

A gendered analysis of the ‘Decade of Crisis’ in Virginia Phiri’s *Highway Queen*

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Introduction

The article is an exegesis of the discursive apotheosis of motherhood/ mothering in *Highway Queen* (2011). It particularly analyses the narrative’s manipulation of motherhood as a vital and strategic life-support resource in a context that, in some scholarly circles, has come to be known as the ‘decade of crisis’ in Zimbabwe. That the mother character is identified with both the search for and the application of, in a pragmatic manner, life-giving values, firmly locates her as the “center of life, the magnet that holds the social cosmos intact and alive” (Sofola as cited in Hudson-Weems, 1993, p. xviii). This construction of motherhood resonates with the place, status and role of the African mother in antiquity where she has always been an important part of the equation of life. Remarkably, *Highway Queen* accomplishes an ingenious role-reversal within Zimbabwe’s literary landscape where male characters have been depicted as exclusive avatars of agency in more tempestuous and tranquil situations alike, while women are forced to contend with the victim tag in either context. *Highway Queen* propagates a topsy-turvy world in which the woman is invested with more agency in a situation that threatens both genders and would normally be for the man to conquer.

In marshalling this argument, the article is alive to the need for corrective discursive tropes on Zimbabwean motherhood in a literary context largely defined by dwarfish, shrewish and even stultifying images of women. The novel under exegesis provides the mechanisms for the articulation of such a corrective position. The symbolic merit of visualising the crisis through the figure of a mother cannot be overemphasised. It casts her as a palisade and a foundation upon which anchorage for a complex experience can be found. Through the mother, who is also the voice of the crisis and a corresponding infrastructure of hope, readers come face to face with the perniciousness of the crisis on human survival and integrity as well as the human capacity for agency. Thus,

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the operationalisation of the mother-figure as a life-force and a pinnacle of hope amplifies the need for scholarship to re-examine gender in literature.

The choice of *Highway Queen* is engendered by the manner it macroscopically articulates the gender, sociological, economic and moral dimension of the crisis. The novel proffers numerous and diverse opportunities for Zimbabwean/African scholarship since it is possible to read it as an impeccable record of the devastating impact of the 'decade of crisis'. It can equally be read as a depiction of the gender dimension of the crisis or even a fictive rendition of the economics of this horrific period in which life "can be characterised as [having been] precarious, and nourished by roots that go no deeper than the daily contingencies of living" (Raftopoulos & Yoshikuni, 1999, p. 8). Thus, apart from recording history, literature becomes an important vessel of the progressive values that recognise female agency. The 'crushing weight' of the crisis is slated on the woman's body, which becomes a crucible where the alchemy of "motherhood as a strategic life-support resource" takes place (Muhwati & Gambahaya, 2009, p. 56).

Highway Queen – the story

Phiri, the author, evidently makes a deliberate decision to 'occupy the chair of history'. This is one of the most significant responsibilities of the African writer – historically and currently. It is an ennobling undertaking that is demanded by the African-centred approach to African life. In fact, Sankofa teaches us that "it is not taboo to go back and fetch what you forgot" (Stewart, 2004, p. 3). We must go back in order to move forward. Published during "what can loosely be defined as marking the endpoint of the decade of crisis in Zimbabwe" (Muwati & Gambahaya, 2009, p. 68), *Highway Queen* brings out the centrality and efficaciousness of motherhood. The 'decade of crisis' is part of the nation's recent history from which durable and enduring lessons about life can be learnt for the benefit of the present and for posterity.

