

The marginalised in post-independence Zimbabwe in selected stories in Memory Chirere's short story anthology *Somewhere in this country*

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Abstract

Memory Chirere is one of the contemporary Zimbabwean writers who uses the short story genre as a mode of expression. In his first collection of short stories in English under one book, *Somewhere in this Country* (2006), Chirere focuses on the marginalised members of society in their day-to-day struggles for survival in post-independence Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe's masses leading miserable lives, years after independence which was obtained in 1980, reflects that the black leaders failed to fulfill their erstwhile promises of better days to the majority. At the centre of each of the stories selected to be studied in this article, "Suburb", "An Old Man", "Maize" and "Sitting Carelessly" is the writer's touching compassion for the underprivileged members of society such as squatters, street kids, land-hungry peasants and displaced farm workers respectively. However, in "Maize" the black government is applauded for alleviating the situation of peasants by giving them land under the recent land reform programme. Hence, notable in Chirere's criticism of society and its institutions is his objectivity.

Introduction

Zimbabwe attained its independence in 1980 after a protracted and bitter armed struggle but capitalism remained intact. Socialism was not implemented despite much hype about its introduction. Astrow (1983) states that capitalism in post-independence Zimbabwe, largely driven by local and international white capitalists, the black ruling class and rich black entrepreneurs engendered and still engenders the political, economic and social marginalisation of the majority of Zimbabweans. The marginalised masses in post-independence Zimbabwe consist of such people as poor jobless citizens, poor urban workers, farm labourers, ex-farm workers, land-hungry peasants, squatters, and street kids.

The marginalised masses feel betrayed by the black leaders because they hoped for better living conditions after independence, rather than a life of deprivation and penury. However, in an effort to improve their lives, many workers and peasants in Zimbabwe participated in the "Third Chimurenga" (the third phase of the struggle for land) that started in earnest in 2000 to reclaim the land from whites.

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Memory Chirere is one of the Zimbabwean writers who portrays the plight of marginalised people in Zimbabwe in the post-independence period and also advances their cause for a better life in his collection of short stories in *Somewhere in this Country* (2006). In this article, four stories selected from the above anthology, namely "Suburb," "An Old Man," "Maize" and "Sitting Carelessly" will be analysed in the context of their writer's portrayal of the marginalised people in Zimbabwe after independence. The stories, "Suburb," "An Old Man" and "Sitting Carelessly" reveal and censure government's neglect and marginalisation of social groups such as squatters, street kids and displaced farm workers respectively. To these underprivileged members of society, independence does not make much sense as it by-passes them. However, in "Maize" the government is applauded for integrating the landless peasants into the economy by giving them land.

"Suburb"

"Suburb" is a story about squatters who live on the outskirts of an unnamed town to show the prevalence of squatter camps in Zimbabwe. The central character is an unnamed old man "with shaky hands and red eyes" (Chirere, 2006, p.10) indicating his poor health. His poor health is a result of inadequate food and poor living conditions. As a result, the old man "has neither dream nor pains", denoting his resigned state. (Chirere, 2006, p.10) Yet he still harbours a faint hope for good fortunes as hinted by the symbol of "the door that might open" (Chirere, 2006, p.11). The concept of knocking on the door symbolises the old man's search for better fortunes. This part of the story reminds one of Jesus' message to believers, "keep on knocking and the door will be opened to you." (Matthew 7 vs. 7). However, the old man's situation does not improve throughout the story.

One of the things which could be noted in this story is how the squatters try to retain some dignity amidst squalor. They live according to African values such as co-operation, respect for elders like the old man who is the natural leader of this community. They also consult him when they have disputes or when their children fall sick. The squatters have ambitions like any other people. Some of them work in town.

The title of the story *Suburb* is ironic as it refers to a squatter camp. Indeed, the squatters call their place "a suburb". This reflects their unfulfilled dreams of living in the low density areas where the affluent of society stay. In Zimbabwe, the word "suburb" is usually used to refer to low density areas such as Mount Pleasant and Chisipite in Harare. Such places were exclusively for whites before independence. Also the site of the squatter camp, which is at the outskirts of the town, has a symbolic resonance. It highlights the squatters' marginalized status. They are the outcasts of society as they live in make-shift dwellings. The old man's hovel is so awkward that he has to negotiate his way in, "sideways, bowing and sighing because the eaves were low" (Chirere, 2006, p.10). His fancy way of entering the house might produce humour but it highlights his homelessness and poverty.

