

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

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### **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.

The three short stories selected here provide rudimentary transformative cultural epistemologies that underline the coping strategies of the urbanites, how they negotiate and manage change as well as espouse novel spatial practices. The common denominator is scripted in African agency and the dynamism and innovativeness under these special social conditions, despite the restrictions and limitations they encounter.

### **A Man Can Die Trying in 'A Land of Starving Millionaires'**

*"Mudhara! I said how much is in that bag of yours?" "One million three hundred thousand in single notes. And I want a loaf of bread and a packet of sugar." The shop-keeper gave a mirthless chuckle, "Old man, don't you read the papers? Or haven't you got a radio? The prices of foodstuffs quadrupled this morning. Half a loaf of bread now costs one million five hundred thousand. Forget about the sugar, it's just not for your class anymore. Don't even ask how much. It will give you a heart attack, sugar is now strictly for the super – class."*

The vulnerability of contemporary urban spatialities and urban livelihoods find ample depiction through this apt quotation from Chinyani's "A Land of Starving Millionaires." This is story about one of the numerous millionaires, the protagonist Mr. Usury Chimbadzo or Baba vaAlphabet, also referred to here as The Old Man (Mudhara). He is a fighter of some sorts, a polygamous father of twenty-nine children and through him we see how a nation in crisis tries to swallow and transform the traditional masculinities. As he travels through the city, Mr. Usury Chimbadzo thus meets up with the Shopkeeper, a representative of the resilient entrepreneur who cunningly flows with the current so as to keep afloat.

Through this short story the mapping of the city space and the ontological ramification of urban culture is made manifest. There is a myriad of variables that are derivative from the material realities of social life which the city slicker has to negotiate for survival. This is a classical marker of the complexities of change in contemporary urban Africa, which require a tactical manoeuvre, thereby bringing about a paradoxical anomie, a culture of citiness in the new millennium. The micro-economics of urban Zimbabwe, interlinked with polarities of the political cesspools that defined the Zimbabwean urban sociosphere stretching for over a decade gone by, witnessed a fermentation of this unique cultural transformation.

The shopkeeper, who gives “a mirthless laughter”, is a classical example of the markers of urban informalities that have characterised the contemporary and shifting urbanities and their cultural forms. Through him and “the long line of tuck shops” is depicted the multiple modes of economic and social adaptability with variegated levels of success. These urban informalities that have seen all the shades of “Operation Murambatsvina” – the ill-timed urban cleansing project by the government in 2005, attest to the tenacity and resilience of the urbanities (Chirisa & Mlambo, 9). And the fact value of fiction finds valence in articulating a quintessentially interdisciplinary site of study as the city in Africa and showing that it is indeed a resource rather than a liability. For whilst “The Millionaire” had not eaten anything, “nothing but the national staple they now call air-pie; a euphemism for one big slice of nothing” (41), the shopkeeper’s critical perceptivity and iconoclasm represents an ideological articulation stretching beyond mundane rationalism. This is an example of the trope of class stratification but in this paper it is the way the people reclaim or expropriate the space of the city that is of utmost importance to me. It is possible to see how perverse agency is restored through the ability of the shopkeeper to respond to fleeting and fluid economic pronouncements of their daily lives. It is these strategic and tactical manoeuvres in tempestuous economic times that give him and the imagined-invisible “super-class” the ability to remain afloat.

The daily ingenuities of the people as they struggle for a livelihood thus offer us a transgressive culture of survival and city dwellership. Despite the various economic upheavals that seriously threaten the contemporary life-forms and the precariousness of urban livelihoods, the protagonist himself is a rich text that is saturated with ambivalent tropes of cultural transformations for survival. In him we see that “Limitations are ...conditions of possibility” (Simone, 3). Despite the speed and intensity of urban change, it is clear that agency is flourishing and there is transformative potency in him. Without downplaying the drudgery of life and the intractable problems that beset the “millionaires”, there is evidence that points to a new tempo of constant revisions of their mode of livelihoods so that they can be active participants in the new political economy, one that operates outside the usually “normal” and “legal” economy. These forms of agency result in shifting trajectories of the self and the other and equip the individual with the right, tactful and pragmatic ‘economic culture’ that justifies and rationalises his *modus operandi*. This is because urban imaginative views of the self and

the other are now determined by the socio-cultural environment he finds himself in.