As previously noted, *Highway Queen* narrativises the crisis through Sophie, a family-centred mother, who despite the many tribulations soldiers on to ensure the survival of her family – husband, mother-in-law and the children. Her story becomes the story of Zimbabwe and that of the suffering citizens during this horrific decade. Her husband, Steven, is retrenched, plunging the entire family into deep trouble. This was at the height of the political and economic crisis in Zimbabwe when everything reached a nadir. Industry ground to a complete halt and all shops and supermarkets were virtually empty. As the sole breadwinner, Steven's retrenchment leads to unfortunate occurrences which include withdrawal of the children from school, food shortages, failure to pay the mortgage "with the effect that the house was finally auctioned [by the bank] to pay off the mortgage" (p. 11). Despite these challenges, which severely corrode Steven's status as a father, Sophie remains supportive. Because her husband has been completely enfeebled by the job loss which diminishes his confidence, Sophie effectively becomes the 'father' of the house. Her determination to defy family stagnation due to the crisis makes her come up with several projects and other strategic interventions which keep the family buoyant. For instance, she sells vegetables, relocates the family to a squatter camp a few kilometres from the city where there are no rentals, engages in the business of buying and selling commodities, cross-border trade as well as 'selling sex'. Through these efforts by the mother-character, the family survives and the children, who had dropped from school following their father's retrenchment, go back.

The 'decade of crisis' in Zimbabwe

As previously signaled, *Highway Queen* recreates what in scholarly circles has come to be known as the 'decade of crisis' or the 'Zimbabwean crisis' (Raftopoulos and Mlambo, 2010). The crisis was largely a political one triggered by brutal contestations for political power between the Zimbabwe African National Union (Patriotic Front) (ZANU PF) led by Robert Mugabe and the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) led by Morgan Tsvangirai. According to Raftopoulos & Mlambo (2009, p. xxx), "between 1998 and 2008 Zimbabwean politics witnessed a range of political and economic convulsions in which new social relations emerged, the state was reconfigured in more authoritarian ways". The authoritarian reconfiguration of the state compounded the already devastating situation in that apart from grappling with a comatose economy, citizens were faced with a hostile state that favoured violence in dealing with putative enemies. Life was made more difficult by "hyperinflation [which] reached an official level of 230 million per cent by the end of 2008, devaluing both earnings and savings" (Raftopoulos & Mlambo, 2009, p. 220), leading to the impoverishment of the ordinary citizens. Chinodya captures life during this period in the novel *Tindo's Quest* (2011): "There were no longer any coins... [Things] like basic goods, soap, flour, sugar, salt, cooking oil, rice, mealie-meal and beans, coins had disappeared years before. All money was in notes now and you needed a brick of them even to buy a loaf of bread" (p. 32).

In fact, the crisis assumed many dimensions which negatively affected ordinary citizens reducing the entire nation into a typical,

House of Hunger where every morsel of sanity was snatched from you the way some kinds of birds snatch food from the very mouths of babes. And the eyes of that House of Hunger lingered upon you as though some indefinable beast was about to pounce upon you (Marechera, 1978, p. 1).

The emergence of the MDC in 1999 and ZANU PF's reaction plunged the nation into a decade of turmoil and crisis. ZANU PF adopted some radical policy measures such as the violent land seizures which forced all white commercial farmers off the land. With agriculture as the spine of the Zimbabwean economy, the land seizures led to unprecedented food shortages. Inflation reached new world levels. Companies were forced to close since there were no raw materials to sustain production, and the corollary was massive retrenchments.

The already desperate situation was compounded by the escalation of violence on the political front, particularly during election time (2000, 2002, 2005, 2008). The result was contested hegemony which earned Zimbabwe a pariah status. There was virtually no food in the nation, with shops displaying empty shelves. The decade was also characterised by severe water shortages in cities leading to a serious cholera outbreak. As Sophie, the voice of the crisis in *Highway Queen* narrates:

Life was not easy for everyone. The economic hardships had left most people hopeless. The future looked bleak. Many had left for the Diaspora to earn foreign currency. For people like myself, there was no chance to go to other countries. I had so much to take care of. I couldn't just abandon my family (p. 144).

