

Urban Lives and the Complexities of Change: Cultural Transformation for Survival in Contemporary Zimbabwean Fiction

N. Mlambo, Polytechnic of Namibia

Abstract

This paper explores the literary representation of the complex, heterogeneous and constantly shifting socio-cultural dynamics of Zimbabwean city-making and human survival today. Its raison d'être is premised on the desire to explicate through nuanced paradigms, a study of African culture using three short stories by Shimmer Chinodya's "Last Laugh", Erasmus Chinyani's "A Land of Starving Millionaires" and Julius Chingono's "Minister without Portfolio". Attention is focused on perspectives on urbanity and how creative cultural expressions (fiction) offer critical discourse on human survival during periods of tempestuous changes. The result is an emphasis on African city-making through fluid and rapidly changing cultural structures and the ability of the urbanites to adjust, negotiate and innovate. Critical is a literary analysis of their espousal and reformulation of the political, moral and socio-economic terrain thereby fostering a distinct culture of "city dwellership". As a result this multiplex perspective of the city rests on a non-essentialist conception of urbanity and the short stories demonstrate the artistic expressions of how the people have not only found effective ways of pursuing their livelihoods but also how to interpret and reformulate these pronouncements in harsh and tyrannical contexts.

Introduction

The so called Zimbabwean crisis, which resulted in world inflation records, a protracted political impasse and economic meltdown, overshadowed many forms of economic, social and political productivity. Yet the cultural sphere was one area that indeed flourished, and of these various areas, the literary one stands as exceptional. This was a moment of re-membering, of narrating and recording lives in tempestuous and trying times. In the midst of this literary flourish what stands out is how particularly the ordinary urban dwellers managed to daily construct themselves and their lives – not only to survive the crisis that pervaded so many facets of their lives, but to go beyond it. The urban dwellers therefore

can be seen as agents of change and survival and the city as a complex site for this metamorphosis, for better or worse. What is of interest in this paper is an endeavour to give multiplex perspective of the city which rests on a non-essentialist conception of urbanity that challenges Afro-pessimisms that hitherto had characterised descriptions of modern life.

I read the short stories as artistic expressions of how people interpret and reformulate these pronouncements in harsh and tyrannical contexts. This is a form of articulation, an activism that explores the myriad cultural trajectories the urbanites fashion so as to reconstitute themselves and engage in various forms of agency. Central in the analysis is an endeavour to valorise Africa's own constructive power and emphasise the resilience and resourcefulness displayed by African cities. Attention is focused on crucial concerns on changing contours of coping strategies, on the intricacies of sustaining complex cultural imperatives through periods of economic and political crisis in contemporary Zimbabwe. Ultimately, such a reading validates the contention by one reviewer on "the paradoxical truth that troubled societies produce some of the most interesting writing available" (Staunton, 2007).

Creative cultural expressions in Africa underpin and spell out the multiple and simultaneous transitions in contemporary urban Africa. For in the existential reality in novelistic creations like these, is an espousal of the semantic repertoire of the modern African urbanite's experience. If culture in its broad sociological sense is both an instrument and medium for societal innovation, opening up new vistas and perspectives of social change, dialectically it construes interesting critical debate on the urban problematique and more exacting in these stories being the resilience of the Africans – epitomised in one motive, to survive and better one's living conditions. With the cultural turn comes awareness that language, discourse and symbolic meanings are central to incessant processes of continually shifting socio-economic terrains and the realm of agency in the spaces of everyday life.

The crux of the matter and background

In as far as culture defines the operative human environment, it sets both maxima and minima on our socially interpretive behaviour, observes Prah (48). So its centrality to the human conditions is so total that it subsumes subcategories

that define modes of livelihood and puts in hierarchies values which under specific socio–historical conditions serve as a validating benchmark. The tone for the predomination of certain cultural forms over others is thus consequently derivative from the material realities of social life on which social production and reproduction are constructed (Prah 47) and these fictional narratives have much to tell us about these dynamics. In other words, we posit the hypothesis that these images and representations of the new form of city dwellership is broached along the epistemologies of how the inhabitants (fictional characters) adapt to new behavioural standards prescribed by the desire for survival. Such a broaching of the fragile sociosphere need necessarily to supersede the conventional grammars of good and bad, moral and immoral, so that the tactical manoeuvres within limited avenues and subtle complexities can be appreciated. Whilst scripting these salient, shifting fluidities embedded in contemporary Africa, it is also patent to underscore the fact that the whole globe is reverberating to a conjecture of citiness and urbanity (Mougot 26). The United Nations predicts that over the next twenty five years all population growth will be in the cities of the developing world and at current rates, it is estimated that 60% of the world's total population will live in cities by 2030 (Mougot 26). It therefore becomes direly critical to take note also of Kofi Annan's observation that as more and more people make cities their home, cities will be the arenas in which some of the world's biggest social, economic, environmental, cultural and political challenges will be addressed and where solutions will be found (UNCHS – Habitat 1). In Zimbabwe, the setting of the three short stories, the recent political disturbances have also increased rural–urban migration, where, with increased globalization, metropolitanism, migration and diasporic phenomenon, there is a fermentation of new forms of urbanisms that are outside the universalizing categories of urban growth.

The complexities of change in urban Zimbabwe of 200-2009 can neither be overstated nor exaggerated. Given an unemployment rate of over 90%, inflation running into millions and virtually everyone a billionaire in the Zimbabwean dollar, a currency denomination which stretched from as little as one cent note to a fifty billion dollar note, where price changes became a daily if not hourly event and one's "take-home" salary "could hardly take one home", it is evident that there can be no simple, naïve and monolithic explanations and interpretations of such a trope of cultural images.

