Exploring the girl-child's body-mind crisis in Mahachi-Harper's *Echoes in the shadows*

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Abstract

In its exploration of childhood, this article navigates the contours of the notion "girl-child" as the "sulbatern" or the "other" in Mahachi-Harper's narrative, Echoes in the shadows. Also, in its articulation of the complexities of "childhood" in African Literature, the article endeavours to address broader issues such as the use and abuse of cultural practices in "knowledge legitimation" (Nnaemeka, 1997, p. 1) in Mahachi-Harper's narrative. Premised on the feminist theory, the article shows how issues in feminism such as visibility, marginality, victimhood, silence, agency and subjectivity are problematised in the narrative. More importantly, the article argues that the "experience of childhood as a time of innocence, security, self-worth, and contribution to family and community" (Kurth-Schai, 1997, p. 193) is a distant fantasy for most children as shown by Vaida in Mahachi-Harper's Echoes in the shadows. Even so, the writer is aware of the dangers of universalising the child's experiences as monolithic and thus will contextualise the child's experiences, specifically, the girl-child, within the Shona culture in Echoes in the shadows. The mental and physical plight of the girl-child is explored within the context in which the book is set and reveals how she is trapped in a familial institution that is supposed to protect and nurture her. Through the young girl Vaida, Mahachi-Harper shows how deeply violence is embedded in the domestic domain (Bal, 1988, p. 231). The paper concludes that it is difficult to attain social justice in a culture or society that pits male against female and adult against child; hence the paper advances for a child-centred social ethic which provides a more appropriate premise for addressing the needs and interests of the girl-child than the feminist approach.

Introduction

Using the character of Vaida in Mahachi-Harper's *Echoes in the shadows*, this paper explores the apparent erasure of girlhood by patriarchy. In the narrative, *Echoes in the shadows*, Mahachi-Harper presents the plight of the girl-child/women through Vaida, her mother and her sister, Veronica. Vaida, a brilliant teenage girl's dreams are shattered when her brother-in-law, aMasaga, Veronica's husband rapes her. Although she fights back, both aMasaga and the legal system eventually overpower her. Her parents and the forces of law do not believe that her case is initiated by an urge to defend herself. The criminal charges against aMasaga are regarded as insignificant and if anything, it is Vaida herself who lands in police cells for a crime invented by aMasaga. Vaida's rape results in her failure to complete her high school education and that precipitates her bondage and victimhood. She falls pregnant and is thereafter forced to be her sister's co-wife. Her dreams of a successful future are wholly shattered when she discovers that her sister is dying of AIDS.

Thus the paper explores the literary representation of girlhood in a constantly changing socio-cultural Zimbabwean urban environment as represented in Mahachi-Harper's *Echoes in the shadows*. It posits that in much recent literature, the adult world may seem to

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have changed but the situation of the child in Zimbabwe and Africa in general remains largely dismal. The child's world as reflected in Mahachi-Harper's *Echoes in the shadows* is riddled with disease, child abuse and dysfunctional families. The paper is also deeply concerned about the literary representation of the discrimination against the girl-child and the violation of the rights of the girl-child, which often results in less access for girls to education, nutrition, physical and mental health care and in girls enjoying fewer of the rights, opportunities and benefits of childhood and adolescence than boys. Girl children are often subjected to various forms of cultural, social, sexual and economic exploitation and to violence and harmful practices such as incest, early marriage, female infanticide, prenatal sex selection and female genital mutilation. Hence, the critical investigation of this paper is founded on the fact that writing is "an essential gesture" (Gordimer, 1988, as cited in, Lionnet, 1997, p. 221) that helps to "break the longstanding silence of, and about, women, and to expose oppressive cultural taboos and archaic customs" (Lionnet, 1991, p. 221). Starting from the premise that fiction has the capacity to participate in and comment on social change, the challenge is to show how the selected Zimbabwean writer positions herself in relation to the child-centred social ethic that advocates for justice and compassion for the girl-child. Thus the paper seeks to interrogate children issues that the Zimbabwean and other African societies remain silent on; issues like HIV/AIDS, sexual and physical abuse, adoption, dysfunctional families and traditional customs. The paper posits that these issues are unspeakable since they are outside what is conventional; thus they are not part of dominant discourses in Zimbabwean and most African societies.