At the end of the story, the squatters are under the threat of displacement by a bulldozer, workmen and gunmen. The bulldozer and gunmen are a symbol of the power of the government. The powers that be are ruthless to the powerless, vulnerable and underprivileged members of society. The "suburb" is, however,

saved by the old man whom the demolishers remember. The old man appears to be a character of national stature, “everyone who is literate and who can afford papers know the history of this country closely and must know who the old man was” (Chirere, 2006, p.11). He seems to have been a high-ranking combatant during the liberation war. He, thus, represents ex-combatants who were betrayed by the ruling elite.

Indeed to the squatters, independence does not have much significance. Instead of enabling these people to have decent accommodation, clean water and healthy sanitary conditions, the authorities worsen their situation by threatening to evict them. Hence, Chirere’s story is criticising the powers that be for neglecting and intention to worsen the welfare of some of the country’s citizens. One finds it ironic that Africans in Zimbabwe can become squatters in the land of their birth. Although Chirere’s story ends with the squatters only being threatened by eviction, the eviction of squatters in the post-independence era in Zimbabwe was widespread.

The pathetic situation of squatters reflects the unrelieved suffering of the masses in Zimbabwe after independence. The betrayal of the masses by the ruling elite has always been the trend in post-independent African countries as Nkrumah (1970, p. 38) observes:

The intelligentsia always leads the nationalist movement in its early stages. It aspires to replace the colonial power, but not to bring about a radical transformation of society. The object is to control the “system” rather than to change it; since the intelligentsia tends as a whole to be bourgeois-minded and against revolutionary socialist transformation.

The ruling elite’s self-serving practices done at the expense of the majority of the people reflect class contradictions re-emerging and becoming clearer after independence in African countries.

“An Old Man”

The story, “An Old Man” focuses on the sordid existence of street kids in Harare. The street kids are homeless and roam the streets in search of food in dust bins. This kind of life dehumanises them. Their life is worse than that of squatters in the story “Suburb” because, at least, the squatters have make-shift homes, families and, in other cases, jobs in town.

The street kids in the story under present discussion are orphans running away from Mozambique, “where wars were endless and young boys owned guns” (Chirere, 2006, p.41). These children, who had been turned into killing machines back home, continue to suffer in the streets of Harare where they fight each other for survival:

the instinct of the war zone is replayed in their day-to-day interaction with each other. The impact of war, homelessness and poverty on children has created street monsters like Raji, and there is a sense of “going” nowhere in particular” in this vicious cycle of violence. (Chihota and Muponde, 2000, p.7)

Raji terrorises other street kids and when Zhuwawo ventures into Raji’s area

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of control, Raji and other boys chase him till he is fatally run over by a car. But Raji himself is sexually abused by women, "the boys always whispered slyly that when women were not serious with anyone, they invited Raji to do things with them." (Chirere, 2006, p.41) Raji was also exploited by a couple that employed him as a garden boy but refused to pay him. He attempts to hit back at this couple by stealing their baby and trying to tie it to the railway line so that it could be crushed by a train. The arrival of the police on the spot saves the baby.

The death of Zhuwawo leaves Sami, his friend, lonely and even more vulnerable. Guchu (2006, p.7) states that:

in the story, Chirere is saying that street kids are people. They need company. They have feelings that can be injured just like a kid who sleeps in a warm bed in some other home.

Harsh street life, anxiety, stress and persistent hunger make Sami prematurely look like an old man hence the title of the story "An Old Man."

Muchemwa (2001, p. 105) comments that:

the rapid ageing of Sami in a single episode metaphorically represents the fast descent of society into moral anarchy and despair. Post-coloniality has brutally destroyed normal growth.

What also makes Sami look like an old man is the "long dust coat" (Chirere, 2006, p.39) he usually wears. In fact, most of the boys in the streets such as Raji and Zhuwawo wear oversize clothes. This further highlights their destitution. Sami's situation of homeless does not improve as, at the end of the story, we are told that, "he moved on, going nowhere in particular." (Chirere, 2006, p.43) The story is open-ended to show that Sami's problems are still going on.

Guchu (2006, p. 7) says that:

the story is told in a playful manner that belie (sic) the pain and the depth of the matter. The use of children's voices and the viewing of the world through children's eyes sometimes shame adults who often take children for granted.

However, the story, by focusing only on street boys and leaving out street girls, fails to provide the full picture of street life in Harare, in particular, and Zimbabwe in general.

Bourdillon (2001, p.5) observes that:

In Harare, much attention is paid to street boys, who are very visible on the streets. Homeless girls quickly get drawn into the sex industry. They spend less time on the streets, and when they do appear they look well dressed and well nourished. They are not so noticeable, and people hardly ever talk about them ... arguably, these girls are more abused and more in need of help than the boys.

