The guiding principle in this paper is a Zimbabwean setting of political upheaval which can also be described as a dystopian chronotope. A literary representation of a dystopian chronotope therefore in this paper is captured here and this is corroborated by a concept that will be termed dystopian hope.

To clarify and justify these two concepts (dystopian chronotope and dystopian hope) in relation to this paper, first there is a need to capture the basic tenets of what dystopia in fiction means. A form of negative utopia, dystopia is characterised by a community or society that is in some way undesirable or frightening; where dehumanisation, totalitarian governments, poverty, political repression, societal collapse are evident, and where humanity suffers from a lack of true freedom and liberty (Baccolini, 2008). Dystopian hope means a positive interpretation of the representation of nightmarish societies, hegemonic and totalitarian governments, in a hopeful manner (Baccolini, 2008). It is a recognition that in the midst of these terrible fictions is a powerful message that an enlightened populace would best not leave unheard. Again, in the words of the social critic, Baccolini (2008, p.1), how utopian hope works in literature is critical and must be appreciated:

One might say that the novels promise doom and gloom, the perpetuation of a downward slope for humanity, and ultimate bondage rather than final liberty. But the true message of these classics is quite the opposite. By giving a warning, by exposing the dangers hidden in the world, dystopian works implicitly promise that mankind can avert this fate and work toward a brighter destiny. The very act of sounding the alarm presupposes that a rescue can be made.

That is the hope and also the coping mechanisms this paper looks at, the idea that if society would look at itself, honestly and realistically, it could fix the problems it has and survive the crises it meets incessantly. Having laid the ground for this specific paper and having illustrated the desirability of such fiction, now an analysis of the short stories is presented.

#### **Surviving hegemonies: fiction, the feminization of political survival and the resilience of activism**

The short story "At the sound of the last post" from Gappah's award winning anthology *An elegy of easterly*, offers a solid, intimate, yet complex and engaging critique on politics and the cunningly non-violent survival instinct of the weak. This version of political survival is presented through the form of the narrator – a woman who has been exploited, abused, chided and finally widowed. The woman is of foreign descent, having married her late Zimbabwean husband during exile. As they are both bound by love, they have the same political vision and a sense of hope for the future. The only glimpse into her origins is encapsulated in the statement, "I forgot about the fight against apartheid in my own country as his battle seemed more urgent" (Tagwira, 2009, p. 9). What that could possibly point to is that either the person is from South Africa or possibly Namibia if one considers the history of apartheid in these two countries. They get married, leave exile for independent Zimbabwe where the wife realises that her husband was formerly married and the first wife is unceremoniously divorced, and because of the traditional custom of being offered *gupuro* (formal token of divorce through a pittance of possession given to the wife) she peacefully packs off, leaving her children with the husband.

However, what the story succinctly captures is a scene at the husband's death and the concern with political survival during the years 1999 to 2009. The narrative adopts a banal, graphic and no-holds barred depiction of "the President" speaking at a funeral. The author's blunt, yet lyrical and poignantly truthful narration of the scene before the funeral is captivating, though it has also raised rancour and controversy in some who view the story as anti-patriotic and a vilification of President Robert Mugabe. The position taken here is based on the fact that the writer, Petinah Gappah, has shown a courageous artistic commitment and responsibility to reality as she perceives it. To bring about the core issues in this paper, the analysis here agrees with and leans towards Marima's 2009 commentary in his article "Silencing



silence and resisting repression”, which posits that stereotypically reading the story as simply about the patriotism and anti-patriotism rhetoric is not enough. According to Marima (2009, p.3):

This would be a gross misreading of the novel and the middle-ground needs to be drawn between these two camps. A sensible, impartial reading of this novel is necessary; all agendas aside and an appreciation of the fictional struggles faced and overcome, assessing the varying ways in which they mirror real life in present-day Zimbabwe.

What is important, therefore, is to analyse how this story affords the reader a futuristic gaze, calling one to extract the wisdom therein and think deeply about what the writing is communicating in veiled literary terms.

