

Parallel Narratives: The Role of the Zimbabwean Writer during the Lost Decade (2000-2009)

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Introduction

This research paper explores how the economic collapse of Zimbabwe from 2000 to 2009 has been expressed in literature by Zimbabwean writers. It seeks to establish a connection between the strong-government controls of information in the media and the politicized nature of fiction during this period. It examines the nationalist narrative created by the Zimbabwean government and shows how the works of fiction of writers like Brian Chikwava and Petina Gappah have undermined this narrative by revealing parallel narratives that reveal the spin the government has put on reality.

The years 2000 to 2009 have sometimes been referred to as the “lost decade” by people in the country, in reference to the deterioration of infrastructure, the collapse of the economy and the large exodus of Zimbabwean to other countries in search of better prospects. Inflation rose steadily throughout the years and stood at 2 002 % at the end of 2007 (Coomer 327). The Land Redistribution Scheme of 2000 moved vast amounts of land out of the hands of commercial farmer and into the hands of corrupt government officials and some of the black majority, severely compromising Zimbabwe’s ability to produce enough food for its population (Southall). The country began to experience food shortages fuelling the rising cost of food. In 2005, Mugabe’s regime carried out Operation Murambatsvina destroying the homes and livelihoods of many people working in the informal sector and displacing at least 43, 000 people (Solidarity Trust). At that point, the informal sector counted for an estimated 75% of the economy, as the official unemployment rate crept towards 80%. The operation was widely condemned by human rights organizations. The people of Zimbabwe expressed their growing discontent with the government at the polls as in 2000, the ruling party Zanu-PF lost its majority in the parliament to

the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), the first time that this had happened since independence.

Faced with such a large amount of evidence of its gross mismanagement of the country and an increasingly popular opposition, the government chose to create a narrative that would shift the blame for the situation to someone else. All the problems of the country were blamed on the British government and MDC, who Mugabe said were trying to make Zimbabwe a colony again (Ndlovu 1145). Using its control of the single television station in the country, all the radio stations and the largest national paper, the government issued its propaganda, urging the people of Zimbabwe to guard the sovereignty of the country.

However, even the most fervent propaganda could not halt the collapse of the Zimbabwean economy, a fall that peaked in 2008, seen by many as the worst year in Zimbabwean history. The Presidential elections were marred by violence and plagued with claims of fraud. Inflation peaked at an estimated 500 billion percent (Coomer 331). Goods disappeared from the store shelves when the government ordered a price freeze, forcing storeowners to sell their goods at such a loss that they could not afford to restock (Coomer332). Hyperinflation ate away at people's saving and many faced poverty.

Mugabe's regime has always been intolerant of criticism, but in the face of the terrible economic situation of the lost decade, the only way to quell criticism was to take greater control of the nation's narrative, by issuing propaganda via the national media and placing restrictions on private media. This narrative excluded many of the stories of the people, as reality did not fit in with the story the government was trying to create. Instead, the real stories began to appear in fiction.

The Beginnings of the Narrative

The War for Independence and a Lack of Tolerance for Criticism

Zanu-PF's determination to control the nation's narrative dates back to the liberation struggle of the late seventies and the gaining of independence in 1980. From the very birth of this government, there has been a reluctance to criticize Mugabe and his regime. This can be seen as a continuation of the way Mugabe ran the guerrilla forces during the war for liberation, where he showed an intolerance of any sort of criticism directed towards leadership. Even as a commander of the ZANLA forces fighting against the Rhodesian government under Ian Smith, Mugabe did not tolerate any dissent from his men. Amongst guerrilla forces, "unquestioning loyalty was required" (Meldrum 23).