The presence of street kids is a symptom of larger social, political and economic problems in post-independence Zimbabwe. Problems such as abuse, poverty, overcrowded conditions, domestic violence and neglect at home can force children into the streets. Street kids experience rude disruptions of their childhood

as they are violently shoved into the ugly adult world as seen in the story “An Old Man”. (Muchemwa, 2001, p. 102) The story, therefore, scrutinises the flipside of the post-independent Zimbabwean society which is full of abnormalities; children living in the streets and their heart-rending way of life being some of them.

The public shun street kids save for organisations that try to help some of them. Council authorities do not involve street kids in their plans but instead see them as unsightly people who tarnish the image of the city. Bourdillon (2001, p.2) blames the government for neglecting street kids:

the government has the responsibility of looking after all its citizens. When they are children on the streets who do not have adequate food and shelter, government is clearly failing in its responsibility.

Bourdillon (2001, p.2) adds that street kids appear to be denied some or all fundamental rights of children such as a home, a caring family environment, playing games and having fun, attending school, being provided with food, and health care. Hence, independence does not have much meaning to street kids given their underprivileged status. Chirere should be commended for highlighting the plight of street kids in his story “An Old Man.”

“Maize”

In the story, “Maize” Chirere, this time focuses on an unnamed single peasant woman who is a beneficiary of the land reform programme that started in 2000. The woman represents peasants who were allocated portions of land in the land reform programme. Paradzayi (2007, p.3) says that in 2000 the government embarked on a massive land redistribution programme that has “resulted in thousands of hectares of land being unalienated by the state using the Land Acquisition Act for redistribution to the landless indigenous people. Southern Times (2006) points out that:

the stories “Maize” and “Signs” are very familiar, drawing as they do from the fertile template of Zimbabwe’s land reform programme. Stories in Zimbabwean short story anthologies have rarely been told from the land angle, often regarded as one of the sacred subjects in Zimbabwean literature. Here (in “Maize”) Chirere demonstrates how resettlements have given birth to new beginnings, hope and some anxieties.

In “Maize” Chirere celebrates the land reform programme. He applauds the black government for economically empowering its citizens by giving them land unlike in earlier stories like “Suburb” and “An Old Man” in which it neglected the welfare of squatters and street kids respectively.

The land reform was necessary given the importance of the land to individuals and the national economy. The land is a primary means of production. From the land, we get food, raw materials for the industry, minerals, underground and surface water, income and other benefits. People build their houses on the land. The land also gives us an identity and a sense of belonging. The land reform was done to redress imbalances in land ownership between blacks and whites. In the colonial times, in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) white settlers owned over half of the best land and the majority of blacks were congested in infertile Tribal Trust Lands which constituted 21% of the land and black small-scale

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farmers occupied the Native Purchase Areas which constituted 8% of the land. (Stoneman, 1981, pp.129-130) The need to return the lost lands to blacks was one of the most important reasons for the armed struggle. Moyana (1984) states that the promise to return the lost lands to the people was a key factor in mobilising peasants in the rural areas during the armed struggle. Moyo (1995, p.11) reiterates the importance of land reform in Zimbabwe:

any rational government or ruling party, which was bent not only on securing rural votes, but also peace and economic stability, given the land history of Zimbabwe, would promote land reform.

The land reform programme would economically empower the landless Zimbabweans.

In the story “Maize”, an unnamed single peasant woman is a happy beneficiary of the land reform:

She was: nevertheless, satisfied that she had come here and this beneath her feet was her land, soil. Her own virgin earth where one could dig and dig without striking rock. (Chirere, 2006, p.63)

The woman is not the only beneficiary of fertile land but her new neighbours in the nearby farms as well. The woman plants maize as it is a staple crop and easier to manage. The story values hard work. At the end of the story, the woman ends up living together with the man who had kept coming to her new portion of land.

Southern Times (2006) comments that:

In a way, the depiction of the attachment to land in a romantic manner could be symbolic. The metaphorical courtship between the man and woman paralleled with the caring of the maize and its coming to fruition depicts that land is something that needs to be courted and cared for as it were, if it is to yield good harvest. The more one cares for it, the more the love between the owner if the land flourishes and it needs deep and natural understanding, not mercenary motives.

What is noteworthy in the story is the fulfillment of Zimbabwean women's need for land. Moyo (1995, p.165) notes that apart from young men, single, separated and defacto women heads of households constituted a majority of those in need of land. Income derived from the effective use of land is most critical to women, given their responsibility for the care and well-being of children. In this context, women required and demanded access to land in their own right, whatever their civil status.