The first and most important point to take note of is that the story discusses physical survival. The story is alive and available to us because of the fact that the narrator has defied death, remained alive to see a better tomorrow, and that she can even plan and talk about that tomorrow to the rest of the world. The setting of the story is at the national Heroes’ Acre where the “... Orator at the Funerals of Dead Heroes” (Gappah, 2009, p. 3) gives his graveside speeches. What is much more important to the reader’s keen eye is that “Close to him in the widow’s place of honour, I am aware of his every movement. I watch him without moving my eyes” (Gappah, 2009, p. 3). The didacticism that is replete with subtleties and innuendos in this statement is a mark of artistic mastery in the writer. Reading between the lines, given the mood of the story, one can see a special emphasis on the phrase “widow’s place of honour”. Despite all the odds, as the saying goes, every dog has its day; so this present day marks the narrator’s day of glory. The badge of widowhood and the label of being the bereaved here becomes a paradoxical triumph. It becomes a blessing in disguise to be a widow and the fact that she is holding a place of honour is not the author’s understatement. Her position affords her the ability to “watch” (the president) and in this particular diction one can sense some form of biblical allusion, as Jesus talks to his disciples repeatedly about being watchful. The narrator does not allow bereavement and widowhood to condemn her to vulnerability, metaphorical blindness and pittance, but like an eagle she becomes alert and watchful so as to survive beyond the funeral. Digging deep into Shona wisdom there is a saying that *nherera inoguta musu wafa amai vayo*, which literally means that an orphan eats to the full the day the mother dies. The narrator is keenly aware of this and takes this wisdom to extend the day of the death to her life ever after. In other words, unlike the orphan referred to in the proverb, she purposefully makes it her resolution that her days are full of contentment from the present day onwards and not pride in momentary bliss.

In addition, the aspect of the narrator, the bereaved woman in the story “watching” the President can further be interrogated so that its meaning can come out clearly. In his paper, “Mugabe’s graveside orations: Collective memory and nostalgia”, Kangira (2010, p. 27), argues:

... that Mugabe cunningly exploited the rhetorical situation existing at that moment in such a manner that made the audience experience and understand his speeches the way he wanted them to do, that is, to sympathise with his political party ahead of the March 2002 presidential elections”.

Kangira further analyses the rhetorical strategies Mugabe uses to woo the people to his side and how he uses “funeral diplomacy” to win the hearts of the electorate. However, in as much as Kangira has made that keen observation, the protagonist in this story has also made a realisation and refuses to be a bystander. That is why she is ‘watching’ the president in a calculated manner aimed at enabling her to manoeuvre tactfully.

Furthermore, another important point to be noted here is how exactly she managed to survive and cope with what many heroes and mighty men have succumbed to. In a tone that is rather above sadistic overtones, the narrative voice lampoons how “They are all culled, all of them, age and Aids will do its



work even among the most gallant of heroes” (Gappah, 2008, p. 6). Compounding the socio-economic and political crisis is the scourge of HIV/AIDS and the question is, how does one survive, given the extramarital escapades of the spouse? In this instance, Gappah gives this challenge a political dimension. Political in the sense that the challenge is not presented as a challenge of the poor only but one that takes no boundaries. The powerful, prominent and “fathers” of the nation are the topics of discussion. What we see in the narrator is one of the most crucial avenues of fighting by those who are physically, politically and culturally weak but know the value of their sexuality in a modern context. This is enshrined in the statement that “He died, leaving me relieved that it had been years since I was wife to him in any but the social sense” (Gappah, 2009, p. 18). Taking note of the philandering characteristics of the husband, the protagonist purposes to take charge of their conjugal intimations. Thereby she survives and can afford to deride the late husband and others that:

Like the worthless dogs that are his countrymen, my husband believed that his penis was wasted if he was faithful to just one woman. He plunged himself into every bitch in heat, even that slut of a newsreader, the ruling party’s First Whore, who lends the services of her vacuous beauty to their nightly distortions (Gappah, 2009, p. 12).

Setting the possible stereotyping in the above statement as well as the uncritical understatement aside, the point made in the above quotation is clear. Other than rising above the economic, political and social crisis, it is first and foremost important to survive physically, that is health-wise; and the narrator here is yet another survivor whose life story touches more than the head but the heart also. This is a further indication of the value of fiction, in that it connects the reader to the lived experiences of the people. Gappah, as a modern writer, does more than merely reflect and catalogue the despair and deeply entrenched ennui characterising crisis-hit Zimbabwe but takes on a critical perspective on this situation, thereby revealing positive possibilities beyond it – which is a mark of the dystopian hope under discussion in this paper.

In addition, another critical point to make is that in order to survive one has to adopt a never-give-up spirit, stick to one’s principles and, as in classical African American wisdom, to begin to bloom where one is planted. In another study of survival strategies in crisis-hit Zimbabwe, Mlambo (2013) made the conclusion that a person is not like a tree but is capable of moving from one place to the other if survival is threatened at the present place of dwelling. That is yet another variant of the multiple modes of survival and the one being emphasised here is that of taking root and anchorage at a particular place so that one can cope with life’s challenges. The adage that a rolling stone gathers no moss finds meaning in this story as we see how the narrator, a “foreigner” and just a “woman” is chided and ridiculed to such an extent that at one time she threatened to leave and go back to her own country. Later on, sticking to her guns, she decides to make the best out of her circumstances. When she threatens to leave and go back to her country of origin, this is what her sister-in-law, Edna, says of her:

*Ngazviende* (let it go), she said, and good riddance. Real women were divorced to make place for a *mhanje* such as this one. Thus my introduction to the word *mhanje*; their word for the lowest form of woman, womanhood without womanliness, *mhanje* being a barren woman, a woman without issue, unproductive, a fruitless husk (Gappah, 2009, p. 9).

