

Gender representation in children's literature: Limits and potential in Stephen Alumenda's *Marita goes to school* and *Marita's great idea*, and Jairos Kangira's *The bundle of firewood*

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Abstract

Different societies across the globe usually contrast masculinity with femininity. Men are often portrayed in more positive terms that include being strong, achievers and providers, while women are depicted as the opposite. Such masculinities have emerged to be frameworks within which literary texts can be critiqued. In this article, I employ hegemonic and subordinate masculinities to argue that children's stories can be utilised to transform unequal gender relations. I explore how Stephen Alumenda and Jairos Kangira respond to gender issues in Zimbabwean children's literature. The first section is a brief introduction that unpacks the concept of children's literature and places the discussion of gender representation in children's literature within the context of African literature. In the second segment, I outline how Alumenda endeavours to promote the education of the girl child. The third part highlights how this theme is advanced by Jairos Kangira, another author of children's books.

Introduction

The theme of gender has become topical in the study of African children's literature. It is important to observe that the pioneers of African literature were exclusively male. The generation of Cyprian Ekwensi, Chinua Achebe and others was characterised by a male outlook. This was in keeping with the African patriarchal conviction that only the boy child constituted a worthwhile investment. Consequently, there were fewer African women who made it to secondary school, let alone university in the 1950s and 1960s. The Nigerian feminist scholar, Ifi Amadiume (1987) argues that patriarchy within traditional institutions was strengthened by the introduction of patriarchal religions such as Christianity. This worsened the situation of women in Africa, she argues.

However, following the pioneering work of Flora Nwapa and others in the 1970s, many African women writers have emerged. African women writers such as Buchi Emecheta, Besie Head, Neshani Andreas, Yvonne Vera, Ama Ata Aidoo, Valerie Tagwira, Sindiwe Magona, Freedom Nyamubaya and others demonstrate a concern for the liberation of African women. In Zimbabwe, the theme of gen-

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der in literature has received a lot of attention from established scholars and in dissertations by students. Gaidzanwa (1985) examined the images of women in Zimbabwean literature and concluded that most authors were not sensitive in their descriptions of women. Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) has been hailed as the country's first outstanding feminist novel, winning international attention. The emergence of Yvonne Vera in the 1990s also reinforced interest in the gender dimension within Zimbabwean literature. Despite the scholarly interest in the gender dimension, when compared to adult literature, there has been limited examination of this theme within the context of children's literature. One would argue that it is not convincing to begin to explain equitable gender relations to grown up men and women because, by this time, the notion of gender divisions would have been internalised to an extent where very little transformation can take place. It is on children that creative writers with the task of changing oppressive gender relations in society should concentrate in order to catch them young.

The term "children's literature" may appear simple to define, yet it is full of intricacies that need to be unpacked. Some critics have proffered different definitions of children's literature, focusing on technical, conceptual, political and terminological aspects (Chitando, 2009). Children's literature may be defined as literature written for children. However, this definition is limited because books written for, or about children, may not necessarily be for children, as they may be used to perpetuate some adult ideologies. One may also argue that children's literature is literature with a child narrator - a definition that again may not be deemed comprehensive of what children's literature is, given that the presence of a child narrator or character does not guarantee that the book is for children, particularly in instances when the content sounds adult-oriented. This is why Muponde (2004) argues that there has to be a clear distinction between 'children's literature' and 'children in literature' in order to avoid conceptual limitations. From the meanings attempted above, it is evident that the definition of children's literature remains debatable: "... it is critical to see it as a contested terrain, one in which the tensions and conflicts of the larger society manifest themselves" (Muponde, 2015, p. 2).

Questions such as who is the writer of children's literature, who is a child, and whether a child is defined in terms of the number of years, further complicate the discussion. For example, a definition that is guided by age, expressed in number of years may be limited, in view of the fact that different societies have different interpretations of who can be considered a child. The term children's literature thus remains controversial. However, one needs to come up with a working definition. In this paper, children's literature is understood to be one which focuses on the child and/or young adult,

written for/about children by adults or children themselves, addressing children's sensibilities and worldview: "... a book that is largely produced with a child's interest and needs in mind" (Wilson-Tagoe, 1992, p. 18).

