

Emasculated by the Crisis: Representations of the Struggling Fathers in Selected Contemporary Zimbabwean Literature

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Abstract

The political turmoil and socio-economic comatose of the past decade in Zimbabwe has had a toll on the social transformation of the Zimbabwean society. The astronomical inflation, the incessant shortages of basic consumer goods, jobs etc has changed the face of the evolution of cultured masculinities, exposed the vulnerability of the male father figure and consigned him to the fringes of the everyday struggle to provide for his family. The gap between the traditional male breadwinner and the hopelessly inept father figure produced by the extraordinary constraints of the last decade in Zimbabwe has over the years created a fertile ground for creative imagination as writers grapple with the nature of the "Zimbabwean problem", the multifarious forces shaping the humanitarian crisis and the human responses to the dystopian situation. This paper looks at the destabilizing impact of the problematic political and economic situation on the male father figure's capacity to effectively deliver on his traditional and cultural responsibility to sustain a family. We contend that the contemporary Zimbabwean narrative particularly in the short story genre reflects and refracts on the complexities of negotiating a crisis situation and represents the "emasculated" state of the male father figure rendered helpless by forces beyond his influence.

Introduction

The "Zimbabwean crisis" of the past decade in the new millennium (which best manifests in the world inflation record for countries not at war) changed lives, social and cultural codes in the most remarkable of ways. For the ordinary family unit as was for the larger extended family, the day to day chores revolved around a fixed locus of survival mechanisms and stop-gap measures in resistance against the ever threatening tide of starvation and extinction. In such excruciating circumstances, the male father figure's culturally assumed role as the family breadwinner and caretaker came under acute exposure as the crisis hit hard on the hinges supporting the father's capacity to sustain his family. The father's vulnerability and susceptibility to the crisis is rendered all the more problematic by the very fact that the economic and political forces informing that crisis are well beyond his spheres of influence. Slowly but surely, the challenges of everyday life loosened the father's grip on the citadel of his familial authority and exposed him to opposition from the disgruntled members of his family. The sons, realizing their father's maladroitness in responding to the newest form of threat to the family seize upon the opportunity to show their intent to take over the reins of power.

This paper explores literary representations of "fatherhoods" under siege with special emphasis on the dynamics of the familial change process; the political and economic circumstances informing the father's ineptitude and the reactionary tendencies of the endangered father. It seeks to add valence to grammars that seek to communicate this fluidity in the public sphere and thereby also show the "multi-voiceness" of literary fictions. This form of communication through imaginative literary texts has become an alternative discourse in articulating disclosures aimed at making accessible certain elusive realities which are often difficult to pin down during moments of accelerated change like the one we are witnessing in the new millennium. Therefore by managing to "freeze moments", there is an ability by the fiction writers to open fissures which allow for a wider and closer scrutiny, thereby enriching our understanding of our present realities and the unavoidable transformations we must register in our social and literary interpretation of life.

Feckless fathers

The socio-cultural identification of masculinity with the breadwinning act spans historic milieus and transcend geographical and cultural boundaries. Breadwinning fathers evolved with the capitalist notion of paid labour where the father's biological and physical superiority over his female counterpart put him at the forefront of capitalist exploitation as a petit earner, consequently propelling him to the apex of the familial power hierarchy as the family's guardian. The father, a *de facto* leader of the family institute is therefore identifiable first and foremost by his capacity to provide the basics of his family's needs. In Zimbabwe, the father's occupation ranged from paid work to self-help small to medium business enterprises. The economic cataclysm of Zimbabwe's past decade, however, disrupted whatever earning opportunities were open to the father - from the agriculture sector where many lost jobs to the land reforms, to the industries where companies (most of which were owned by foreign investors) closed shops, leaving many without alternate means to livelihood. Entrepreneur fathers were not spared in the meltdown as they too succumbed to the dwindling income in their traditional clientele. The changing fortunes of the father called for a change in the family system, particularly its status quo and this reduced the father's life to one long struggle against the odds threatening his traditional reign on the family. The father's new struggle stems from his defiant conservative spirit that is inimical to the imminent change in the familial status quo and one that constantly spurs him to endeavour the herculean to save a role assigned to him by age's long traditions. When fatherhood delineate ability in a man to provide the basics of his family needs, an emasculated father easily comes to be identified by his inability to provide - the distinctive mark separating him from real able fathers.

Edward Chinhanhu's short story "These are the days of our lives" in the short story anthology *Writing Now* presents a definitive emasculated father bearing the brand of the nation's near socio-economic annihilation. Unlike his "fatherly" heyday of full employment with cautionary earnings to sustain his fatherhood, Freedom appears in the greater part of the short story a helpless and vulnerable victim of circumstances