At this point it is important to recap and refocus this analysis. This story is set in the chronotope of a national crisis and the challenges that the people face are dire. However, what is noteworthy and quite critical to note here is that over and above the socio-economic and political crisis which is faced by the generality of people, there is another incessant crisis along gender lines. This is the double burden of womanhood in a cultural setup that is patriarchal and whose social constructs and perceptions are discriminatory, biased and severely diminutive of the woman. The narrator therefore has to fight and triumph the crisis of the 1999 to 2009 in its generality and yet still fight more battles like the one in the



quotation above (see Mlambo, 2010 on the double burden which women face and survive, compared to their male counterparts).

In order to cope, the narrator adopts a leaving and cleaving attitude towards marriage. She adapts, instead of running away from the challenges. The cliché, winners never quit and quitters never win, also finds a reinvigoration and relevance in this instance and it is indeed another survival strategy. One of her first tools for survival is a linguistic one whereby she learns the language of her adopted country including the subtlety of intonations such that "... in the end I did not need him, as he had done at first, to explain words to me" (Gappah, 2009, p. 11). The narrator lingers on, perseveres, and even when deserted by the husband, she still carries the day as evidenced by her pitying Edna, the cantankerous and rancorous aunt that "... she really should start investing more money in shoes; her unshaped peasant's feet require something stronger than cheap *zhing-zhong* plastic leather shoes to contain them" (Gappah, 2009, p. 9). This is a mockery of the substandard shoes of Chinese origin which are mainly worn by the poor and some non-resilient characters. The critical point here is that the narrator can stand on such a privileged position because she never gave up. So now even when the economic and political crisis claws have a vice-like grip on many people, as an independent woman who has persevered, she is much better off than her former detractor, Edna.

Another critical point that is noteworthy in this story is that of gaining a voice in a politically volatile and plagued society. The narrator survives the stifling silences of the day by criticising the society she lives in and protesting against the perceived injustices and social ills of the day which rightly or wrongly are categorised as life under Robert Mugabe. The narrator's voice is protest in tone and content, offering constructive and corrective criticism. In other words, this manner of reading the story moves from what the people do to survive, but veers more towards what the writer and the people as well hope for. The writer captures the vision of the people and what they aspire towards and also exposes the hopes and impediments faced, which are a contemporary reality. The act of writing in itself becomes a therapeutic measure and by the mere fact of writing, Gappah assumes a position of authority, a voice of the voiceless and also an assumption that a woman's voice can and must be heard. Through authorial intrusion, Gappah's voice is both advising and chastising in one breath. Her rod of chastisement paves a way for a better Zimbabwe as she feminises the political landscape. Through presenting a protagonist who is a woman in a male dominated political landscape, Gappah further demonstrates that for a people and country to develop, there are some vices which the people need to do away with. The personal aggrandisement of office bearers in African political circles and political patronage is shown as one of the greatest impediments to the survival of African countries. This is coupled by the donor syndrome which the narrator lampoons. To demonstrate the facade and hypocrisy of some charity work she draws the reader's attention to how the first lady once remarked, "If only I could", she said to the nation's orphans, "I would really, really adopt you all" (Gappah, 2009, p. 17).

The point in this analysis is that, as a form of expressing dystopic hope, protest literature is the writer and the reader's coping mechanism against perceived hegemony. The writer ridicules and derides the various disorders in the society in order to evoke feelings of contempt, moral indignation and scorn so that ultimately human vices and folly can be corrected. To further attest to this, the narrator at the Heroes' Acre recalls how, "It is known that one of the heroes we buried recently was not the fine upstanding family man of the presidential speech but a concupiscent septuagenarian who died from a Viagra-induced heart attack whilst inside [having sex] with an underage girl" (Gappah, 2009, p. 24). What the narrator hints at is the limit of pragmatic morality, showing that such coping mechanisms have limits. This is exemplified in the possible horror and psychological torment this underage girl possibly may have, all in the name of surviving the crisis. In other words, the writer here becomes society's moral compass, directing the society towards moral supremacy in spite of all the odds.