The crisis reached a crescendo in 2008, leading to the intervention of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the African Union (AU). A peace deal brokered by SADC and underwritten by the AU led to the formation of a Government of National Unity (GNU), leading to an attenuation of the situation that had signaled mass disaster in the nation. It is out of this experience that Phiri weaves her novel, *Highway Queen*, foregrounding the gender dimension of the crisis.

Motherhood as a strategic life-support resource

Highway Queen provides the vital symbols for the re-contouring of thought and perception. It narrates the life of Sophie, who takes over the running of the family after the retrenchment of her husband due to a failing economy. She is cast as an embodiment of crucial decision making and a symbol of struggle and hope in the face of a damaging crisis that leaves the father emasculated. She resists being dwarfed by the marauding political and economic crisis by assuming new identities as a self-namer and self-definer and not just wife, an identity that is very limiting in terms of women's agency. She becomes a mother-warrior, who resembles the African queens in antiquity. In fact, the nomenclature *Highway Queen*, deriving from Sophie's painstaking search for solutions to the crisis in the hostile public terrain, is an alchemy that pulsates with historical resonance. As someone who after having explored all the other avenues of fending for her family, and subsequently deciding to engage in 'prostitution', which she calls 'selling sex' along the highway, it marshalls a moralism that valorises her inclination to defend and safeguard the survival of the group. Equally, it supports a moralism and pedagogical agenda that deconstructs bigoted, stereotypical and sexualised readings of women who are forced into prostitution by circumstances beyond their control. Seen in this light, this nomenclatural presence makes the narrative diminish the chronic victim-blaming syndrome which often exculpates the authors of flawed policies that impoverish citizens.

In this regard, the title *Highway Queen* becomes even more intellectually and pedagogically fecund especially when conceptualised within the matrix of Africa's profound history of luminous queens and other women leaders, most of whom have sacrificed for their families, communities and nations. Names that quickly come to mind include, inter alia, "Warrior Queen Nzingha of the Jugas who bravely confronted the Portuguese in their bid to seize Angola, Yaa Asantewa of Ghana (1863-1923), the Queen Mother who fought fiercely against the British and finally gave her life in a bid to save her people and Makeda, the Queen of Sheba, who ruled over Ethiopia and Saba with the capital city of her empire at Axum" (Sofola, 1998, p. 60). Wheeler (2007, pp. 324-5) proffers a more fascinating and comprehensive account of the history of queens and other women leaders in Africa of antiquity:

Africa has in fact, produced an unusual number of queens, remembered not because they were consorts of kings but because they were rulers in their own right... Between 748 and 644 BC, a period of more than eighty years, Ethiopia again ruled Egypt. During that time a series of eight Ethiopian queens called Mistresses of Kush reigned. One of them, Queen Amenertas, bore the full insignia of authority... Queen Amenertas, "a vigorous ruler, administered her kingdom in peace and prosperity, both as its political and spiritual leader."... Her daughter, Shepenapt,

was the last of the Ethiopian queens to Egypt...Egypt has produced great and illustrious queens, excitingly glamorous queens. The world has long romanticized and idolized them, particularly Cleopatra and Nefertiti”.

Notably, these African queens have waged struggles motivated by a desire to defend the rights of the entire African family – men, women and children. Rather than being female-centred, they are inspired by family-centredness, just as is the case with Sophie. Seen in this light, the title therefore is an ingenious configuration of the agency of the African woman. It locates her at the centre of the battle for life-furthering schemes. The author is therefore manipulating the character of Sophie as a metaphor of an African-centred gender ontology.

The story is narrated from the centrality of her own perspective. The bestowal of narrative agency on Sophie eradicates and smothers the numerous corrosive identities that flagellate and collapse women’s presence, visibility and authenticity. This, according to Aldridge cited in Hudson-Weems (2004, p. xi) is vital for women “as a means of providing their story and to eradicate many of the myths and distortions surrounding the lives of women”. Such agency is vital as a critical corrective in that women’s voices in literature have been swathed by a cacophony of limiting and misogynistic voices. In other words, the trend in most creative works in Zimbabwean literature is that women have not been allotted the platform to account for their actions. They have been judged on the basis of decontextualised moral and ethical benchmarks and an often misunderstood tradition. Because of lack of voice, they have been given various names and definitions that disadvantage them in struggles for authentic existence.