To control the Narrative, you must control the media

To control the narrative, and squash criticism, the government had to control the media. So in 1981, the government bought the two national newspapers, the Herald and the Chronicle, which meant they now had control of the main newspapers, and all radio and television broadcasts. The impact of having the government in control of the media was seen as soon as 1983, when the government massacred large numbers of the Ndebele, the largest minority in Zimbabwe, who it saw as a threat to their rule. During the War for Independence, there had been two guerrilla forces operating, Mugabe-led Zanu that was mostly made up of men from the Shona majority, and ZIPRA, led by Joshua Nkomo where most of the men were Ndebele. After independence, many former ZIPRA men abandoned the Zimbabwe army after persecution by Shona commanders and began roaming the countryside attacking small shops and farms to get supplies (Meredith 64). In response, Mugabe created the 5 Brigade, a special forces unit trained

by North Koreans which, according to Mugabe, was created so that the government could have “one arm of the army to have a political orientation which stems from our philosophy as Zanu-PF” (Meredith 66). These words revealed three very important things. The first was that the line between party and government was already blurred. Mugabe saw no difference between Zanu-PF and the government. Zanu-PF was the government. It also reveals an unwillingness to tolerate any philosophies that were in opposition to that of Zanu-PF. The 5 Brigade had been created to uphold the Zanu-PF philosophy, which would suggest that its job was to squash any contrary philosophy. The third thing it revealed was that Mugabe was not afraid to use force to crush his opposition.

In early 1983, the 5 Brigade began Operation *Gukurahundi*. *Gukurahundi* are the first rains that blow away the chaff before the rainy season begins. The word can be interpreted as meaning to sweep away the rubbish. In the narrative Zanu-PF was building, they equated opposition with filth. Their first target was the Ndebeles and the 5 Brigade set out in the Matebeleland countryside waging “a campaign of beatings, arson and mass murder directly targeted at the civilian population” (Meredith 67). Thousands of Ndebeles were killed over a four-year period but none of these attacks were reported in mainstream media. The state-controlled press said that reports of the massacres were fabrications, but foreign reporters like Andrew Meldrum were going into Matebeleland interviewing survivors. These journalists were persecuted and some thrown out of the country by the government that claimed that they were apartheid supporters trying to destabilize the government (Meldrum 23).

The violence only ended when the leader of the main opposition party, ZAPU agreed to unite his party with Zanu-PF, making Zimbabwe a one-party state by default. This move “brought peace to Matabeleland, but the message was loud and clear: Mugabe would ruthlessly

use violence against those who dared to challenge his rule. Zimbabwe became permeated by a climate of fear and intolerance of any criticism of the government” (Meldrum 24). Gukurahundi made it clear that the government would tolerate no criticism of how it ran the country.

What is the Narrative?

Gukurahundi revealed how Zanu-PF was positioning itself in its nationalist narrative. The government had created this story where they embodied the liberation struggle so that to question them would be to question the struggle and threaten the independence of Zimbabwe. They accused reporters of being allied to the apartheid government, much in the way that they would later accuse opposition parties and foreign reporters of being supporters of the British government that was allegedly trying to recolonize Zimbabwe (Chikwava Free Speech 18).

Gukurahundi showed how the government privileged those who fought in the war as having more right to rule than anyone else in Zimbabwe. As Meldrum puts it, “unless you fought in the liberation struggle against Rhodesian rule, then you had no right to criticize the government” (24).

The Rise of the Movement for Democratic Change party (MDC) and the proliferation of the Zanu-PF Narrative

The lost decade marked the first time since the unification of Zanu and Zapu that the ruling party faced a major opposition party. The Movement for Democratic Change Party (MDC) had been formed in 1999 under the leadership of Morgan Tsvangirai, a prominent workers union leader who had frequently clashed with the government in the past. Zanu-PF had been in power since independence in 1980, and was surprised when in 2000 the party lost control of the Parliament for the first time as MDC won the most seats. In response to the growing popularity of MDC, Zanu-PF enforced a series of laws designed to make it difficult for the opposition party to

reach its supporters by placing greater controls on the media. The Public Order and Security Act (POSA) made it illegal to have a public gathering of more than three people without police consent. This meant that the MDC needed to get police consent to hold political rallies and this permission was often withheld. The government encroached on Zimbabweans' freedom of speech with the establishment of the Information and Protection of Privacy Act (IPPA), which made it illegal to practice journalism without the consent of the government. The law was seen as mainly targeting the popular newspaper, the Daily News, which aligned itself with MDC. Whilst the Act was designed to muzzle newspapers that did not support the government, it only served to polarize further the media.