In addition, perhaps the most outstanding survival tactic in this short story is through the narrator's regaining of her voice and adopting a trickster method for political and economic ascendancy. This is



done through non-violent means of attaining one's goals through calculated, well thought-out and well executed coping tactics. When the husband dies, the one who is politically connected and a powerful man, the narrator does not see her own demise as well but rather an opportunity to be seized and used to catapult her to greater heights. In the midst of adversity she sees an opportunity for survival and regains her long lost voice. For the narrator, the ruling party has to gain political mileage through her husband's death since her "... husband was from the restive tribe in the south that sleeps and feeds and knows not the President" (Gappah, 2009, p. 22). Therefore, to survive the political crisis, the ruling party has to use the narrator's husband's death to their advantage in the name of altruism and patriotism. "Think of how good it will be for his region" (Gappah, 2009, p. 22) they say, meaning if the late politician is buried at the Heroes Acre then that would mean a satisfactory representation of the poverty stricken region – a typical opportunism which others use in order to survive politically and reap the economic benefits thereafter.

However, the author positively brings about the fact that to survive in a dystopian situation, one has to schematically and courageously use one's voice as the narrator does. Her voice of defiance and protest is made clear as she thinks to herself, "They did not tell me, his widow, of this decision and I had to hear of it from his whore on the evening news" (Gappah, 2009, p. 20). This is when the animal trickster mode of survival comes into play. The animal trickster is replete in African tradition and folktales. It expresses the invincibility of the weak in the midst of major crises or hegemonic dispensations. In African folktales this takes the form of a weak and despised animal that eventually tackles a challenge. Some of these archetypes include the tortoise, chameleon, an ant and other small and weak animals. These folktales were used to bolster the story teller and the audience's confidence in their ability to survive and eventually to overcome the inhumanities and challenges they face, no matter what magnitude these difficulties can be. The wisdom enshrined in the animal trickster folktales include the principle in the Shona proverb which says that, *matanda makuru mazungunuswa*; which literally means that it's worth the effort to try and shake huge logs, because you can meet one whose roots have been eaten by termites and at your fickle push the tree will fall and you get all the firewood. This is what the narrator does, she does not succumb but dares rise to the challenge, a coping strategy which even Biblical literature in the gospels preaches when it talks of knocking and it shall be opened for you, as well as seeking and it shall be found.

The narrator tricks her way into political power, economic emancipation and the regaining of her voice to also become a voice of the voiceless. She refuses to allow the death of her husband to be her end but in the midst of catastrophe she sees opportunity aplenty. She does this by simply refusing to have her husband buried at the heroes' acre – in other words even at a time of bereavement she doesn't throw away her brains. Instead she resiliently thinks of an overture:

And in that realisation, I saw my future. I have no home in my own country to go to; everything that I have invested in is here. I could choose to be an official widow to be trotted out at every commemoration of the heroes. Or I could choose my own path (Gappah, 2009, p. 23).

Such is her plight and she has to find means and ways of surviving as well as make life worth living. She cunningly uses her wit and refuses to budge, threatening the emissaries sent to her with *ngozi* (deadly avenging spirit of a wronged dead person) and also going to the private press to expose political secrets which are purportedly damaging to the ruling party. She pools all the resources around her, real or imagined to survive; under such circumstances the lesson the readers learn is that at times it is not the survival of the fittest but of the wisest. Mental agility can indeed triumph over physical prowess.

Realising the opportunity before her, she makes her position clear, "I want my husband's farm", I said, "and I want it registered in title deeds in my name. I also want an uncontested seat in the new Senate" (Gappah, 2009, p. 23). Here we have the coping strategies of a survivor supreme. A woman of foreign descent, who is widowed, is without a job, has no investment in her country of origin, and also has no children of her own to possibly assist her to sail through as well as even offer her some form of comfort – but ultimately she is a survivor and victor. She is possibly not included in the late husband's will if ever



there was one and living in a country undergoing a horrifying political and economic crisis is no easy at all; but she is a survivor indeed. She is resilient, schematic and unyielding. The uncontested seat affords her an opportunity to make a difference, to make her voice heard and be a voice of the voiceless, thereby contributing to national development instead of being on the periphery of national developmental issues. Emphasis is also on the point that this senatorial seat has to be uncontested, to make it certain that really she gets the senatorial seat without any doubt. Furthermore, the fact that the senatorial seat is in the new senate implies that she has approximately five years to prove her worth. In addition, getting a farm with title deeds in her own name assures her a home for sure. The story becomes representative of survival tactics not only for marginalised women but also citizens by marriage; a minority whose voices are seldom represented in literature and social science research.