Against this background, *Highway Queen* therefore marks “the first step toward existing on [her] own terms” (Hudson-Weems, 2004, p. 21). The author creates a discourse in which the unmistakable legacy is that of contesting domination through proper identification beginning with self-naming and self-defining (Hudson-Weems, 2004, p. 21). Despite all the tribulations and even her violation at the hands of some unscrupulous masculinities, she remains an unyielding believer in positive African male-female relations as foundations of the survival of African people and humankind. She is not drowned in outsider and largely patriarchal voices that hide behind the façade of culture.

The author juxtaposes the disaster preparedness levels of Sophie and Steven in a very revealing manner. While Steven gets bludgeoned by the crisis and embraces typically nihilist attitudes, Sophie shuns this “ascetic tradition, the attempted fleeing from life, from full participation in the tremendous and deepest challenges of the life-process with its risks and dangers, with its joys of success and brief sorrows of failure and loss” (p’Bitek, 1986, p. 21). Through her actions following the retrenchment of her husband, she resists the temptation of letting her experience of degradation due to the crisis limit her world view. She re-strategises in order to ensure family survival. Re-strategising is a key human factor quality in that it concretely establishes agency as an indispensable force in human survival. She is a shrewd and fearless defender and upholder of the human rights of her entire family. For instance, she does “all sorts of odd jobs such as ice cream vending, street cleaning and shop assistance” (p. 10) just to get the

family going. On the other hand, Steven is overwhelmed by the enormity of the challenges to such an extent that he “couldn't think any more, he was permanently drunk” (p. 12).

Sophie becomes the family's fountain of hope. As echoed by most African scholars on gender, she has no problems adjusting to the position of breadwinner, something that had been monopolised by Steven. This is consistent with the status and place of the African woman in classical Africa:

In most African societies it was usual for females as well as males to be engaged in activities – such as farming, trading, craft production, or food-processing...The important economic roles of women in traditional West Africa were part and parcel of the overall domestic roles of wife, mother, sister, and daughter, around which the lives of most females were ordered. At the same time, through their economic roles, women played an important part in the “public sphere” (Sudarkasa, 1981, p. 44).

Her unwavering concern is the survival of the entire family. Because of the hyperinflationary situation in Zimbabwe then, Sophie is compelled to frequently adjust her survival techniques:

Noticing that I had to come up with something before our money ran out, I concluded that buying and selling was still the way to go. Selling rice and dried fish, I thought would bring us reasonable income. For capital, I decided to use a bit of money that I had kept for emergencies (p. 13).

She enters into numerous strategic networks with some men who are already in the business of buying and selling. Though this experience exposes her to different masculinities with different levels of tolerance, it is her creativity and resourcefulness that is given more prominence in the novel. The most productive partnership that she enters into is with a man called Tiki. Tiki runs an enterprising business specialising in scarce commodities. The fact that he is ready to help and is dependable makes him a pillar of support for Sophie. He assists Sophie in various ways, including lending her money to start various projects. Thus, for Sophie, “survival becomes an issue of constructing or tapping into informal networks of support” (Aldridge, 1989, p. 124). She epitomises the African American woman who, unable ‘to depend on the absent father of her children for financial support’, finds herself assuming the role of chief architect for family survival. In addition, her determination to struggle for the defence of the entire family propagates a positive image of the African woman while bringing some of the attributes that differentiate her from any other woman. She is the “woman with ability”, the very foundation of the race. The challenge in the novel is not sexism or gender, it is about class and collective poverty of the marginalised classes.