Mr. Usury Chimbadzo finds himself in essentially a complex lattice-work of constraints and limitations. It is interesting to note the millionaire's restructuring of his personal and business relationships so that he can paddle across the quagmire that threatens not only himself but also his 'twenty nine' children, with the triplets also joining the brood. This quandary prompts him into action; to rethink and re-imagine ways of negotiating the complex economic changes that have risen above the wits of 'his decades-long career as a no-nonsense money-lender' (41). In these changing times he has to ponder on the crucial indices of production and reproduction and equate them to bring about Gramsci's hegemonic culture - where certain cultural values override the others as determined by specific socio-historical conditions. Mr. Chimbadzo's 'uncompromising mood' to his two elusive 'clients' resonates with the Raban concept of the soft city. This is how Raban defines the soft city and the city dweller's response:

For at moments like this, the city goes soft; it awaits the imprint of an identity. For better or worse, it invites you to remake it, to consolidate it into a shape you can live in. You too, decide who you are, and the city will again assume a fixed form around it. Decide what it is, and your own identity will be relieved, like a position map fixed by triangulation (9-10).

Mr. Usury Chimbadzo straddles a tenacious socio-spatial and transgressive cultural discourse and in the Rabanian concept, he has to work on shaping it so that he can survive. The question of tearing down laid principles as he does is a classical marker of the constantly shifting social dynamics of African city-making. As a performer in this ritual of reclamation, the city walker (Mr. Usury Chimbadzo) meets each situation with a measure of flexibility as a tactical move to remain afloat. Innovativeness, creativity and language are the tools at his disposal. Within the new economic and socio-cultural terrain of the city, the conventional grammars of traditionalism are pushed to the periphery. The tactical adjustment of even the other urbanites

is evident through '...the low-key attendance, the low-key ceremony and the absence of food' (49), indicative not only of the deep-seated deprivation but also the ability to conform to new social rules. After all 'everyone knew that funerals were expensive these days' (41).

The denouement to the story forms a critical semantic repertoire of the ways in which cultural expressions intersect with political and socio-economic issues. The story takes a wry look at the hegemonic political situation in Zimbabwe and signifies the existence of the complex web of relations of domination and re-imagination of nationalism, patriotism and the post-colony.

Like a fiery bat straight out of hell, the legislator's blood-red luxury Mercedes turned the corner in the typical fashion of a well-fed politician with inexhaustible amounts of fuel to burn. Baba vaAlphabet flew into the air on impact, his sack of money with him, dying long before he hit the ground. (42)

All the potential, the vibrant agency and innovativeness meets up with a cruel and abrupt end. The descriptive language, with hellish and vampirish epithets scattered all over, marks sites of political discourse that are equally central to the language of cultural exegesis. The cyclical nature of cultural transformation is further projected along gender lines as it is imperative that the three wives have to revivify alternative urban spatialities as the next story shows.

### **Fragile Certainties with the "Minister Without Portfolio"**

The critical approach to the constantly shifting socio-cultural dynamics of Zimbabwean city making and human survival today need necessarily register the contemporary non-essentialist axiom that cultures are not self-contained organisms but social spaces whose edges are unfixed, irregular and difficult to locate ( Bachmann-Medick:2008:8). Such a broaching of the complex and textured mapping of the city space implies finding ways of accounting for positively the challenges of multiple and simultaneous transitions. I read the story "Minister without Portfolio" as a semantic

marker of sites of metamorphoses, opportunities and prospects. It does allow us a new way of reading the world and of seeing, a more sensual form that immerses us in the rhythms and struggles of everyday life for the urban poor, an imaginary of the process of the re-invention of Africa struggling under the privileged, self-serving and tyrannical regime. Whilst the effects of war, AIDS, hunger, starvation and conflict have littered development literature, political *indabas* and the media, what interests me in this story are the positive, often glossed over ingenuities of the African.

In this story, we have a young lady, Agnes, who survives as a commercial sex worker in urban Harare and also her current client the Minister without Portfolio. The major part of the story takes place whilst together with Mhofu the driver, they are travelling from Harare to Masvingo and throughout the journey, Agnes's survival instincts come out clear through her chronicles of conquest as opposed to the Minister without Portfolio's political rhetoric. The survival instinct in the young, especially the women, is particularly interesting and Agnes's story is scripted with possibilities and significant measures of personal emancipation, such that she is able to forge a relatively well off life. As Musila G.A. (in Muchemwa and Muponde 148-149) has observed;

Within a hostile and rough urban environment, with limited avenues for responding to institutionalized violence, the body remains one of the few – if not the only object over which the individual retains ownership--- what seems to emerge is that women [are] better able to anchor themselves in the turbulent city environment, and find ways of coping with their circumstances.

This reading of social contexts resonates with vistas of truth in our protagonist (and heroine) Agnes as she tries to absorb the shockwaves of the complexities of change through the wilful and cunningly calculated "subjectification" of her body. This alerts us to the fact that new situations give rise to new cultural imperatives that characterise contemporary urban life. In Agnes we see a metamorphosis of the traditional women such that in her now is the versatility which is a critical ingredient in negotiating the ever changing economic and political terrain. That is why she is able to hop



from the Minister of Human Resources and Labour Policing to the Minister without Portfolio. The impermanence of social relations is an imprint of the strategic and tactical manoeuvres that are necessitated by the complexities of change, that require one to always negotiate the variegated time spaces of the city. Consequentially, due to the ease and fluidity of the socio-economic arena,

She did not mind that the relationship would not last. The important thing was monetary gain. She also regarded all her sexual relationships as enviable conquests. She recorded the names of the big guns whom she lured into bed in a small notebook. It could come in useful one day (69).