Critical to note is exactly how the heroine manages to creatively craft a coping strategy which makes her carry the day. The narrator, as a paragon of survival, pulls off a grand plan by using the trickster method; beating the powers that be in their own game of political survival. The authorities survive political demise through singing praises to fallen heroes like the narrator's husband, especially if the death happens to fall in the strategic month of August when heroes' celebrations are held. So inasmuch as the death of her husband is political mileage for the regime, she decides to make the cause worth her personal gains as well. This is how the author explicitly puts across this survival master plan:

So the bargain was sealed: for a seat in the new Senate, and a farm in my own name, I would close my mouth and let them bury wood and earth in his name. They jumped at this; how could they not, when my husband had died early in August, that they could have a real funeral in the month that they commemorate men of the ruling party who have died still in agreement with the President. And so the spokesperson arranged everything, the coffin, the service, the switch after the lying in state at Stoddard Hall (Gappah, 2009, p. 22).

Desperate moments call for desperate measures indeed as the above illustrates. During tempestuous moments it does not help to be whining and grumbling, whilst looking for someone to come and help you to overcome the crisis situation. Instead, there is a need to rise to the occasion as the narrator does, and use pragmatic morality, wit and courage to survive. As the saying goes, only dead fish flow with the current; the narrator decides to swim in an oppositional direction and rise up when vexed by threatening circumstances. Writing in almost similar dystopian contexts of apartheid, the renowned author, Athol Fugard in his celebrated play *Sizwe bansi is dead* demonstrates the same principle. Gappah here further suggests and corroborates that to cope and also survive; one has to cheat the system. Buntu in Fugard's play says to Robert Zwelinzima, "All I am saying is be a real ghost, if that is what they want, what they have turned us into. Spook them into hell man!" (Fugard, 2000, p. 185). In the same manner, Gappah's narrator also spooks the system into hell and this is a version of the Shona colloquialism of the day called *kukorokoza*; which literally means gold panning but now means scavenging around in order to make a fortune in spite of all the mishaps.

Ultimately, what stands out in the short story "At the sound of the last post" is the fact that politically the Zimbabwean crisis as presented in such imaginative narratives is dystopian in nature. Yet still such stories as the above are rhetorically effective in that they are hopeful. The story has demonstrated that escape is possible and the very act of writing is therapeutic as well as demonstrative of the human capacity to resist, resiliently imagine a way out of the *den of lions* and also politically manoeuvre one's way into survival mode. Despite her numerous problems which are compounded by her position as a woman, the narrator remakes the world around her, defines her own destination and her life becomes a testament of how impossibilities can be made possible.

A further testament of how the Zimbabwean short story represents survival and coping mechanisms during times of crisis is found in Mlalazi's short story "They are coming" (2011). What is outstanding in the story is the author's representation of the coping strategies and his provocative imagination of how



change can be made more visible. Known for his protest fiction, Mlalazi writes to purposefully commit to the truth by pointing out and promoting the possibilities of positive changes and suggesting practical survival mechanisms out of the political malaise the people find themselves in. The story "They are coming" is about how Mr Nkani, a local school teacher intends to be voted into power in the following elections. Because of the fact that he belongs to the opposition party many people intend to vote for him. However, the state machinery – the police, who are nicknamed "green bombers", cannot have any of it. So when the story begins, the police are chasing him but the omniscient narration quickly shifts to an ordinary township family which gets engulfed into the scuffle involving the police and the township dwellers. This scuffle includes a ten year old boy, Lungisani, his mother and father and Lungisani's brother whom we only hear about but never meet. So when Mr Nkani is chased by the police, he runs past their house and a few minutes later he comes back with a group of people, now chasing after the police who are now running back in defeat.

The first coping mechanism that can be raised here pertains to protest that comes out through metaphorical terms. This is presented through the names which are given to the characters in the story. First, the township street also becomes a character whose name carries a lot of meaning. When the young boy, Lungisani, gets out of his parents' house, the panoramic view meeting his eyes is that of Khumbulani street. This is an important street name which speaks volumes within the political context of Zimbabwe as it is situated in the Matabeleland town of Bulawayo, the second capital of Zimbabwe. Literally translated, *khumbulani*, means "remember" or "recall". This is a clarion call to the citizenry of Bulawayo to remember how their past has been – and one of the political events that the people of the town can easily remember is that of *Gukurahundi*. This [*gukurahundi*] is an historical massacre which took place shortly after the independence of Zimbabwe and resulted in thousands of civilians being brutally killed. Therefore the reason why it should make sense in this instance is because on one level of interpretation the author is advising that for people to cope with the present crisis they need to remember such historical pains and thus be able to map the way forward.