There are other men in the novel such as Zex and Tickie who assist her. For instance, Zex introduces her to the business of selling hair products, something that proves to be very profitable. Despite going through all these challenges, Steven, her husband, makes no effort to assist her. He has become addicted to

alcohol. Nonetheless, she remains supportive and continues to execute her motherly duties:

The next day I woke up early despite being still tired. My whole body ached. I wished I could sleep longer. For breakfast, I cooked sadza and fish for Steven, mealie-meal porridge with peanut butter for the rest of us (p. 33).

Providing support for such an uncaring husband is considered unacceptable in feminist circles. However, when looked at from the point of view of African Womanism, an African-centred gender theory, the mother is right at the centre of struggles for existence. She is cast as strong, flexible role player, adaptable, male compatible and family-centred (Hudson-Weems, 2004). In certain instances, Steven squanders all the money that Sophie would have struggled to get. As the evidence shows, he has become a burden to Sophie who is trying to ensure family survival.

Apart from selling rice, she also ventures into selling table cloths at the border between Zimbabwe and South Africa. The rationale for this move is to enable her to earn foreign currency in the form of South African Rands. Through Zex, who is a truck driver, she gets linked to a white woman who buys table cloths at a good price. Life is however not easy at the border as she has to sleep in the open. “The fact that I had Rands made me feel secure. I had to continue making trips to the border to earn more Rands. That did not mean neglecting my family. Half the time I would be around selling rice and the other half selling batiks at the border” (p. 53).

The few trips that she has been to the border enable her to build a “second hut” and also pay the “developers one thousand Rands, which they had demanded as a deposit. As she puts it, “local currency could not have guaranteed me a stand. Another project was to send the children to school at the beginning of the year...It was unfortunate that I had to organise everything myself, Steven could not be relied upon” (p. 53). She becomes part of the group of Zimbabwean women who sustained families and the nation by engaging in cross border trade. According to Mamvura and Kufakunesu (2012, p. 94), “that such Zimbabwean women traders are resilient, strong economic warlords is clear in their participation in informal cross border trade as a means of ensuring the survival of their families... The involvement of these ‘women without borders’ in this trade shows that they consciously played their roles as African women who are adaptable, male compatible and flexible role players”.

What is particularly interesting is that the central character is marshaled as an avatar of the broadness of African women’s agenda which transcends a mere concern with personal/female empowerment. It is about the survival of the oppressed and suffering black people. As a result, Sophie becomes a symbol of the largeness of the human spirit in the search for a more fulfilling existence. This vision is akin to Ruth Mompati’s conception of the position and role of the African woman in African people’s struggles. While her views are made with reference to South Africa, they pulsate with echoes of an African Womanist ontology:

The national liberation of the black South African is a prerequisite to her own liberation and emancipation as a woman and a worker. The process

of struggle for national liberation has been accompanied by the politicizing of both men and women. This has kept the women's struggle from degenerating into a sexist struggle that would divorce women's position in society from the political, social and economic development of the society as a whole (as cited in Hudson-Weems, 1998, p. 158).

Because of the collapse of vital social safety nets, the business of buying and selling that she ventures into is inundated with numerous challenges, including sexual abuse. Her first experience of sexual abuse at the hands of Dhuri, who is a truck driver, brings her face to face with chauvinistic tendencies and intransigent and intolerant masculinities. Despite paying for the rice, she has to struggle to get the rice that she has already paid for. Dhuri demands "just ten minutes with me" (p. 18). Remarkably, this experience marks how some men have a durable conception of the woman as a sexual being. Out of desperation, she gives in. However, this experience traumatises her and leaves a debilitating and lasting guilty conscience. Describing her anguish, she says:

I was very angry with myself for giving in. I thought of my husband and children. What I was about to do was a shameful thing, I was betraying my family. I was also angry with Dhuri for taking advantage of me... I felt rotten and dirty about what we had done (p. 19).