Hers is an evasion of the political culture of exclusion in contemporary Zimbabwe that tries to control everything one acquires and or does through the yardstick of one's war credentials. Moreover, in Agnes is a resurrection of Zandile, Getrude and Deliwe in Vera's *Butterfly Burning*, commercial sex workers who managed to live off their sexuality (Musila, in Muchemwa and Muponde 149). Similarly in Marechera's *House of Hunger*, there is Nestor who is also a commercial sex worker and becomes famous the nation over and manages to live an opulent life. Agness also actively participates in this new socio-economic space of city dwellership and the only regret she has is the politicians' tedious war rhetoric; "This was one thing she found wearisome about her *profession*. She wanted to entertain her boyfriends but some of her *clientele* was too egoistic to let her perform her *duties*" [my emphasis] (14). Yet the financial gain is enviable, the "two thick wards of greenbacks" (11) [US dollars] she gets in crisis-hit Zimbabwe is a true reward of her innovativeness and reformulation of the moral, and socio-economic urban spatialities. The author's use of language is also more telling, ("profession", "clientele", "duties") urging a linguistic change from the word "prostitute" to the more euphemistic and appropriate "commercial sex worker" to one of the world's oldest professions, stretching to as far as Biblical times.

Furthermore, the remapping of the city is indicated by the reference to "the people's market" (11). The urban dwellers are capable of re-appropriating

the city's space and restructure it to suit their own intentions and desires (Manase 102). This urban restructuring is a reference to foreign dealership that flourished in Harare's 4<sup>th</sup> Street and in Bulawayo's Main Street. The story thus valorizes African agency in the face of threatening tempestuous changes, whether global or local, to demonstrate that the citizenry is neither a bewildered alien and perpetual victim nor helpless functionary of a completely overwhelming hegemony. Agness's journey from Harare to Masvingo, a mark of de Certeau's "rhetoric of walking" calls attention to her social commitment; she is an advocate for her own people, their unsanctioned legislator. This is through her keeping the pressure that the Minister without Portfolio should "tar the Nyabadza Osborne Dam road" (8). She is a survivor who has the luxury of living in the high class suburbs of Sixth Avenue which is close to the CBD, she journeys with a chauffeured Mercedes Benz and drinks expensive imported whisky. She can gladly see the dawn of a new day and the commercial economy of sex is a socio-cultural conformity shaped by the prevailing economic order and even though "most of them thought that she was naïve. She let them believe so by not talking and pretending to listen" (14). Whilst Mhofu the driver would try to "shame" the Minister without Portfolio, her motive instead is to better her livelihood, a financial endeavor through negotiating her female sexuality for gain, material and immaterial, permanent and impermanent.

### **Scoffing at Destitution and the Macabre in "Last Laugh"**

*"Laughing Now" suggests that we are finding new ways to reflect our reality; that however many zeros we add to the rate of inflation, and however hungry we may become, humour is as good a response as any- Irene Staunton.*

*Laughing at our mistakes can lengthen our own life. Laughing at someone else's can shorten it-Cullen Hightower.*

The Danish physicist and Nobel prizewinner Niels Bohr (1885-1962) once remarked that "There are some things so serious that you have to laugh at them". Laughter as a form of self rehabilitation, as resistance and a way of disordering and destabilizing the political assemblages is markedly scribed in the story "Last Laugh". Laughter is therapeutic and cathartic, investing in

the urban poor a new form of communicating and or narrating their socio-political landscape. Chinodya in this story re-establishes culture as sharing and as a uniting factor, indefatigably marking contours of rebellion and defiance.

It is a story about virtually everyone who visits the Home Industries Centre during lunch time to buy food at Mai George's open place kitchen, "motor mechanics, glaziers, garage attendants, electricians, cobblers, plumbers..." (26) to the butcher, teachers and the jealousy landlord. Whilst the story centers on Mai George, more striking are the fearless, nameless characters and their undeterred and unbridled voices whose jokes and subtle observations make Shimmer Chinodya a master of words, satire and humour.

My theorization and re-conceptualization of resistance and innovation as cultural markers of agency find further expression in the amplified urban informalities in this story. The 'Home Industry Centre' and the iconographical representations of entrepreneurship form an idiom of being in the city and capitalizing on its potential. The constantly changing geo-political terrain that has seen the harshest of times still resonates with shimmers of hope and vitality even in the aftermath of *Operation Murambatsvina*. The industriousness, resourcefulness and sheer determination of the urbanites, despite their lack of well pronounced formal education as shown by the miss-spelt iconographic signage, further attests to the ubiquity of agency in the face of the harshest of limitations.