Both sides of the media (those supporting the government and those supporting the opposition) set about creating their narratives, manipulating the truth by choosing what to highlight and what to downplay, to make whichever political party they supported appeared to be the nation's Savior and the other party appear inept and bent on violence (Chari 138). There was a lack of middle ground as the political parties had large stakes in the main media outlets. The government muzzled free speech and did not allow Zimbabweans to tell their own stories (Chikwava Free Speech 20). Chikwava argues that the government created an environment in which only pro-government stories and stories that showed Zimbabwe in a positive light could be told in the media.

The Language of Zanu-PF

The Language of Zanu-PF is a language of exclusion. It can be termed as what Sabele J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni calls 'Mugabeism', "a summation of a constellation of political controversies, political behaviour, political ideas, utterances, rhetoric and actions that have crystallised around Mugabe's political life" (Ndlovu 1139). The result of MDC garnering so many votes in the

elections in 2000 and 2002 was that Mugabe separated Zimbabwe into two groups, “traitors, puppets, sell-outs, enemies of the nation versus patriots and authentic national subjects”. All those who voted for MDC fell into the first group, whilst Zanu-PF supporters were regarded as true Zimbabweans. “This mentality enables a politics of exclusion of a large number of people from the nation and the authorisation of violence against those who were written out of the nation” (Ndlovu 1140). It is a classic case of “if you are not for us, you are against us.” Zanu-PF’s narrative leaves no room for any disagreement with how the ruling party goes about its business.

Mugabe’s speeches seem to be formulaic, something highlighted in Petina Gappah’s short story “At the Last Post”, where a mourning widow at a national funeral anticipates not only the content, but also the timing of the speech. Ndlovu writes that Mugabe’s speeches to center around three things, the apparently ever-imminent threat of British attempting to recolonize Zimbabwe, the issue of land and returning land from white commercial farmers to native hands, and the issue of belonging and patriotism (1140).

To illustrate the nature of his speeches, I will examine a famous speech that President Mugabe gave on September 3, 2002 at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa. Whilst the speech is mainly about how the President blames the inequality of the world on a global system that favors the rich North and keeps the poor South in poverty, it still contains many of the themes of Mugabeism. Mugabe refers to the President of South Africa as “Comrade President. In Zimbabwe, only those who fought in the Second or Third Chimurenga are worthy of the title Comrade, according to Zanu-PF. Everyone else is not viewed as an equal in that sense. This is evidence of how Zanu-PF privileges those that fought the war over those who did not. Mugabe emphasizes the idea of belonging to a land and

possessing the land and takes it upon himself for “all of us who live, belong and rightfully own this great corner of the Earth.”

The speech is meant to be a commentary on sustainable development policy in general, but Mugabe uses it to address critics of his policies especially the Land Redistribution Scheme that began in 2000. One of the popular lines used in jingles, advertisements and speeches soon after the scheme began was the idea that the land is the country. So the land becomes not merely an economic issue, but a part of Zimbabwean identity. Mugabe asserts that “we have fought for our land, we have fought for our sovereignty.” When this statement is put against the idea that those who fought in the war are privileged, one begins to see how some people of Zimbabwe are excluded from the narrative. According to Mugabe, the land belongs to Zimbabweans because they fought for it, yet his usage of the term Comrade suggests that if you did not fight the war then you are nobody. This by extension means that only those who fought in the war are worthy of the benefits of the Land Redistribution scheme and everyone else does not matter.