In addition, the narrative presents the cultural, thus commonly accepted psychological state of a girl-child as that of vulnerability and desperation. Of significant concern is the emotional double bind experienced by many girl children in modern day Zimbabwean society. On one hand, "children are asked far too soon to assume adult responsibilities that are not of their choosing … On the other hand, children are systematically excluded from meaningful social and political participation (Kurth-Schai, 1997, p. 193). For example, they assume parental duties of looking after their siblings while parents are working; some families are headed by children and many child marriage cases have been noted. Seldom are children allowed to participate in policy decisions affecting their lives and through Vaida in *Echoes in the shadows*, this paper illustrates that children are denied the right to participate in decision making, education and knowledge creation.

This is further compounded by the fact that Vaida lives in an adult-centred and patriarchal society in which children's voices and social contributions remain largely unacknowledged. For instance, when she decides to escape getting married to aMasaga, her mother discourages her saying, "these days Vaida, it is how sensibly you marry rather than how intelligent you are that determines the security and cosiness of your life" (p. 45). By implication, Vaida's efforts of re-articulating her identity are thwarted by her mother. Her identity and sexuality are controlled by patriarchy and her mother compounds the situation by becoming an accomplice. My argument here is that, though positioned within the patriarchal society, Vaida's mother could have protected her daughter but instead, she treats her as a commodity "that [brings] rewards in monetary and material terms" (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997, p. 105). For Vaida, going back to aMasaga's house was like "being pushed into the mouth of a snarling tiger" (p. 20) and she felt like a "sacrificial lamb for the slaughter" (p. 20). Contrary, when she feels threatened by aMasaga, her parents refuse to confront aMasaga with Vaida's rape accusations because "they were unwilling to bite the hand that fed them" (p. 20) and "their son-in-law had snatched them from the grip of poverty" (p. 20). The contradictions involved in Vaida's efforts to claim her private space and identity clearly indicate that she has no say over her victimhood. Her status as the "other" is reinforced and the viciousness of the *chiramu* practice is shown as she is dominated and manipulated by this adult-centred and patriarchal society.

Furthermore, the narrative shows that the ongoing struggle for political space, economic and personal emancipation, coupled with the struggle for personal freedoms remain constant themes in Zimbabwean literature. The central challenge in this paper is to demonstrate that the crisis in Zimbabwe goes beyond politics and economics; that beyond the political and economic crisis a hemorrhaging society lies; that the soul of the nation is grotesquely debauched, leaving behind many emotional and spiritual child casualties. As such, this paper endeavours to examine the pain and trauma paradigm, hence the body-mind crisis of the girl-child in modern Zimbabwean society. It explores the internal collapse in children victims of pain, trauma and sexual abuse and how in *Echoes in the shadows* the protagonist is made to succumb to silence, marginalisation and victimhood. Arguably, in such an environment, it is almost impossible for children; boys and girls to develop physically, mentally and socially to their fullest potential – a right of all children stipulated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Convention further stipulates that all rights apply to all children without exception and that no discrimination shall be made on the ground of their sex.

Children's literature: the African perspective

In African literature, children's literature has been represented through varying perspectives. As a genre that accommodates other genres, it provides a flexible and discursive space for relating to this type of literature in new ways. In fact Okolie (1998) notes that the African child was not a subject of literature until the late fifties. He adds that, "shrouded in myth, rash generalisations, patent untruths and ethnological insinuations, the personality and inner realities of the African child badly needed clarification and highlighting" (p. 30). Okolie makes a valid point because of the fluid nature of children's literature and the complexities and ambiguities associated with the notion "childhood" in modern day African cosmology. The representation of the African child as a "victim of the environment" and 'miserable being in a 'hostile' world necessitated that the notion of childhood be interrogated and have children presented in "their true light" (Okolie, 1998, p. 30).