The author gives her narrative agency, which enables readers to visualise reality from her perspective. This avoids the tendency of rushing to make conclusions that disadvantage women. It is clear from her anguish that she feels dehumanised and dewomanised. At the same time, it is palpable that she has been plunged into this morass because of a commitment to salvage the family. She is a family-centred character who struggles for the human rights of the entire family. Clearly, 'selling sex' becomes part of the "repertoire of survival skills" (Young, 1989, p. 212) that she has developed.

Another man called Samson also takes advantage of her desperation to sexually abuse her. He pretends to be a good Samaritan by making irresistible business suggestions. For instance, he suggests that since she is "the breadwinner" (p. 23) she could make more money by going to the border. Despite appearing to be kind and genuine in his offer of assistance, he rapes her in his truck and throws her out. Similarly, Danny, also a truck driver, takes advantage of her desperation at the border. Just like the other men, he camouflages himself as a genuine helper but in the end forces himself onto the hapless woman. Unbeknownst to Danny is that by now Sophie has acquired a new level of sophistication after realising that some unscrupulous men are after sexually exploiting her. She therefore makes a decision to assume control over her sexuality. As a result, she surprises Danny by demanding payment for services rendered. When he refuses, she removes the ignition keys from the vehicle and uses them as an effective bargaining weapon. In the end, she manages to get "two hundred Rands" (p. 63) with the assistance of other men. Paradoxically, one of the men who forces Danny to pay is Dhuri, who once raped Sophie at some point. She also has non-consensual sex with Stan who, again taking advantage of her desperation, convinces her to drink an alcoholic beverage which he deliberately says is innocuous. Like the other men, he also does not use protection. In the morning she is given a note but "didn't bother to have

a look at the note, I just shoved it into my bra. I was so ashamed of myself... The money made me feel rotten. I had sold myself and most probably contracted the AIDS virus. I didn't want to slide into being a whore" (p. 73). While such behaviour is responsible for spreading HIV, the narrative largely focuses on the gender, social and economic dynamics of the virus.

Through these heinous acts by unscrupulous masculinities, the author depicts how in a crisis situation women become exposed to multiple risks and crises. Sophie finds it difficult to protect herself from such powerful men who have access to the scarce resources and commodities. She becomes a victim of the excruciating decade long economic, political and social crisis in Zimbabwe. The narrative therefore provides an inventory of the gender dimension of the crisis. Such atomistic penetration and interpretation of the crisis transcends simplified generalisations that gloss over the impact of the crisis on gender. It is interesting to note that the narrative adopts a conceptual thrust that debunks the tendency to homogenise human experiences. More often, such homogenisation undercuts objective impact assessments. Effective rehabilitation can only take place in the context of such sector specific accounts on the quantum of the damage.

She develops with much more intensity and rigor as she emblematises a feminine rupture of the chauvinist and unscrupulous masculine ideas that construct the woman's identity in terms of her sexuality. By demanding that all men who want to have sex with her pay for services rendered, she erects a new philosophy on the human rights of the woman, which unequivocally places value on her body. She finds that in most of the situations she can't turn down the advances of the men because they would have offered her transport to the South African border. She is no longer that docile woman, epitomising putative female submissivity as she challenges them and simultaneously demanding payment for anything.

As a result of successive and repeated acts of indulging in non-consensual sex with different men, Sophie just finds herself doing this more often. The crisis has plunged her into a situation where she finds that the only way to handle such men is to make them pay. While the practice is morally reprehensible, it is a crisis-management strategy that on the one hand enables her to retain her dignity while at the same time solving her liquidity challenges. One such instance is when she goes to the border with the intention to sell her materials. Finding herself without any accommodation, she begrudgingly agrees to spend the night with an old white man at a lodge. She charges him five hundred Rands but sadly the man does not use protection. After this experience, she makes a decision to 'sell sex' in order to make ends meet:

After agonizing for about a month, I made a decision which was very hard to take. I came up with an idea to mop up Rands. I wasn't interested in the local currency as its value was unpredictable. To achieve this I would sell my body. It was a shameful thing to do but I would be discreet about it. That was the only commodity that no one had control over except myself. It was easier to earn the Rands at the border where I would go there pretending to sell batiks (p. 88).