Marita goes to school: Alumenda and the girl child in Zimbabwe

An analysis of Alumenda's selected works shows commitment to the improvement of the welfare of the girl child. In this fictional work, Alumenda puts forward his proposals regarding a better world for the indigenous girl child. His novel suggests that the formal education system provides the surest way of empowering the Zimbabwean girl child. It is of significance to note that Alumenda's works are positive stories about girls' rights to education. This leaves the impression that formal education improves individuals' chances for social and economic upward mobility, hence liberating themselves from poverty and perhaps, eventually becoming leaders in their respective communities. No wonder responsible parents tend to encourage their children to follow this path. Many a time, the route to education has worked in societies. Nevertheless, one may not ignore situations where it has failed, as is the case in Charles Mungoshi's *Waiting for the rain* (1975), where Lucifer's mission education does not benefit members of his family.

In *Marita goes to school*, Alumenda (1997) tells the story of the little girl, Marita's, quest for education. While her brother Ngoni attends the local Chimbarami Primary School, she stays at home. Her father, in a retrogressive patriarchal stance, maintains that it is a waste of time and money to send girls to school as they are bound to get married (p. 1). As observed above, this has been a common refrain within Zimbabwean communities, although attitudes have since changed for the better. Marita often hears her father arguing with her mother, who wants Marita to go to school. She only goes to school in her dreams, with her brother cruelly teasing her for her sense of ambition. Through Marita, Alumenda also comments on the discrimination experienced by the girl child:

Marita wondered why boys were always allowed to do what they wanted, while girls had to collect firewood, wash the pots and help with the sweeping at home. Boys were supposed to be stronger than girls; at least that is what they always said. Why then should they do less work? (p. 4)

Marita's village is quite conservative and is critical of Miss Hombo, the school teacher who is fond of wearing trousers. She has a blue car, and she is not married. The villagers call her a "hen-cock" because of her independence. They use culture to justify themselves. The villagers feel that she poses a threat to indigenous cultural traditions. The complicity of African women in promoting patriarchal

oppression is seen in how many of the women in the village despised Miss Hombo. It took the Regional Director, Mr Mlambo, to stop the villagers from forcing the lady teacher out of Chimbarami Primary School. Mr Mlambo explained that Miss Hombo had the same qualifications as the male teachers, and that they just had to accept her (p. 6). Marita admired Miss Hombo's success and independence, although she felt sorry that the community did not appreciate her status.

One day, Miss Hombo gives Marita a lift in the rain. Marita seizes the opportunity to tell her that she did not attend school. Miss Hombo tells Marita that her own father had been opposed to the education of girls. However, one day a young lady filled in the forms for him in the bank as he could not do so himself. This led to a fundamental change in his attitude towards the education of the girl child. The young lady had suggested that he should send his daughter to school. Thus the lady in the bank, Saliwe, had contributed to Miss Hombo's advancement as her father ultimately allowed her to go to school. The story is suggesting that women need to be in solidarity with each other if they are to progress. As shall be discussed below, Miss Hombo adds to the chain by helping Marita to develop, as she herself had benefited from Saliwe.

Miss Hombo decided to give Marita free reading lessons. Marita secretly attended her lessons and she learnt quickly. She even found a secluded spot where she would do further reading by herself. After some months, "she was able to read and write even better than her brother Ngono" (p. 12). In this loaded sentence, *Marita goes to school* is making a plea on behalf of the Zimbabwean girl child. If given the chance, she can even out-do the favoured boy child, the story suggests. Thus, against all odds, Marita becomes able to read and write. One is reminded of the slave narratives. Slaves, such as Frederick Douglass, were denied access to education, just like the girl child in Marita's case. These two groups, the slave and the girl child, embody the worst forms of oppression and exclusion. Their talents are suppressed, yet ultimately, at a symbolical level, the act of writing becomes an act of self-liberation, defying all odds.