Children's literature means different things to different people. To begin with, various terms have been used in an effort to characterise the discipline. Some of the terms that have been used interchangeably with children's literature include literature for children (Meniru, 1992), and children and youth literature (Khorana, 1994). Children's literature scholars such as Nodelman and Reimer (2003), assert that children's literature ought to be a pleasurable experience to both adults and children. They add that this pleasure is derived from dialogue, which is, thinking, talking and even arguing about children's literature. Bodmer also notes that "Books for children are objects we give them to entertain and to educate, the function of all art. … By giving, we actively involve them in our world and our community of values" (as cited in Nodelman & Reimer, 2003, 97). Whatever the case, two terms, children and literature, intensify the challenge of definition. In the African cosmology, the question, who is a child is shrouded with complexities as one is confronted with a plethora of definitions. This is because different ethnic groups define childhood differently. Because of the difficulty in defining the term 'child', the paper will use, as its working definition, the broadest definition of children's literature which applies to books that are actually selected and read by children and some of which are "written by adults for people younger than they are" (Nodelman & Reimer, 2003, p. 14). Although *Echoes in the shadows* is a book that can be read by adults also, in this paper it falls under children's literature because the story focuses on the lived experiences of children. It also convinces people that children are different from adults and that "the needs and sensibilities of children are considered a legitimate priority" (Ndelman & Reimer, 2003, p. 14) in children's literature.

Okolie (1998) also notes that childhood in African literature implies a period of initiation of the child into the mysteries of nature and existence. In fact, children often enjoy stories which speak on multiple levels and, due to cultural differences; it is difficult to clearly state the focus group in children's literature. This has seen efforts to increase the scope by including young adults. In this regard, children's literature in this paper stretches up to teenage level. Nana Wilson-Tagoe (1992), an author of children's books, maintains that "a children's book is a book that is produced largely with a child's interest and needs in mind, one that deals honestly with children, portrays them candidly and in a medium to which they can respond with imagination and pleasure." In this regard, *Echoes in the shadows* falls under the children's literature category because it highlights children's needs and sensibilities.

Similarly, Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson (2005, p. 3) perceive children's literature as "good quality trade books for children from birth to adolescence, covering topics of relevance and interests to children of those ages, through prose and poetry, fiction and nonfiction." However, they point out that, "stories are told in a forthright, humorous or suspenseful manner and stories should emphasise the hope for a better future rather than the hopelessness and utter despair of the moment" (Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson, 2005, p. 3). I argue through Vaida's experiences in *Echoes in the shadows* that this is a rather limited and myopic definition of children's literature. It is a type of literature that idealises the child's world in the sense that it evades the other side of the child's world; a world of pain and trauma. Hence, this paper's argument is that such issues should not be pushed to the periphery; they should be addressed. Africa in particular should take children seriously as it is essentially a young continent (Trudell et al., 2002). I also concur with Dadie and Seydou Badian (as cited in Okolie, 1998, p. 30), that African childhood fundamentally differs in content and physical nature from its Western type. They illustrate through their novels that it is "unwise to apply the same yardstick of cultural and social determinism to both African and European patterns of life" (as cited in Okolie, 1998, p. 30). Of interest in this article is the *"chiramu"* Shona practice which I believe does not exist in the Western culture, meaning, the girl-child in the latter is not affected by such a practice. Hence this paper's argument is that it is crucial for the continent to listen to the voices of children and young adults; and children's literature affords this platform. Arguably, children's literature represents an important resource for understanding the needs, wishes and aspirations of young people. As such, "African children [have] to be presented in their true light through the novels" (Okolie, 1998, p. 30) and this article posits that Mahachi-Harper's *Echoes in the shadows* is such a novel that investigates more purposefully the African girl child's lived experiences in order to address the social ills that affect her.

The de-oracised girl-child

The core argument in this paper is that the African girl-child is a "conspicuously 'silenced' person in a conspicuously 'silenced' continent" (Bukenya, 1994, as cited in Kaschula, 2001, p. 33). I hazard in this paper that the marginalised girl child's position in society is a result of this "silencing or de-oracisation" (Kaschula, 2001). Vaida, in her fragmented state intimates on this denial: "My body and soul have been encased in this cocoon for ages and the desire to fly out and seek the peace denied me for so long is stifling" (p. 3). She questions the functionality of both her family and society that has consistently and systematically denied her a voice or the "facility of oracy" (Bukenya, 1994, as cited in Kaschula, 2001, p. 33). This denial may be traced in the socialisation process that Vida goes through; a process that expects her to "depend on the male for the orating experience" (Kaschula, 2001). Vaida is silenced by both her parents and her brother-in-law, aMasaga, when she makes claims that the latter had tried to force himself upon her. Her mother says, "… Veronica's husband has not touched you and therefore you have no reason to think that what *you imagine*