The implications of this were fully put on display in Operation *Murambatsvina*, which demolished the illegal, shanty homes of people in major cities who could not afford land. These people were not comrades and so had no claim to land. In 2005, the Zimbabwean government decided to set out on an exercise to clear all illegal housing and informal selling points in the cities. They called the program Operation *Murambatsvina*, which they chose to translate as Operation Clean-Up or Operation Restore Order. However, a more literal translation would be “drive out dirt”, a term that has echoes of *Gukurahundi* in the early 1980s that resulted in the death of thousands of the Ndebele. Not for the first time, the government resorted to calling those who did not fit in their narrative as filth rather than as humans. Due to rising unemployment, the informal trade sector had grown rapidly, evidence of how tough things were for people. Instead

of helping them, the government rewrote them as criminals stating, “Crooks, greedy people, opportunists and black market traders in foreign currency, fuel and basic commodities had found convenient operational bases in the informal sector. The obscene feast is over. Law and order must now prevail” (Solidarity Trust 14). The government’s narrative allows it to get rid of the evidence of its mismanagement of the economy, by designating it as rubbish.

Questioning the National Narrative

The government has created a nationalist narrative that does not tolerate opposition. This narrative, alongside the polarized and politicized nature of the media in Zimbabwe, has left the creative writer with a responsibility to correct the narrative presented. An example is how writers have examined the ruling party's depiction of the guerrillas during the liberation struggle and told the stories excluded from the nationalist narrative, which are the stories of women, of peasants, and the stories of unhappiness and in-fighting amongst the commanders of the struggle. In a similar manner, recent writers have begun to question the depiction of the lost decade, retelling stories that were suppressed using draconian information laws like Information and Protection of Privacy Act. Any writer that wishes to speak about Zimbabwe during the lost decade is obliged to engage in a discussion with the nationalist narrative that has left out so much.

Chikwava portrays President Mugabe during the lost decade as a blue-stomached lizard who sits in a burning building trying to tell you that there is no fire. He has picked a lizard as lizards are viewed suspiciously in Shona culture and often linked with bad luck as "a lizard became a chameleon by biting people and other creatures and sucking their color out of their bodies" (Chikwava Free Speech 19). The President and the government had taken the color out of people's lives, and distorted their story. The stories in the government-controlled media are so different from reality, that people cannot recognize themselves in them. Like a chameleon changes color, Mugabe's regime has changed the story to a completely different shade.

How does the writer question the narrative?

Writers that rewrite the nationalist narratives, filling in what was left out are like ngozi, the spirits of those who die unfairly and rise in search of retribution as “the backward migration of the spirit allows it to rediscover that which has been lost and discarded, those aspects that are too horrific to integrate and accept into the modern consciousness” (Muchemwa, Thoughts 198). The role of the writer, in this mode, is to give a voice to those who have been silenced.

To illustrate how writers question the narrative presented by the government, one can examine how writers have depicted the Liberation war in their stories (Muchemwa, Thoughts 195-202). Writers like Hove and Vera draw a connection between colonial literature and traditional oral literature showing that both have minimized the roles of groups like women and children as “[w]ays of remembering and forgetting the past are probed” (Muchemwa, Thoughts 197). The writers challenge the narrative that has been created by the government, which it uses to justify oppressing its people (Vambe, 236). Through their depictions of the guerrillas of the Civil war in literature, writers like Charles Samupindi, Alexander Kanengoni, Dambudzo Marechera, and Chenjerai Hove depict the guerrillas as not always heroic, but sometimes violent, plagued by in-fighting and a danger to peasants. They argue for a narrative that is less nationalistic, but more accurate. They adopt the language of Zanu-PF and subvert it to reveal alternate narratives.

The Approaches of Two Writers

During the lost decade, writers have engaged with Zanu-PF’s narrative and interrogated it, but there are many ways to enter into this conversation. Here, I will examine the approaches of two writers, Brian Chikwava and Petina Gappah. Both writers are based outside Zimbabwe, which gives them the freedom to criticize the government without fear of retribution. However,

they approach the issues of the decade with different outlooks. To illustrate their differing outlooks, this paper examines each writer's most popular short story. For Brian Chikwava, the story is "Seventh Street Alchemy", the winner of the Caine Prize for African Writing in 2004, which follows an ageing prostitute as she tries to reenter the official narrative that the government has excluded her from. "Elegy for Easterly" is the title story of Petina Gappah's successful first short story collection. It examines the government's controversial Operation Murambatsvina from the point-of-view of the people who lived in the illegal settlements that were demolished under government orders.