One day, when all the other children in Chitsike village had gone to a sports competition at another school, Marita got the opportunity to demonstrate her newly and secretly acquired skills. Mr Chari, a member of the community, had brought an urgent letter from the city. However, both he and Marita's father could not read. Like Marita's father, Mr Chari did not send his daughters to school. Alu-menda addresses, through the story, the futility of retrogressive African patriarchal traditions. By failing to send their daughters to school, these two men were not only sacrificing the futures of their children, but they were also putting themselves at a disadvantage. Marita's mother seized on the

two men's desperation, pointing out that if Marita had gone to school, she could have helped them by reading the letter. The story exposes the folly of retrogressive patriarchy.

The story challenges hegemonic masculinities that thrive on the cultural domination of women by men. According to Akosua Ampofo and John Boateng (2011, pp. 422-423), hegemonic masculinities present "... a version of how men should behave and how putative real men behave as the cultural ideal..." Progressive types of masculinity are sensitive to the welfare of men, women and children. Women and men play complementary roles in society (Hudson-Weems, 2004). Advanced societies generally advocate other forms of masculinities that have different and more progressive definitions for men. One such alternative is subordinate masculinity.

Subordinate masculinity challenges hegemonic masculinities and views it as unsustainable. It questions the dominant portrayal of men as strong, intelligent, fearless, brave and commanding, among others. It does not readily endorse the dominant ideas of what it means to be a man in society, particularly when these notions are meant to promote the domination of women and children by men. However, hegemonic masculinities are always alert to repress subordinate masculinity, for fear of defeat. This is why those men who are sensitive to women and children's plight, are often laughed at by those who support hegemonic masculinity (Chitando, 2011).

The power of literacy is seen in how young Marita becomes the heroin when she offers to read the letter. As in a folktale, this is the climax of the story. A character that has been underrated rises to the occasion by accomplishing what the elders could not do. It is reminiscent of stories of little animals, such as the tortoise, succeeding where bigger animals such as the elephant, lion, and others would have failed. Marita surprises her parents and Mr Chari by reading the letter (p. 18). This simple exercise of a small girl managing to read a letter when she is deemed incapable has the status of a major revelation to Kondai, Marita's father. He confesses that Marita had opened his eyes. Through this story, fathers who are still trapped in repressive old patriarchal ideas are challenged. The whole set-up is encouraging: mother, father and daughter are drawn together, the ideal scenario that Hudson-Weems' (2004, p. 1) theory of Africana Womanism advocates:

Africana Womanism emerged from the acknowledgement of a long-standing authentic agenda for that group of women of African descent who needed only to be properly named, and officially defined, according to their own unique historical and cultural matrix; one that would reflect the co-existence of men and women in a concerted struggle for the survival of their entire family/community.

Equally enlightened, Mr Chari undertakes to sell his two cows in order to send his two daughters to school. The fluidity of deeply entrenched notions is, therefore, highlighted. People, perceptions and culture change. Mr Chari's positive change becomes counter-discourse to the grand feminist theory as his act shows that indeed, there are 'good men' who are 'good fathers', as demonstrated by Mr Chari. By the portrayal of Mr Chari as a changed man, who is now also sensitive to his daughter's education needs, the story challenges society to change for the better. Both Mr Chari and Mrs Chari are likely to benefit when they send their children (daughters and sons) to school.

The negative socialisation of the boy child is highlighted in Ngonzo's dismissal of Marita as a "dumb-head", and comparing her to the old blind man, Gora. The story ends with Marita's father having registered her at the local primary school. Marita's success excites Miss Hombo who "knew that when one girl did well, there would be others as well" (p. 20). The story borrows from the slogan that, when one educates a girl child, one would have educated the entire nation. This is due to the responsibilities that women face in bringing up children. Other villagers began to emulate Marita's father in sending their daughters to school, and Miss Hombo gained respect for her efforts.

Salvation through education: *Marita's great idea*

Alumenda continues with the story of Marita in a, *Marita's great idea* (Alumenda, 1998). Marita is now in Grade Five, and Miss Hombo continues to assist her. However, there is a serious shortage of books at Chimbarami Primary School. Heavy rains have destroyed crops, leading to further desperation within the community. Marita reads newspapers to supplement the few school texts that are available. She gets excited after reading a report that Kambuzuma High School had held a successful fund-raising event. She went up to Miss Hombo who explains to her what is involved. They start planning to have their own fund-raising event.