Similarly, the name *nkani* means to be unwavering, being stubborn and tenaciously soldiering on. As a way to survive this crisis in question, the writer is calling for such resilience and tenacity as we see in the bearer of this name, Mr Nkani. He is resolute, unmoved and strong headed, and this is in spite of how the state machinery is all bent on squashing the likes of him. However, the point that comes through him is that when times of political crisis like this come and when dealing with dystopian and hegemonic regimes, one has to be firm, courageous and resilient so that the whole nation can survive through that person. Furthermore, the name of the small boy who joins in chasing away the police is *Lungisani*, which means, "make right that which has been made wrong" or "correct and make things better". It is therefore not a coincidence that we have such names in a story that is about a crisis of such a magnitude as the one considered in this study. It is a symbolic name which emphasises the people's desire for survival and making their lives better and therefore it is a call to the authorities to do something for the people. This is sharply contrasted with the derogatory name given to the police officers – Green-bombers. This is an allusion to the very big houseflies which are green in colour and which quickly lay white eggs whenever they land on food. The idea created by the author through using such a name is to create a nauseating feeling and revulsion towards the state machinery used to silence people. Ultimately the point made here is that if the previous section and chapter concentrated on showing how people cope with a crisis like the one in question, in this short story the analysis is extended to show how the authors of commitment like Mlalazi also grapple with that question and make their voices heard. It is not enough to discuss how the characters themselves interrogate the situation around them but to also interrogate how the writers themselves grapple with the concerns of the day.

Mlalazi also imaginatively forecasts the possibility of coping with the difficult times of the day through political involvement. In the previously analysed short story ("At the sound of the last post"), Gappah's main character resolutely decides to join the political senate so that she can bring about positive change



which can enable people to survive and cope with the challenges they are facing. Mlalazi also brings about the issue of political involvement. Instead of wallowing in apathy and having a *laissez faire* attitude as objects of history, the way to cope with troubled times is through taking up a position in the future government and make a positive difference. The story tells of how, "Mr Nkani's face is plastered on posters all around the township, posters that are tied to trees, to electricity and telephone poles, and stuck on the walls at the shopping centre where his father works. People say he belongs to the opposition, and that they will vote for him in the elections next week" (Mlalazi, 2011, p. 103). This statement is illustrative of the author's vision of survival when the political situation seems unfavourable. This can be done through the democratic means of taking part in elections so that the people's voices can be heard and ultimately bring about means of escaping the crisis that is gripping the whole nation. In addition, in this vision of coping with a political crisis, the author adds another very important dimension when it comes to the person who takes political office. Not only is Mr Nkani a stubborn, strong willed and determined man, as his name implies, but he is the Grade 7A teacher at Lungisani's school. The fact that he is a school teacher also adds another dimension to the author's vision of survival mechanisms – he is not just an ignorant political opportunist but an educated person with some sense of enlightenment. This implies that being a respected member of the community and fairly educated, Mr Nkani has the potential to lead the people, represent them in government and courageously transform the political terrain - which is a true mark of democratic processes desirable in 21<sup>st</sup> century Africa.

Moreover, the story also insightfully and with measured wisdom represents some ways to cope with political repression – through resistance. When Mr Nkani is chased after by the "Green Bombers", the picture painted is that of a dystopian society indeed and Mr Nkani is momentarily presented as an insignificant individual who cannot dare challenge the hegemonic regime with its mighty state apparatus like the unflinchingly ruthless police force. However, the author refuses to cultivate such a pessimistic, cynical and helpless situation. Instead the story is indeed one of dystopian hope as we see how the proverbial Goliath is now retreating as the masses charge after them – this is a possibility the author touts loud and clear. In order to survive, the people need to face their situations head on and take charge of their lives instead of timidly being bystanders as the story suggests. This we see as:

The group is comprised of a mixture of men, women and children, and tagging behind, is the township stray, Ginger, normally a timid dog, but now barking and chasing with the others. Mr Nkani, still in his torn and blood-stained shirt leads the group, snatching up stones from the ground and throwing them in the direction of the Green Bombers, as if he is lobbing grenades (Mlalazi, 2011, p. 105).

Two points need to be emphasised here. First is that this group has a leader who is Mr Nkani and the group, with an advantage of numbers, is all inclusive as it has the men, women and children of the township, hence it is fully representative. The "Fanonian" wretched of the earth take up a speaking position to challenge the status quo. Second is the interesting observation by the author that even the stray dogs like Ginger have also joined in the protest and fight for justice. Despite the fact that Ginger is normally known for being timid, the situation (crisis) has grown into such proportions that timidity and apathy can no longer be accommodated. Hearing of how the Green Bombers were defeated by the people, the representative voice of Lungisani's mother rejoices, "They were defeated then. Good. There is exultation in MaNdlovu" (Mlalazi, 2011, p.107). Even the ten year old Lungisani cannot be an onlooker forever. His proverbial childhood innocence is cast aside as; "Lungisani joins the chase. Even though he is small, he overtakes some of the crowd" (Mlalazi, 2011, p. 105).