is what he feels" (p.14) [my own emphasis] and "you tell your sister that and you shall be igniting a fire you won't be able to put out" (p. 15). And when Vida threatens to tell her sister Veronica, aMasaga reminds her, "You are my *muramu,* you know I will have you sooner or later, so why not stop fighting me" (p. 20). The *chiramu* practice is a traditionally recognized Shona custom in which the brother-in-law is allowed to fondle the spouse's sister and engages in a playful flirtatious behaviour. This is echoed by Vida's mother when she says: "He is your *babamkuru* … and has every right to indulge in *chiramu* with you" (p. 14), and she also adds, "That is the nature of the relationship between you two. Your *muramu* and you can engage in *chiramu,* it is nothing more than just flirtatious banter which is quite acceptable and harmless. It is part of tradition in which our existence is rooted … *Chiramu* is a traditionally recognized custom … " (p. 15)

Sadly, Vaida's mother fails her at a time when she needs reassurance and her support most. As a parent, she plays a vital role in the wellbeing of her daughter's life and it is also her duty to develop Vaida's personality and to better prepare her to deal with difficult events and relationships. After this discussion with her mother, Vaida then realises how powerless she is and how hopeless her situation is. Amidst an insecure and sterile situation as a girl child in a patriarchal Zimbabwean society; a situation that is further aggravated by the harsh economic climate as well as the HIV/AIDS pandemic, Vaida suffers both physical and emotional trauma. Clearly, the African girl-child is seriously de-oracised. Her power of oracy is stifled by her family and the patriarchal milieu in which she finds herself in. In this regard, she becomes invisible and powerless. Bukenya (1994) reiterates that, "productive oracy would entail self-definition, self-assertion, negotiation of relationships, resolution of conflicts, claiming of rights and indictment of their violation" (as cited in Kaschula, 2001, p. 33). Lack of this productive oracy deems Vida vulnerable and powerless in the face of men like aMasaga. Thus, one would agree with Coats (2001) that texts that represent the adolescent self-emphasise how the self is constructed and mediated through interaction with cultural and social forces, and other selves.

According to Sharma (1993), a mother plays an important role in the development of a child`s personality and wellbeing. A mother's care, protection and love for her child are necessary for the development of a child especially in the case of girl children. Sharma (1993, p. 88) says, "The human child is the most helpless and weak being. A family is needed in order to maintain its existence and to coordinate or ensure a child's balanced development." Tellingly, a child's balanced development is achieved with difficulty in the absence of parental love and in a non-responsive environment. Children therefore become unwilling victims when they are not supported by the family members. *Save the children* (2001, p. 43) argues that, "… their powerlessness and low status has meant that their suffering is invisible and unheard." As children are dependent on adults they keep quiet about the abuse so that the adults continue providing for their needs.

Hence, this paper explores the metaphor of the "eyes of children," in telling their stories of conflict, pain, HIV/AIDS, poverty, trauma and desperation. Through the voices of Zimbabwe's girl-child, the complex roots of pain and trauma in the country assume new meanings and significance. The paper, therefore, argues that this important aspect of the human life has not been fully recognised. The physical and mental pain, suffering and sadness have been misrepresented by some authors. In fact, pain and sadness have been used as symbols of bigger contemporary, global issues. The study is deeply concerned that girls, in particular adolescent girls, continue to be silent and invisible victims of violence, abuse and exploitation and that some legal systems do not adequately address the vulnerability of girls in the administration of justice, including the need for better protection of child victims and witnesses.