Alumenda has captured the book famine that almost all rural schools in Zimbabwe face. Although the government embarked on a highly successful literacy campaign, including compulsory primary education for every child in the early years of independence, the adoption of the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) in the 1990s saw a massive reduction in spending in education. Many pupils have to share the few books that are available, and this has had a negative impact on the quality of education. Furthermore, a series of natural disasters, such as droughts and floods, have led to a lack of food security amongst rural communities. When this happens, it is extremely difficult to channel available resources towards education. Alumenda's capturing of life at Chim-

barami Primary School is quite realistic. Marita and Miss Hombo successfully mobilise the community to ensure the success of the fund-raising event at the school. Ngonzo typically tried to frustrate Marita's dream, but she remained resolute. She was also excited about the possibility of meeting famous writers, such as Shimmer Chinodya, Chenjerai Hove, Yvonne Vera, Charles Mungoshi, and many others (p. 17). Many young Zimbabweans, such as Marita, would welcome the opportunity to meet their own literary heroes in person. Only a few ever have the chance of actually travelling to the major cities to be able to meet them.

On the day of the function, many people from various walks of life attend. These include Mr Takaenda, the local Member of Parliament (MP). Alumenda leads the reader to conclude that little Marita is better than Mr Takaenda, the MP who specialises in long speeches without doing much for his constituency (p. 20). Alumenda's story delves into the world of politics. The story suggests that most elected politicians have not been actively involved in projects to empower their communities. Again, the choice of the name of the MP is deliberate. By calling him "Takaenda" (We are gone), the story is drawing attention to his anonymity. In fact, in Zimbabwean politics, some MPs are known as "Missing Person". Indeed, even in the very early years of independence, a satirical play, *The Honourable MP* (Musengezi, 1984) attacked the corruption and inefficiency of elected politicians. Mr Takaenda is in this group of politicians who do not have any credible plans to transform their constituencies.

Miss Hombo diplomatically tells Mr Takaenda to shorten his speech, confirming the criticism that politicians do not seek to liberate their communities. Rather, it is the creativity of its own members, such as little Marita and Miss Hombo, which will ensure that the community thrives. In other words, whilst nationalist discourses endorse the stereotypical "father of the nation", "founding father" and "*nyika yamadzibaba*" (nation of fathers), the literary artist affords us an opportunity to be perceptive and to see that heroism, creativity and innovativeness reside in those often peripherally treated and the marginalised (children) whose sense of altruism is contrasted to the self-centred and self-serving sense of personal aggrandisement in the political elite.

During the fund-raising event, many activities take place. Thopo's circus ensures that participants are fully entertained. Through Marita's great idea, the school raises money to buy a lot of books. The headmaster acknowledged the need to accept new ideas, and Marita is acknowledged as a heroine at assembly. Many book publishers like Baobab Books, Longman, College Press and the Zimbabwe Publishing House donate books to the school (p. 26). In this regard, the story is calling upon publishing houses to do more for rural schools. It is suggesting that they could provide some supplementary

texts so that more Zimbabwean children have access to books. A Writers and Readers Club is formed, and national newspapers run the unique story of Chimbarami Primary School and its efforts to transform its situation. The school even buys a new dictionary, a gesture that demonstrates the power of the word. Marita promises to continue with her creativity at the end of the story.

The portrayal of the girl child in Alumenda's works

In the stories on Marita, the importance of educating the girl child in Zimbabwe is underlined. The stories challenge patriarchal traditions that do not allow the girl child the chance to express herself fully. As noted earlier, the girl child in Zimbabwe has been disadvantaged for a long time. The situation has been compounded by the exploitation of some oppressive traditional beliefs that lead to the low status of women in society. Certain retrogressive Shona beliefs tend to regard women as specialising in witchcraft, gossiping and for being cowardly. In such cases, the worst insult for a man is to be called a "woman". To be a woman is to lack courage, creativity, and strength of character. Some Shona beliefs relating to purity also tend to accord low value to women because of their biological condition. It is only women who have stopped menstruating, that is those "who have become men", who play leading roles in brewing ancestral beer.