In her short story "At the Last Post", Petina Gappah states that the government has created an environment in which "[o]nly the official truth matters, only that truth will be handed down through the history books for the children to learn. This they will learn...The land is one of plenty with happy citizens. The injustices of the past have been redressed to consolidate the gains of the liberation struggle" (Gappah 21-22 *At the Sound of the Last Post*). The nationalist narrative denied many a voice creating its own version of the truth. In their short stories, Chikwava and Gappah interrogate this "truth" revealing what it leaves out. Kizito Muchemwa says that when one institution, like the government, has so much control on deciding which version of the story is told, minorities find their stories being left untold (*Thoughts* 196). In a patriarchal society like the one in Zimbabwe, the stories of women, children and ethnic minorities are often left untold and when their stories are told, they are presented as victims. Many writers try to rewrite the national narrative to include the voices that have been excluded from the story the government chooses to tell. In a way, the people's voices are only heard in fiction. Both Chikwava and Gappah use women as their main characters, a group that has traditionally had no voice in the narrative given by the government.

Brian Chikwava's "Seventh Street Alchemy"

Brian Chikwava's "Seventh Street Alchemy" was published early in the last decade in 2003 when things were not as bad as they would become later in the decade. In his story, his characters seem to be leading an existence parallel to the one that the government states. In this short story, Chikwava gives all the blame for the dire economic situation to the government. When one sees the title "Seventh Street Alchemy", one cannot help but think of the Presidential residence situated at the end of the road, the residence that insists that the situations that the reader witnesses in this short story either do not exist or have been created by those who wish to destabilize the nation. The alchemy in the story can be read as the propaganda of the government that spins reality to come up with a story that removes any blame from them and says that things are not as bad as some people would say. Yet there is no gold in this story as Chikwava shows the basest metal of society.

In Chikwava's version of Zimbabwe, poverty rules, crawling "over the multitudes of faces scattered along the city roads, ravaging all etches of dignity that only a few years back stood resilient" (17). He describes the people of Harare using language that the government will later use to justify Operation Murambatsvina.

By 5 a.m., most of Harare's struggling inhabitants are out of their hovels. They are on their varied ways to innumerable places to waylay the dollars that they so desperately need to stave hunger off their doorsteps. Trains and commuter omnibuses burst with exploitable human material. Its excess finds its way onto bicycles, or simply self-propels, tilling earth with bare frostbitten feet all the way to the city-center or industrial areas. (17)

In this opening paragraph, Chikwava simultaneously highlights the poverty that Zimbabweans face, but shows no sympathy in his description by using imagery that dehumanizes them. They

emerge from hovels like animals. They are merely objects as they burst out like “exploitable human waste”, facing another day when someone will make a profit off their misery.

No one is spared from this poverty as “[e]ven the supposedly civilized well-to-do section of the population, a pitiful lot typified by their indefatigable amiability, now finds itself anchored down by a State whose methods of governance involve incessant roguery” (18). The dire economic situation has affected everyone, and Chikwava states the government’s misconduct as the reason for all this misery. The excess waste finds other ways to get to work. This paragraph does not give much agency to the people it describes. They may make their own way to where they go, but there is a sense of a lack of options, as if they have to go out every day to try to find that money they so desperately need. People will even walk long distances because they need the work so much. This makes the people come across as prisoners to their situation and to the poverty. The word “self-propel” suggests a sense of mechanization, as if the people have become machines, following this routine because they have no other option.