“Sitting Carelessly”

The story, “*Sitting Carelessly*” is not against land reform. In fact, it mirrors the irreversibility of the land redistribution programme. However, in the story, Chirere reveals how the land reform failed to include displaced farm workers in its agenda. What worsens the situation of a displaced farm worker like Pempani Pempani in “*Sitting Carelessly*,” is that he is the son of a migrant farm worker from Zambia and has no home to go to. Without homes and source of income, Pempani and his friend Jerod are forced to stay “at a place by a road” (Chirere, 2006, p.77) where they carve wooden objects for sale.

It is ironic that Pempani's situation of homelessness is worse than that of an

ant he sees “dragging a straw of dry grass into a neatly hewn hole in the soil” (Chirere, 2006, p.76) at the beginning of the story. Pempani’s wife and children go to stay with the wife’s parents in Murehwa. Pempani’s in-laws despise him because he is a foreigner and they mock his efforts in speaking Shona. The government does not consider the fate of the likes of Pempani in the redistribution of land. The xenophobic attitude of Zimbabweans towards Zambian migrant workers leads us to question the genuineness of the calls for Pan-African unity.

Pempani is not accepted even though he was born in Zimbabwe, which makes him Zimbabwean by birth. He belongs to the third generation of Zambian farm labourers in Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe is the home he knows, not Zambia as he says, “home can’t be where I know no river, valley, hill, stone...where I have not dug the soil to sow a seed... (Chirere, 2006, p.78) His questions and arguments below beg for attention:

Where will I go if you take the farm? You will take the farm and baas goes, driving in his car, but where will I go?...My father’s father and my father came to this country from across the Zambezi. Black men like you. Black like two combined midnights. See my father worked here. My mother worked here. They are buried here. Their folks too: Alione, Chintengo, Anusa, Nyanje, Machazi, Mpinga, Zabron, Banda, Musa... (Chirere, 2006, p.76)

Despite being fellow Africans, the Zambian migrant farm workers are uprooted without being offered an alternative farm to resettle. Their efforts over the years towards the development of Zimbabwe is not acknowledged and reciprocated. Maybe the logical thing to do was to give displaced farm workers their own plots so that they would use their skills to produce crops.

Thus, in “*Sitting Carelessly*”, Chirere hints that something should have been done about the situation of displaced farm workers. The land reform reduced them to helpless vagabonds. In this case, the government should have provided them jobs elsewhere or provided them their own pieces of land to eke out a means of livelihood. The title of the story “*Sitting Carelessly*” hints at this unfinished business of the land reform which, in future, might lead to disturbances by disgruntled displaced farm workers. Excluding the ex-farm workers from the land redistribution programme is not only being insensitive to their needs, but it also retards social development. Nyerere in the *Third World Quarterly*, (1984, p.825) argues that:

real development is not possible without involving the masses. For us, development is more than economics, it is political awareness, it is mental liberation, it is popular participation.

The national cake should not be enjoyed by the privileged few only but by all the citizens of the country including ex-farm workers, squatters and street kids.

Conclusion

As shown in this article, Chirere represents the marginalised groups in post-independence Zimbabwe such as squatters in the story “*Suburb*”, street kids in “*An Old Man*”, land-hungry peasants in “*Maize*” and displaced farm workers in “*Sitting Carelessly*”. The overall picture is that these people are underprivileged

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and live a life of suffering. However, Chirere celebrates the government's land reform which will uplift the life of hitherto landless peasants in the story "Maize". Hence, Chirere makes an objective criticism of the powers that be in the sense that he censures them when they turn a blind eye on squatters, street kids and ex-farm workers but commends them for giving land to the people. Chirere supports the land reform portrayed in "Maize" because it is a solution to Zimbabwean people's landlessness and deprivation caused by the colonial regime.

One of the striking aspects of Chirere's short stories is the humanism in them. The writer has a strong compassion for the underprivileged people in society who struggle to survive such as squatters, street kids and ex-farm workers in "Suburb", "An Old Man" and "Sitting Carelessly" respectively. *The Southern Times* (2006) rightly observes that:

almost all the characters in these stories appear to be fleeing from the demons that haunt their current existence (and they) search for a place they all know is "Somewhere in this country" where they will find fulfillment, away from the harsh realities of contemporary society.

Chirere does not present his characters fighting to solve their problems but in "Maize", the land reform is a solution in its own right. At the end, one feels that if all Zimbabweans are provided with opportunities to advance themselves and their society, we would be "somewhere in this country."

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