Women who tend to defeat patriarchal oppression are regarded as "men". Thus, a successful, independent woman is said to be "*murume pachake*" (she is a man in her own right). While the birth of the boy child is the cause for celebration, the girl child is in some cases grudgingly accepted. Alternatively, she may be embraced for her potential to bring wealth to the family through the bride price. This is why in Nyamfukudza (1991) the nameless narrator's father continues to ask her when she would get married.

It is the boy child who is regarded as the route for the perpetuation of the family's name. Emecheta (1979) portrays the importance attached by some African societies to child bearing, and most significantly, giving birth to sons. As a result of this, some families have witnessed a lot of tension due to the birth of baby girls only. Some husbands have had extra-marital affairs in their quest to have sons. It is within such an environment that Alumenda writes. The stories essentially force society to reconsider its stance on the girl child.

Marita shatters the myth that women have to rely on men for success. She acquires reading and writing skills under very difficult circumstances from a fellow woman. Once in school, she is creative and hard-working. Alumenda's two stories on Marita constitute a passionate call for society to reflect on the needs

of the girl child. The name of this leading character is also likely to stick to memory for many readers within Zimbabwe. A funeral song, "*Maria naMarita*" (Mary and Martha), derived from the biblical story of the two sisters who requested Jesus to bring their brother Lazarus back to life, is quite common. Readers begin to think of Marita, the "dead" girl who springs to "life" through her access to education. The book, *Marita goes to school* is used by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in its gender awareness programmes, highlighting the significance of the text (Chiweshe, 2004).

The portrayal of the competition between Marita and Ngonzo, her brother, seeks to draw attention to the privileges enjoyed by the boy child. It is Ngonzo who goes to school, although he is intellectually inferior to Marita. Ngonzo takes his patriarchal privileges for granted and even abuses his sister. These works are meant to be an inspiration to the girl child, while also challenging the boy child to reflect on the need for more equity. Where rigid and oppressive gender roles are sustained by appeals to culture and tradition, the stories call upon society to save the girl child from suffocation, neglect and abuse.

Although the stories are clearly determined to present the Zimbabwean girl in a more favourable and liberating perspective, the project faces a number of challenges. To begin with, the investment in Western education as the channel for women's liberation may not be worthwhile. Education is certainly very important for the advancement of women in Africa. However, it has not proved to be the final solution to gender discrimination. The roots of patriarchal authority run deep in Africa, Zimbabwe included. The education system itself is the very centre of patriarchal values. Contemporary education is not sufficiently empowered to make the girl child sensitive to gender dynamics in society. Although some progress has been achieved, the curriculum remains conservative, with traditional gender roles being reinforced in the school system. Teachers and pupils continue to see nothing wrong in maintaining old patriarchal values.

Social vision in Alumenda's works: A critical review

The stories' chosen vehicle for the liberation of the girl child in Zimbabwe is itself in great need of reform. The greatest dangers to gender equity are some African nationalists who defend oppressive values in the name of "our African culture". When gender activists point out that there are cultural elements that are in need of reform, they are quickly dismissed as agents of Western imperialism. Where most male African nationalists and writers want to defend "African culture", feminists seek to interrogate culture to get rid of aspects that cause pain and suffering to women. A good example is in the area of female genital mutilation (circumcision), where most African men who do not experi-

ence the pain anywhere, insist on sustaining the practice, but gender activists are calling for its abolition. It is also important to observe that educating the girl child without changing the social system in which the educated woman will operate is not very helpful. The stories needed to have paid more attention on the transformation of society, rather than pursuing the educational careers of specific individuals.