Remembering violence

According to Pat Conroy (2002), rape is often called 'a crime against sleep and memory' (as cited in Klungel, 2010, p.43) and is often depicted as the ultimate trauma – one that is "surrounded by silence" (Klungel, 2010, p. 43) In other words, rape cannot be described by any language; "it is beyond words" (Das, 2004, as cited in Klungel, 2010, p. 43). In her study of the Guadeloupian women who are continually menaced by the threat of rape, Klungel (2010), argues that rape remembrance is crucial, for it functions as a kind of warning, protecting, and reintegrating system" (p. 44). Following on Winkler's (1991) definition of rape as "the experience of social death," (as cited in Klungel, 2010, p. 45) I maintain that aMasaga socially murders Vaida by taking control of her body and mind. Her social existence is totally annihilated as the rape incident takes control of her body and mind (Winkler, 1994, as cited in Klungel, 2010, p. 45). Vaida says, "At my blackest moments of despair, I have painstakingly endured each day as it were eternity" (p. 2) and "…my mind totally disorientated as I find myself in perpetual motion, but with no sense, nor satisfaction of having finally arrived anywhere" (p. 3). The rape experience has not only disempowered Vaida but has also disconnected her from her husband, aMasaga, her children and mother. Rape is seen as the ultimate end as Vaida experiences a kind of second rape when people in society and the justice system blame her and doubt her story (Winkler, 1994, as cited in Klungel, 2010, p. 45). She is deliberately silenced and because she threatens the dominant social order, she is seen as abnormal. Hence, she undergoes a "second assault as social rape" (Winkler, 1994, as cited in Klungel, 2010, p. 45). Arguably, it is this social rape that silences and marginalises Vaida and shatters her very existence. According to Patterson (1982), effects of social death include losing one's social rights and being "confined to a marginal social space and [being] forced to live in a continual state of liminality and dishonour" (as cited in Klungel, 2010). As such, Vida's social death status is made possible by the cultural barriers and prohibitions in the society that she lives in. She is faced with a system which is based on unequal societal power relations; a system that is a part of the patriarchal agenda and conceives rape as normal. This article seeks to interrogate such a system that thrives to protect traditional power inequalities in most Zimbabwean cultures and has since led to the suppression of knowledge and ideas; and imprisoned women and girl children in the name of culture.

Erickson's psychosocial stages

We find Erickson's theory of psychosocial development quite vital in the argument espoused by this paper. The theory also helps to explain the body and mind crisis that Vaida undergoes and endures. Erickson uses eight stages in the development of a child to explain the child's growth and development through socialisation and how this impacts on the child's sense of self. However, it is not the intention of this paper to explore the eight stages in depth but the debate will be restricted to stages 5 and 6; the Identity vs. Role Confusion and the Intimacy vs. Isolation stages, respectively. The two stages are explained below:

Stage 5: Identity vs. Role Confusion:

During adolescence, the transition from childhood to adulthood is most important. Children are becoming more independent, and begin to look at the future in terms of career, relationships, families, housing, etc. During this period, they explore possibilities and begin to form their own identity based upon the outcome of their explorations. This sense of who they are can be hindered, which results in a sense of confusion ("I don't know what I want to be when I grow up") about themselves and their role in the world.

Stage 6: Intimacy vs. Isolation:

Occurring in young adulthood, we begin to share ourselves more intimately with others. We explore relationships leading towards longer term commitments with someone other

than a family member. Successful completion can lead to comfortable relationships and a sense of commitment, safety, and care within a relationship. Avoiding intimacy, fearing commitment and relationships can lead to isolation, loneliness, and sometimes depression (Heffner Media Group, 2011).

The two stages relate to Vaida's experiences during her adolescence and young adulthood stages. Premised on Erickson's Psychosocial Development theory, I argue that Vaida fails to assert an individual identity because she is not given the opportunity to transition from childhood to adulthood. The rape by aMasaga denies her the opportunity to find and develop a personal identity. In addition, the rape incident denies her the opportunity to explore relationships with other people (stage 6) and to create a resistance space. Consequently, she lacks a sense of commitment in her relationship with aMasaga and these results in "isolation, loneliness and depression" (stage 6). Significantly, failure to successfully complete a stage can result in a reduced ability to complete further stages and therefore a more unhealthy personality and sense of self. In the narrative *Echoes in the shadows*, Mahachi-Harper, presents the cultural, thus commonly accepted psychological state of a girl-child as that of invisibility, victimhood and dehumanisation. Vaida fails to navigate these stages and the result is confusion and a weak sense of self. Because she lapses into this permanent stage of depression, these stages seem not to be resolved successfully even later. The situation prevailing at this time renders her the hopeless victim and offers extremely limited options for escape. She fails to debilitate the deep-seated cultural misogyny in her society. Her fragmented identity and body-mind crisis is shown in some of her reflections:

"I am now tired …, very tired. I feel so exhausted that I just wish to lie back and let go … I no longer have the energy to persevere anymore … Now I have to face the inevitable as I find the simple act of maintaining both mental and physical balance very exhausting. I just cannot hang on much longer. For me, survival has become much more than just a case of mind over matter. I long for the serenity of that final rest, the sleep which I hope to finally find contentment …" (p. 1).