Furthermore, it also needs to be underlined that Mlalazi does not blindly preach tactless confrontation as the best way to cope with a political crisis. He presents this survival tactic with a lot of wisdom, guarding against rubble rousing and senselessness. The author therefore shows the possibilities the masses have to change their lives but warns against war. According to this story, as a country which gained independence through bloodshed, the Zimbabweans are keenly aware of the destructive nature of war, especially in the



present day which is now different from the days when they were fighting for independence. Some form of authorial intrusion is discernable when Ngwenya, Lungisani's father, regrettably observes that, "Because then we had a common enemy, the white regime. Now it is our government versus the people, the war has changed complexion. What about our children" (Mlalazi, 2011, p. 107). The implication being that the survival tactic of confrontation to the point of civil war is not the best according to the story. This is further clarified by the fact that Ngwenya's own son, who is Lungisani's brother, is now on the side of the government, as one of the Green-Bombers. Lungisani swears that he saw his brother, Persuade, amongst the Green-Bombers and the parents cannot stomach it. Persuade is their own son and now the prospect is that their two sons are engaging in a war in which they support different sides, fighting against each other. This is the wisdom enshrined in this short story and through the concluding paragraphs; we can discern the value of artistic responsibility as the author refuses to commit the reader to a desire for war as a coping mechanism. Coping with hegemonic crises can take many forms including confrontation, as we see in this story, and the masses do have what it takes, but fatalistic survival tactics which end up in pyrrhic victories is not what the responsible writer wants to propagate. As the saying goes, a fly that has no one to advise follows the corpse into the grave, therefore, the author seeks to advise against any confrontational survival mechanism as the best way out. Physically confronting the regime can easily result in another Egypt, Iraq or Syria, and such coping mechanisms are quite retrogressive and undesirable, the story seems to suggest.

In addition to the above, Mary Ndlovu's short story "Hands" (2006) brings other interesting dimensions of how the survival and coping mechanisms during a political crisis are represented through fiction. Set again in the second capital of Zimbabwe, Bulawayo, the story is about the way the urbanites try to solve the challenges they face during the crisis. It is a story about the discord between father and son who occupy opposing viewpoints when it comes to the challenges facing the country and the proposed ways of solving these challenges. The emphasis in the story "Hands", just like in *They are coming*, is that the way out of the situation is to do something about it rather than simply complain with folded hands - taking action is the way out. Bongani, who is the son to Ndlovu retorts to his father's disapproving interrogations and says that; "No, Baba, it's not like that. We are trying to solve our problems; it's not easy" (Ndlovu, 2006, p. 37). In other words this is yet another reiteration of the colloquial *tofira mutrial* (we die trying) which has been popularised during the period of the crisis. Instead of waiting for a messiah, outside help or handouts, the urbanites like Bongani act; they have to resiliently make meaning for themselves, explore alternatives and find a possible way out. Therefore, one way of surviving is through protesting against the status quo (regime) which is perceived to be the sole cause of much of the problems. This comes out when Bongani argues with the mother and says:

Can't you see, that's exactly what I am fighting? Things are all wrong. Your generation messed everything up – no food, no jobs, no rights to anything. We have to fix it. Who is going to fix it if we don't? We can't even imagine having families and homes; those are for the big thieves who want to be called chefs. Do you want all of us to run away to South Africa to live in the streets there, or do you want some of us to do something? (Ndlovu, 2006, p. 3).

The golden statement which colours this whole study therefore is in one doing something, taking charge and arising to make sure that in the midst of the crisis one can salvage something and be a survivor. Survival at national and political level is presented as something which needs to come through the young generation as we see through Mlalazi's presentation of Lungisani and now also through Ndlovu's Bongani. Arrests and persecution come Bongani's way, just like Mr Nkani's beatings and torment by the state apparatus, but with resilience and fortitude there is a possible future for the nation.

However, what needs to be further explored is the fact that the political, economic and social crisis gripping the urbanites is at a macro level, but at a micro level and mostly importantly as occasioned by the national crisis is also a family crisis. In "They are coming" by Mlalazi, we already saw a family crisis as the son Persuade has become one of the Green Bombers who is fighting against his own family. In the



present short story ("Hands"), the fight is directly between the son and father but the positive voice that is celebrated is the voice of wisdom coming through the pacifier, Bongani's mother. The chasm between the father and son is quite disturbing but the mother has a way out as she advises:

No, Ndlovu, that's not the way. This is a time of understanding, not for temper and violence. Surely it's a time to reflect and consider what has gone wrong here. The boy is the same as you: headstrong but brave. We need to find out what he is doing and why. My guess is that you will find he has not strayed as far as you think (Ndlovu, 2006, p. 39).