The case of Miss Hombo in Alumenda's *Marita goes to school* may serve to illustrate this point well. Although she is educated and successful, she is not accepted by the community in which she operates. It does not matter that she has a car and is financially independent; she is not able to enjoy the fruits of her labour. This echoes Maiguru's predicament in Dangarembga's *Nervous conditions*. Maiguru is well-educated and full of potential. However, she is reduced to a restrictive traditional role by oppressive patriarchy, championed by her husband, Babamukuru. From the portrayal of Maiguru and Miss Hombo above, it is clear that Zimbabwean women can obtain the highest possible educational qualifications that are available. However, until such a time when patriarchal values that deny equality between the sexes are undermined, they may not experience total freedom.

Many educated and successful Zimbabwean women continue to be oppressed in the various spheres of life. These include marriage, at the work place, and others. Some patriarchal teachings have led most men and some women to take the oppression of women as a natural fact of life. However, one is not denying that the educated Zimbabwean women has better chances of confronting negative patriarchal values. One is only drawing attention to the fact that education alone is not adequate to ensure that the Zimbabwean girl child can enjoy life.

In their criticism of patriarchy, Alumenda's stories might have also portrayed African men in a totally negative manner, without take other factors into consideration. Although the discrimination against the girl child is to be condemned, the issue of poverty in Africa also needs to be taken into account. Most parents would like all their children to have access to education, but their resources are severely limited. Authors such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o have shown how African societies have been victims of neo-colonialism. While it is easy to condemn Marita's father for not sending her to school, there is need for caution as his situation of poverty might force him to become abusive. Thus, although African men might appear backward and insensitive, the global economy might have reduced their options.

At the level of developing characters, the stories may be criticised for coming up with flawless female figures. They are too exceptional to be real. Marita's accomplishments are astonishing, as she receives secret education and masters reading and writing in a very short time. She also has better insights than her teachers and the headmaster. The female characters are burdened with outstanding achievements. Chinua Achebe cautions against this tendency. He argues that although writers may create heroes and heroines, certain aspects of a hero's or heroine's character should not pass the test of heroism. According to him, if the hero or heroine is "absolutely flawless, you'll create a cardboard, wooden character, not a character that lives" (Ohaeto, 2003, p. 10).

While cultural feminism extols the positive qualities of what is viewed as feminine virtue, the portrayal of women as sensitive, nonviolent and caring also tends to confirm the traditional stereotype. This presents women as being guided more by their feelings than by rational reflections. In the context of Zimbabwe where women face many challenges, this image might lead the girl child to be less aggressive. Although it is important for women to show concern for others and to have a "motherly instinct", it should be noted that society has often taken advantage of this. The stories perpetuate the impression that women are soft and considerate. It is also necessary to encourage the girl child to be aggressive and to work hard to transform her situation, even when this goes against social expectations.

Although the stories try to challenge society by presenting the girl child as equally deserving in terms of getting access to education, they do not alter the career possibilities of the girl child in a radical way. Writing in a South African context, Grobler (1988) highlights some of the main challenges relating to the portrayal of the girl child in youth literature:

The title of this paper, *Me Tarzan, You Jane*, was chosen because it sums up the sex role stereotypes expressed by the readers: boys/men are the leaders, girls/women are the followers; boys invent and girls use what boys invent; boys become engineers, doctors, lawyers, firemen, hunters, traders, engine drivers, etc. and girls become mummies or nurses, teachers and secretaries; boys become presidents and girls become first ladies- in short, boys *do*; girls *are* (Grobler, 1988, p. 127).

In fairness, the author has covered appreciable ground in gender representation in Zimbabwean children's literature. Most of the criticisms noted above are due to the fact that the oppression of women in society is so widespread that a single author should not be expected to correct this at once. In a real sense, therefore, the author's achievements in his descriptions of the Zimbabwean

girl child are quite commendable. The author has been able to articulate some of the hopes and fears of the girl child. This concern is also seen in the work of another Zimbabwean children's literature author, Jairos Kangira, discussed in the subsequent section.