"I remained insignificant and worthless in the eyes of my family" (p. 40).

"Agreeing to be aMasaga's wife meant becoming a child-bearing contraption to be used to fill in his childless marriage" (p. 40).

"I was being blindfolded and asked to follow unquestioningly….into the dungeon of a world I did not wish to inhabit, a world I could not willingly volunteer to live in" (p. 40).

"…I would die each night with the setting sun, plunging me in the darkest abyss imaginable" (p. 39).

Clearly, all types of child abuse and neglect leave lasting scars. Some of these scars might be physical, but emotional scarring has long lasting effects throughout life. As reflected in Erickson's theory of Psychosocial Development, the scars have fatal consequences that damage a child's sense of self, ability to have healthy relationships, and ability to function at home, at work and at school. However, in Mahachi-Harper's *Echoes in the shadows,* mental depression has been used to explain bigger issues, for example, the political or economic aspects of the novel. For instance, Vaida's family lives in abject poverty. She says, "…the poverty of my family seemed to go beyond that of the average family. My family of six lived in a two-roomed matchbox structure that was extremely cold in winter while turning into a furnace in the hot summer months" (p. 7). This paper is thus deeply concerned that girls, in particular adolescent girls, continue to be silent and invisible victims of violence, abuse and exploitation and that some patriarchal societies and legal instruments do not adequately address the vulnerability of girls in the administration of justice, including the need for better protection of child victims and witnesses.

As such, in *Echoes in the shadows*, Mahachi-Harper nags the conscience of many Zimbabweans in particular as well as many Africans in general, regarding the problem of the family institution and situation in a world of flux. She argues that there is no family love, care and unity as it was understood in the old sense, hence, the human bond has dissolved. In *Echoes in the shadows*, this insecure and sterile situation is cultivated and aggravated by the harsh economic climate as well as the HIV/AIDS pandemic. This paper thus argues that amidst a situation conducive to anarchy and chaos and sadism, families are now dysfunctional. The assumption is that these dysfunctional families not only breed social misfits but also impose stifling and dangerous identities on children; hence the pain and trauma. This is corroborated by Ngoshi's argument that the patriarchy and economic insecurity coalesce to erase the childhood of adolescent girls, in the process shattering the perceived stability of the categories child/girl and adult/parent (Ngoshi, 2010). Ngoshi (2010) further argues that some factors such as the legacies of patriarchal power, economic insecurity, the advent of HIV and AIDS and unstable identity categories occasioned by increased responsibilities disrupt and erase notions of girlhood.

Towards a child-centred social ethic

Of interest to the intentions of this paper are Ngoshi's (2010) reflections on girlhood in Zimbabwean literature. She points out that the analysis of girlhood has always lumped the adolescent girls together with the womenfolk and further argues that girlhood as an identity category is fluid and deserves its own analytical framework to theorise their experiences. This hybrid identity of the girl-child offers her a unique combination of girl and woman which instantly erases her girlhood identity. Notably, there are concealed connections and differences that are not made evident in the two words 'girl' and 'woman.' Although this paper is premised on the feminist theory, I would like to concur with Ngoshi that the collective feminist position does not re-vision girlhood as a different category from womanhood, hence presupposes that their experiences are the same. Based upon the premise that the girl-child and woman categories are the same, I posit that the feminist theory is conceptually flawed. The boundaries between the two categories are "artificial, socially magnified, and politically motivated" (as Cohen cited in Kurth-Schai, 1997, p. 200). As such, there is need to adopt what Warren and Cheney define as a child-centered social ethic centered in themes of "relationship, pluralism, inclusion, and transformation" (as cited in Kurth-Schai, 1997, p. 201).