The author recasts prostitution by extending unhindered ownership of voice to

the woman, who is involved. In the absence of an unconstrained ownership of voice, women continue to suffer the debilities imposed by externally imposed discourse. For instance, in the case of Sophie readers are persuaded to view her commercial sex work through the prism of an incapacitating social and economic environment. She is only making an effort to fend for her family. The novel shifts from a narrowly contoured perspective of the African woman as a seductress and an infidel. Through the money that she gets from 'selling sex', she manages to send her children back to school, and buy food and medication for her mother-in-law.

Similar experiences are also found in the author's other narrative, *Desperate* (2002), which is a collection of short stories. In one of the stories, 'Teenage Bread Winner', the central character Chido, ventures into prostitution in order to salvage her family from the claws of hunger and vulnerability following the death of both parents. She says: "I started selling sex in the early seventies when both my parents died within a year of each other, leaving me, then fifteen years old, with my two young sisters, Kate and Chipso, and a young brother, Roger, who were twelve, ten and six years old, respectively"(p. 2). In another story in the same anthology, Susan is widowed and immediately dispossessed of the family house. She tries to do house cleaning chores but the salary is not enough to take care of her children. She then decides to supplement this by 'selling sex'. When asked by one of her male friends whether she intends to stop 'selling sex' at some point, her response is: "I have to see my children through school first, hoping they don't find out how I make money to look after them. Do you think I enjoy it?" (p. 30). What is particularly captivating about *Highway Queen* and the other stories is that each narrative is named after the protagonist. This becomes a crucial technique that indentures the story to the narrator, thereby allowing for the dominance of the insider's perspective. It makes it possible for the author to locate the individual within a social, economic and political context. Such a context then determines behaviour. This way, Phiri transcends the chronic problem in Zimbabwean literature in which victims of government policies are saddled with blame.

The narrative is structured in such a manner that the activities she engages in are located in a readily identifiable social and economic matrix. What towers above therefore is not the 'immoral' practice but her ability to re-strategise. This ability to re-strategise in the face of what clearly is a conflagration for the family locates her as a strong, nurturing and resourceful family-centred mother. What is also significant to note is that the crisis marks a significant turning point in the art of breadwinning. It democratises this experience by turning the former 'housewife' into an aggressive soldier in the battle to survive. The crisis thus brings out the effectiveness and centrality of the mother in survival. This breadwinner identity, which was acknowledged in Africa of antiquity, went through a series of convulsions due to colonialism and its lopsided gender policies which infantilised and dewomanised the African woman.

Disease and sickness as metaphors of a debilitating economic crisis

The narrative is replete with images of a pestiferous society that is also saddled with death. These ubiquitous and preponderant images amplify the corrosive and devastating impact of the crisis on society. They are an indictment of a nation that can no longer offer sanctuary to citizens. Citizens become very vulnerable to this decade of fatally-deficient government policies. Survival

techniques crafted out of desperation exacerbate the situation as these expose individuals. The family, which is an age-old human institution that has provided protection to individuals fails to withstand the intensity and immensity of the crisis. Institutions such as the family are important in that they are the centerpiece for organised community and national life. It is this realisation that prompts p'Bitek (1986, p. 13) to comment about institutions that:

Human beings do not behave like dry leaves, smoke or clouds which are blown here and there by the wind. Men live in organisations called institutions: the family and clan... And all these institutions are informed by, and in fact built around the central ideas people have developed, ideas about what life is all about, that is, their social philosophy, their 'world view'.