The depiction of the girl child in Jairos Kangira's *The bundle of firewood*

Jairos Kangira resembles Alumenda's approach in handling the theme of gender in children's literature. His book, *The bundle of firewood* (2003) is the story of Tariro, the orphan whose parents died of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) when she was very small. She is now being looked after by her old grandmother. One day, as she is looking for firewood, Tariro comes across a pangolin. According to Shona traditions, this is a sacred animal. Alongside some rare snakes, lions and other animals, it is believed to represent the presence of the ancestors. Tariro's courage and environmental sensitivity is seen in how she looks after this special creature. On the other hand, Tariro's grandmother sees the pangolin as an opportunity for them to break from the cycle of poverty that has engulfed them. In the dark of night, she enters into an agreement with Lififi, the notorious businessman. Tariro's grandmother offers to sell the pangolin to Lififi so that he can have medicine to promote his business. Tariro overhears the conversation, and develops a plan to rescue the small creature from sure death.

Although Tariro is poor, and realises how her grandmother is struggling to ensure their survival, she does not approve of the plan to use the little creature for economic reasons. Tariro's commitment to wildlife is seen in how she undertakes a daring trip to Impala Game Park where the safety of the pangolin is more guaranteed. She takes a bus ride at night, with insufficient bus fare, in her quest to save the little creature from Lififi. She is harassed by the bus conductor, who verbally abuses her for not having the required bus fare. She is forced to disembark in the night. Only the timely intervention of the people from the Department of Wildlife Management saves her by offering her a lift in the forest. The story falls within the eco-criticism debate and calls for society to conserve and celebrate its natural heritage.

The cruelty of the bus conductor, who declares that Tariro's status as an orphan has nothing to do with him (p. 20) captures the disintegration of African social values. Whilst in the past every child was regarded as the responsibility of all members of the community, there is now emphasis on attaining maximum financial rewards. For the conductor and his capitalist employer, the most important thing is money. All other values are meaningless if they do not ensure financial advance-

ment. However, the kindness of Sergeants Winfreda Musara and Lungisani Mbongeni allows the reader to retain some belief in human nature.

It is in her conversation with the two officers that Tariro's dire circumstances are revealed to the reader. Her parents died of AIDS when she was in Grade Three. She dropped out of school as there was no one to pay her school fees. Her only surviving relative was her grandmother (p. 26). HIV and AIDS have decimated families, leading to the rise of many orphans and vulnerable children (Chitando and Madongonda, 2013). The task of looking after these children has in most instances fallen to ageing grandmothers. These grandmothers do not have adequate resources to ensure that the children are educated. The major challenge is the welfare of these children when the grandmothers succumb to death due to old age. The strain of raising children yet again also compromises the health of the grandmothers.

Like the successful role models in Alumenda's stories, Tariro's dedication to the pangolin receives press coverage. The officers are impressed by her commitment and allow her to visit the game park from time to time. They also make it a point to visit Tariro and her grandmother whenever they pass through their area. This is the story's own message to society. It calls upon society to be sensitive to the situation of orphans and the grandmothers who look after them. Although material resources may be limited, people can make a difference by just making time to be with them. Often, their lives are routine, lonely and sad. Kangira shows how Tariro and her grandmother have their spirits lifted whenever the people from the department of Wildlife Management visit them.

One day, Mr Dube, the National Director of the Wildlife Society, meets Tariro at the game park. He assures her that although they do not have a lot of money, they would strive to award her a scholarship to enable her to finance her studies. This would be in recognition of her commitment to wildlife. Thus, Tariro's life undergoes change when she goes back to the local primary school. She then studies Veterinary Science after High School and becomes a successful veterinary surgeon. "She is allowed a first taste of freedom as the game park is symbolic of the child's spiritual growth in a male dominated environment. Thus, the story demystifies traditional perceptions of children as submissive and silenced", (Pasi, 2012, p. 188). Tariro looked after her grandmother, until the old lady's death (p. 34).

Social vision in *The bundle of firewood*: A critical evaluation

Like Alumenda's works, Kangira's story focuses on the struggle of a Zimbabwean girl child. As an orphan, Tariro's vulnerability is worsened by living in a society in which the abuse of the girl child is common. Her grandmother worries about her being alone in the bush, and makes reference to the bad men of the village (p. 8). Newspaper reports are full of grown up men who shamelessly abuse vulnerable girls. This has been worsened by the myth, prevalent in South Africa and Zimbabwe, that having a sexual relationship with a virgin cures HIV and AIDS. A number of organisations, such as the Girl Child Network, have sought to promote the welfare of the girl child by exposing such myths. Kangira's work thus seeks to highlight the vulnerability of orphaned girls.