Here we see the role that women can and do play in the quest to solve a national and family crisis - they are a voice of reason which prefers reconciliation, engagement, dialogue and progressive effort over violence. Bongani's mother advises her son, Bongani to go and apologise to the father for the sake of progress and family unity; "Just apologise and then do whatever you think you have to do" (Ndlovu, 2006, p. 41). Whilst at the same time she is admonishing her husband to try and understand the changing times and not live in denial of the fact that things are bad and the young have to do what they think is the best, just like he (the father, Ndlovu) previously had to go into exile and come back as a freedom fighter for independence. Finally, the husband also concedes that the time for the gun is now past; shedding blood so as to solve a crisis like this is not an option to consider at all. "All he knew was that his wife spoke the truth", (Ndlovu, 2006, p. 41). Therefore, the value of the short story is further amplified here as one of the innovative ways to prevent violence. Such reconciliation and reconstruction mechanisms are highly welcome in the highly volatile and polarised world we live in today, characterised by religious extremism, terrorism, xenophobia, civil unrest and the threat of weapons of mass destruction, covert and overt political domination, to mention but a few. Peace-oriented mechanisms are therefore not solely found in the highly politicised *indabas* of international organs but are also found in simple stories like these ones. With peaceful conflict resolutions starting at family level like this, positive avenues are created for national and international harmony as they are already imaginatively presented in this short story. To attest to this, in practical terms, it is such peace-oriented mechanisms which prevented Zimbabwe from total collapse in the year 2009 when there was a formation of a government of national unity between archrivals Robert Mugabe and Morgan Tsvangirai.

The argument above can therefore be summarised with the idea that protest fiction opens locked doors and does not condemn the reader to futility and disgruntlement but moves the reader to a higher level of consciousness. It is not simply an "unbeliever's journey" or "a dry season" which results in a "house of hunger", "nervous condition" and "a harvest of thorns"; to string together some fictional titles in Zimbabwean literature. Instead of simply "waiting for the rain", the people resolve to act, they go to fetch water, metaphorically dig deeper wells and aim at surviving against all the odds as the three stories so far analysed in this chapter have demonstrated. To echo the late Chinua Achebe, there will always be some "anthills of the savannah" which can survive the horrendous bush fires of the hot summer time and this is the wisdom enshrined in this fiction - resiliently surviving against all the odds.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, therefore, the aim of this paper has been to demonstrate the literary representation of political survival and how the ordinary people resist repression, and also about the resilience of hope. The paper's main concern has been to show how the writers imagine possible coping strategies which are peaceful, non-violent and futuristic. The short stories analysed have represented the Zimbabwean crisis under discussion as a form of dystopia; with authoritarianism, the dehumanization of the ordinary people and the oppression of the weak. However, the ultimate idea that carries the day is that this is a form of dystopian hope; beyond the gloom, the outrageous and the horrific is a world full of possibilities and it is this potential that needs to be celebrated. The short stories analysed here are hopeful and suggestive; the act of protesting and sounding the alarm is an act of didacticism, directing the reader towards the realisation that survival is ubiquitous and a possibility, thereby spurring the reader onwards.



In the story "At the sound of the last post" by Gappah, the heroine defies all the odds and ends up being the last woman standing. She outwits the political authorities, regains her voice and ends up with a farm delivered to her on a silver platter and a senatorial seat is awaiting her without her having slaved in campaigns and voting processes. Whilst in Ndlovu's short story, "Hands" the value of protest literature is valorised. The story admonishes that in order to survive the political crisis; the ordinary people have to protest, take control of their destiny and courageously challenge the system. The woman's voice is given more prominence in the story as a voice of wisdom, which pacifies the father and son and also calls for reconciliation. The short story "They are coming" further emphasises the value of political engagement and physical resistance to harassment as a coping strategy. Through Mr Nkani, the story advises that apathy will not help the situation but capable people must get into government so that they can bring about positive change. The story further illustrates the power which the masses have to drive away the state apparatus like the "Green-Bombers", whilst at the same time cautioning against civil war since it pits brother against brother hence it is not the best survival mechanism the country needs to utilise.

In conclusion therefore, through this paper it can be concluded that fiction can foster innovation and change which is peaceful and non-violent. The short stories analysed here are vehicles of emancipation which bring about hope, growth and an awakening as well sensitisation to the fact that despite the dystopian nature of the crisis there are always coping mechanisms and survival strategies. Through protest, admonishing and ridiculing in some instances, the reader is possibly left with optimism, courage and energy to face challenges in life.

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