In the novel, HIV and AIDS are portrayed as manifestations of a failed state. They are not presented as mere diseases borne of immorality. They are remnants of a national tragedy. For instance, when Sophie visits the Ncubes, her former friends in the township, she learns that they "had both been dead for the past four months... They had succumbed to AIDS. Catherine, their fourteen-year-old daughter, was in charge of the other children. She had quit school to look after her four siblings. The youngest, Tom, who was five, didn't look well. His skin had wrinkled and he was thin" (p. 79). This child-headed family epitomises the vulnerable condition of the citizens during the decade of crisis. It also paints a lugubrious picture on the state of the family institution. As already argued, under normal circumstances the family is expected to be a redoubtable bastion of protection.

Because of her involvement in the struggle for survival which brings her into contact with some uncaring men, Sophie also contracts HIV. She becomes aware of her condition after summoning enough courage to get tested and the result turns out to be HIV positive. Though this devastates her she still has to work for the kids:

Two weeks after getting my results and though not so keen on starting work and unready to go to the border, I had to start thinking about it. The next school term was getting closer. I needed school fees. The best way to work on the highway... I would innocently patrol the highway during the day. I was sure of getting one or two customers per day (p. 98).

In this regard, Sophie is portrayed as a victim of the decade of crisis. When one looks back, it is clear that the author brings out the vulnerability of women in a crisis situation. Due to the desperate situation in which she was plunged, she could not negotiate for safe sex. Men just took advantage of her situation. This gender dimension of the crisis, which also brings out the gender side of HIV and AIDS, makes *Highway Queen* a narrative that prioritises matters of national importance.

Because of his addiction to illicit brews at the squatter camp, Steven injures himself during one of the binges. His condition worsens as he fails to respond to medication. Eventually, his leg is amputated and he has to relocate to the rural areas. Steven's condition is emblematic of the damage done to the ordinary citizens. Before he lost his job as a result of a failed economy, he was a caring

father and husband who had done everything within his power to fend for the family. Due to the crisis, he loses dignity, self-worth and respectability. The amputation, including the stump, is an indictment of the political regime in power that has mismanaged the nation. Without security at family level, individuals become vulnerable:

Without saying more, Steven lifted the blanket to show me the stump. The leg had been amputated from the knee. I failed to hold back the tears. This was all a result of a mismanaged and failed economy. If Steven had not lost his job, we would still be a happy family. We had never expected life to be that hard. We were not the only ones, other thousands of families were suffering like us (p. 153).

As consistently argued in this article, Sophie is deployed as a metaphor of a nation in a crisis.

Conclusion

The narrativisation of the gender dimension of the decade of crisis evinces the dual role of the woman as a vital strategic life-resource and as victim. While this dual identity of the woman is palpable throughout the narrative, the author deliberately manipulates the narrative process in a manner that crucially constructs the black woman as the centrepiece of survival in an otherwise debilitating social and economic matrix. In particular, the canonisation of mothering/motherhood purveys a curriculum of instruction that potentially redefines the position of the woman in society. Womanhood is contoured beyond sexuality and recast in terms of the broad human agenda in which the search for enlarged options tops the priority list. It thus assumes an important place in the arena of human struggles. The advancement of such a philosophy also diminishes the palpable tendency to speak and write vituperatively about women who are actively involved in the ennobling search for survival options. The very practice of 'selling sex' has been cast in rather pejorative and truncated terms. Women have often been depicted as willing accomplices, initiators of deadly sexual acts and dangerous temptresses. Such negative labeling of the woman, which *Highway Queen* copiously debunks, affects her position and status in society. It is against this background that we have argued that the narrative under exegesis in this discussion provides a critical corrective. It operationalises the decade of crisis as a crucible for the enunciation of a liberating and liberated pedagogy of women agency. While it is also possible to foreground the moral dimension of the narrative, wherein Sophie can be accused of all sorts of ills, including engaging in dangerous sexual behaviours, our approach has been to avoid that rather narrowing and quite kneejerk a perspective.

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