Furthermore the femininity reconstruction of Mai George and her redefinition of the socio-economic landscape (like Agnes) is a pointer to the dearth of rigid masculinities that invest in men the economic grammar of 'bread winner'. Her life for, "... the past three years was work and work every day to fend for her family and her ageing mother" (42). With her "open air kitchen" in the industrial sites, Mai George restructures the urban spaces in a bid to reclaim some form of entrepreneurial selfhood; spatial constraints for her are not absolute. And as a result "Business was unbelievably good, great, in fact..." (26). To survive she sets up alliances, associations and networks through a range of relationships. These range from the winking butcher, the

friendly garage owner where she stores her kitchenware, the more regular clients to whom she gives meals on credit; through to the adversarial police officer she has to bribe to avoid being raided. She has fashioned a practical and effective way to pursue her livelihood and at the end of the day, "Surely Mai George [was] earning enough to pay five teachers every month" (26) and her household furniture was the envy of many.

The story also offers vistas of reading the "city under siege" through music, a form of popular culture that has in contemporary contexts calcified into normative shorthand of narrating the ills and evils in Africa as well as how the people evade them. The people's vision, aspirations and dreams, find expression through the popular hit songs as the artists offer the people a voice and language to articulate their concerns. The political message in the two songs *Bvuma Wachembera* (*Accept that you are old*) and *Dai ndakadzidza* (*If only I was educated*) are prime examples of how cultural expressions offer an alternative and relatively safer discourse yet unflinching attack on the despotic regime that uses the draconian AIPPA (Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act) to silence and mull divergent views. And fictional narratives like these are cultural and linguistic ammunitions that interrogate the status quo and offer an alternative spectacle to one created by the official, monologic and selectively nationalist discourse (see Muponde and Primorac, 2005).

The humorous and decidedly derisive jokes that the ordinary people recite are (1) a record of their daily lives, their struggles, ingenuities and privations (2) a socio-political commentary unmasking the social morass and the language of political deification and (3) a form of comic relief, therapeutically giving them the energy to dream of a better tomorrow. For "People loved to laugh and hold the world at bay" (26) and "joking, like breathing, made people's lives easier" (30). Even in the most excruciating circumstances, the people still have the capacity to find humour; this is a survival strategy, a show of how the people find humanity in dehumanizing situations. In the face of tyrannical and despotic geriatrics epitomized in Mbuya MaSibanda, the land lord who preys on her tenants, it is laughter that registers the marked contours of rebellion and resistance. Laughter becomes a conspiratorial rebuff of oppressive forces and inhibiting factors,

an explosive form of agency that refuses to be curtailed forever and an ultimate cultural metamorphosis and activism upped by the urbanites as a survival strategy. Like the brave cultural workers- the fictional writers who create these literary works, the macabre is scoffed and it is a paradoxical joy for the reader and the cultural critic to altogether join in as;

Bravely following Mbuya MaSibanda to the door and shooping her out almost, Mai George began to LAUGH. She laughed freely now. She laughed and laughed; she laughed at the brazen jokes that had plagued her day, at the sudden future that now glared at her in the face. She laughed and heard the voices of the other lodgers in the adjoining rooms shrieking with hers, conspiring with her against the ageless tyranny of the world. Her ears drowned in the echoes of her mirth as warm tears coursed down her youthful face (37).

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion therefore, these three stories amply demonstrate the challenges of a nation in crisis and above all, they show that despite all the odds against them, the urbanites also stand up to the challenge. They are pedagogically inspiring and show that there is a continual struggle that resultantly brings about shimmers of hope. This necessarily entails a metamorphosis of the people's usual perceptions, their re-reading of the world and also a reorientation of their conception of good or bad, moral or immoral. Ultimately, rather than being a classical marker of foreign invasion (in the exclusionary nationalist discourse) and a source of all ills as used to be portrayed in fiction in pre-independence times and shortly after independence, the city in the new millennium is presented as a site for struggle, which is a wellspring for cultural change and innovation. From Mr. Usury Chimbadzo and the Shopkeeper's negotiation of the ever-changing and treacherous economic landscape, to Agnes' rediscovery and reinterpretation of the resources "within" her, up to Mai George's remapping of the cityscape and personal transformation into energized femininity with high business acumen, what is most apparent is that the people are finding some means of coping. Agency is immensely ubiquitous and the short story writer has the language to capture these complicated and fleeting

changes and manages to render them much more visible.

***All the three stories are published in Irene Staunton's collection of short stories Laughing Now: New Stories from Zimbabwe. (2007). Harare: Weaver Press.***

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