Although Mahachi-Harper's *Echoes in the shadows* can be analysed from a feminist perspective, I argue that such an analysis obscures important differences between the girl-child and the woman, and children and adults. That the girl and woman categories are distinct is shown through Vaida and the adult characters in the narrative. Their needs and experiences are different. Through Vaida, Mahachi-Harper demonstrates the difficulty of transcending age and girlhood. As a child she is dehumanised by patriarchal social structures. The *chiramu* cultural practice, abused by aMasaga clearly illustrates the need for an alternative space that will demystify the objectification of the girl-child/woman. Furthermore, through Vaida, Mahachi-Harper questions the exploitation of the girl-child by a mother through forced marriage to an older man for material gains. Veronica, Vaida's sister is supposed to be her guardian and benefactor but she sacrifices her sister in order for her marriage to survive. At four months pregnant, Vaida decides to stay with her parents but Veronica threatens her and tells her that she cannot make a choice, "If you refuse to become aMasaga's um ... eh ... youngest wife, then you have to take full responsibility for your life. You cannot continue to stay here and live on what he and I give Father and Mother" (p. 34). Vaida's mother pushes her into the sexual snare set by aMasaga and her subsequent rape is celebrated by her family. Although the narrative suggests that poverty is the primary cause of the exploitation of the three women by the business man aMasaga,

the latter expects Vaida, his *muramu* to be sexually available if he is to assist financially. Vaida proves to be a brave girl but is unfortunately socially silenced and invisible to the justice system such that she fails to protect herself. It would seem that constructions of girlhood as womanhood are essential for the harmful practice of *chiramu* to be justified. However, Mahachi-Harper condemns mothers who deprive their children the motherly love and the protective home space they deserve.

At the end of the narrative, aMasaga deserts Veronica when he realises that she is HIV positive. He also deserts Vaida with her two children when he realises that Ropafadzo, their son was mentally retarded. Vaida notes, "ours was a struggle of the silenced, the unseeing and the mindless … My silence was one forced upon me in much the same way that Ropafadzo's was imposed on him" (p. 77). For all the arguments presented, it seems the ideology of the Shona culture shapes the ideas that adults have about children. These ideas not only influence the way adults deal with children, but also affect the development of the child and their perceptions of their society. Nodelman and Reimer (2003, p. 100), note that "children considered as a group are incontrovertibly, different from adults as a group." What this means is that, ideas about children and childhood are part of a society's ideology. Shahar (as cited in Nodelman and Reimer, 2003, p. 82), contend that "Child raising practices and educational methods as well as parent-child relations are determined not solely by biological laws but are culturally constructed." I believe Shahar presents a persuasive case that requires a different conception of childhood that will stress mutual trust in relationships, thus enabling a child-centred social ethic. Possibly, such an ethic will extend "moral consideration to children not only as members of a broad social category but also as unique individuals." (Kurth-Schai, 1997, p. 204) As such, the girl-child's experiences are unique and hence the argument is that there is a need to reimage the girl-child's position in such practices. The reimaging of girlhood, recasting of girlhood/female/child agency, and the inclusion of children's voices implies meaningful relationships and promotes a child-centred social ethic.

Conclusion

The paper is thus deeply concerned about the literary representation of the discrimination against the girl-child and the violation of the rights of the girl-child, which often is a result of dominant discourses such as patriarchy. By and large, it encourages people to maintain and preserve what is termed 'their culture' and 'identity' and these are perceived as homogenous, authentic, originary and unchanging. By delving into the domain of sex and sexuality, and by satirising the Shona custom of "*chiramu*," Mahachi-Harper's *Echoes in the shadows* has deconstructed these dominant discourses and has triggered debates on fundamental issues that affect the emotions and psyche of young-adults. From a feminist perspective, issues such as, visibility, marginality, victimhood, silence, agency and objectivity are problematised in the narrative. In the process, it is noted that differences between girlhood and womanhood exist. The girl-child is vulnerable and powerless as she is victimised and threatened by an adult-centred society. Thus, the study seeks to expose the weak foundations of what is considered as truth, knowledge and identity. The conventional culture is actually destabilised. In fact, the study's argument is that societies should not continue holding on to a single centre or regarding culture and identity as natural, rigid and permanent. As such, a child centred social ethic that promotes reciprocal relationships and offers alternative spaces for the protection of the girl-child is advocated for. To ensure justice for children, it is important that their voices be heard as a way of shifting the centre and of giving agency to silent issues and silenced subjects.

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