However, the story has a happy ending when Tariro pursues her education and embarks on a successful career. Her sense of direction and kindness to nature ensures that she manages to break from the circle of poverty. Kangira's story, like Alumenda's stories, sees education as the most effective weapon in the liberation of the African girl child. Tariro's future would not have been secured had she remained out of school. The scholarship enables her to continue with her education, demonstrating the need to extend more support to children in similar circumstances.

Kangira's story challenges society to adopt policies that address the plight of the orphaned girl child. With the right support, Tariro is able to move up the social ladder and becomes a successful veterinary surgeon. The choice of career is also significant as it challenges the tendency to limit the options for women to the traditional professions. Tariro's story can empower the Zimbabwean girl child to become more ambitious and to dream of a better world. In this regard, Kangira's story achieves more than Alumenda's, in that the former's story challenges the stereotypes relating to careers that are available for women. Furthermore, Kangira's story reminds the readers that the girl child can look after parents and guardians. Often, the investment in the boy child is motivated by the need to have security in the future, since the girl child would be married and moves to another family. Tariro shatters this trend by looking after her old grandmother up to her death. She is an upright, hard-working and focused woman who does not allow her circumstances to tie her down. Significantly, the story does not proceed to have Tariro get married and live happily ever after. Perhaps the institution of marriage in Zimbabwe is not the best set-up for the heroin Tariro to be snared in.

Although *The bundle of firewood's* for the welfare of the girl child in Zimbabwe has to be saluted, the story's approach suffers from the same weaknesses that characterise Alumenda's work. Since these have been outlined in the preceding section, I shall only state them briefly. The focus on the education of the girl does not ensure her total liberation, as many patriarchal practices continue to threat-

en educated women. Furthermore, the optimistic ending may be accused of lacking realism. The real world does not always allow dreams to be fulfilled. Kangira's story, therefore, falls into the same trap in which Alumenda's is caught up. In their efforts to lift up the spirits of children, the stories may be serving these children with unrealistic images of the world. Perhaps there is need for more stories that expose children to the painful realities of this world, yet celebrating their resilience and allowing them to come to terms with such facts.

Conclusion

In this article, I explored Alumenda's approach to the theme of gender in children's literature. I examined his portrayal of the girl child and acknowledged that his work largely succeeds in undermining patriarchal values that threaten to suffocate the girl child. However, I also highlighted some limitations within his approach. I utilised Kangira's work to illustrate the growing emphasis on education as the route towards the emancipation of women in Zimbabwe. My focus has been on the two authors' achievements, while pointing out some problematic dimensions of their work.

The girl child receives positive coverage in the children's stories discussed in this article. The heroines are predominantly disadvantaged girls who seize the opportunities created by education to alter their lives in a dramatic manner. Alumenda's work seeks to shake his society's conscience, and hopes to influence the emergence of a new society that is marked by more equitable gender relations. This vision is also shared by Kangira's story, which highlights the achievements of an orphaned girl child. However, I have argued that these two authors' works might be placing too much emphasis on the formal education system as the surest path towards the advancement of women in Zimbabwe. I have argued that there is need for radical changes in social values if this ideal is to be achieved and maintained.

I have also interrogated the happy endings in the children's stories as lacking realism. This runs the risk of exposing children to a utopian vision where all their dreams come true, and their aspirations are rewarded. It is significant to note that in Alumenda's stories, the female protagonists receive material rewards in the form of scholarships. They also receive publicity at assembly, and are praised for their achievements. Kangira's story follows the trend by having Tariro receive a scholarship, alongside having positive press coverage. Nonetheless, the usefulness of children's literature in promoting unbiased gender relation is acknowledged. This is why (Odaga, 1998, p. 23) argues that while "society's methods of socializing its members cannot be changed in a day, editors and writers

can be sensitised to the harmful effects of perpetuating gender disparity in children's literature" (Odaga, 1998, p. 23).

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