The hero of the story is Fiso, an ageing prostitute struggling to survive now that she is getting older and less attractive. Once again, Chikwava uses the language of Zanu-PF as he describes Fiso:

It has been decades since she realized that, *armed* with a vagina and a will to *survive*, destitution could never lay claim to her. With these *weapons of destruction* she has continued to *fortify her liberty* against poverty and society. Fiso is her name and like many of the city’s inhabitants she has conjured that death is a mere spin, nobody ever really dies. (18 – emphasis my own)

Her life is a struggle just like the struggle for independence. She carries “weapons of destruction” to guard her liberty in a similar way to how the government says Zimbabweans

must always be guarding the fruits of independence against those who wish to recolonize the country. Just like the government, she has spun reality to make it fit better with how she chooses to see the world. Unwilling to face her own mortality, she sees death as mere spin, something that cannot touch her. Her attempts to survive have been characterized as a battle. So how can she be denied a voice, denied a place in the country's narrative, when she struggles in Zimbabwe too?

The existence of Fiso highlights the existence of a parallel world to the world created by Zanu-PF propaganda. There is no room for Fiso and her daughter Sue in the official narrative. As the gap between the official life and their reality grows, they become disillusioned and less-enamored by the government. When Fiso smears a mosquito across the picture of President Mugabe, she does not wipe it away as she "could not be bothered to make good the insignia of her patriotism" (21). Keeping the picture pristine is no longer a priority for her. Just like the picture, her perception of the government has been smeared by a violent reality. The gulf between the people in government and herself grows every day. Once it seemed a bridgeable gap, but now "the novelty of affecting patriotic sentiment in the hope of dreaming herself out of prostitution to the level of First Lady had long worn off" (21). There is no connection between what the government says is happening and what she experiences every day. Sue experiences this dissonance between the official story and reality when she switches on the radio. Once again she is "confronted by the continuously recycled maxims of State propaganda, which ranged from the importance of being a sovereign nation to defending the gains of independence in the face of a 'neo-colonialist onslaught'" but she fails to "grasp the value of the messages to her life" (21).

The State keeps reproducing the same story but it has no relevance to the lives that people are leading. Instead, they inhabit this parallel world where they come up with many different

ways to try to survive. Indeed “Seventh Street Alchemy” examines “the creativity of ordinary people in surviving these absurd forms of taxonomy that structure state power” (Musila 140). Officially food is affordable “because prices are State-controlled” (23), but in reality, vendors’ prices change not just from day-to-day, but during the day as well. Officially, government offices work well, but in reality there is corruption and many civil servants work other jobs to make ends meet. Officially, Fiso does not exist, but every day she fights the battle to survive. Fiso and Sue have no day-to-day use for the official narrative as it ignores their problems. They find their solutions in their parallel world. Sue ignores the radio and its repetitive empty message, turning instead to the market women who can at least tell her where to get sugar.

There is a wide gulf between the official story and the parallel story. However, this does not stop people like Fiso and Sue from trying to find a way to re-enter the official narrative that has shut them out. In the official story, there is identity and there is no poverty.

Officially basic food commodities are affordable because prices are State-controlled.

Officially no one starves because there is plenty of food on the supermarket shelves. And if it is not there, it is *officially* somewhere, being hoarded by Enemies of the State. With all its innumerable benefits, who would not want to exist in this other world spawned by the authorities – where your situation does not daily remind you what a liability your mouth and stomach are (23 – emphasis my own).

In this quote, Chikwava again echoes an aspect of Mugabeism, blaming so-called ‘enemies of the State’ for whatever economic problems the country faces. This official world is the world controlled by the government through the media. The government performs its alchemy to turn reality into a more palatable tale and it is this tale that Fiso and her daughter want to be a part of, a world nothing like the one they currently inhabit.

By attempting to obtain birth certificates and passports, Fiso and Sue try to find a way into the official narrative. Not only have they been shut out of the government's narrative because of their status of being working-class women, but officially, they do not exist. There is literally no record of their existence. There is no way Fiso can get a birth certificate legally as both of her parents are dead. Her daughter, in turn, is also subjected to that anonymity. She cannot get a passport as she does not have a birth certificate either. There is no place for prostitutes and struggling market women in the government's narrative. It has positioned itself as champion of the people and the British and MDC as threats to the Zimbabwean people, but it is the government that denies Fiso and her daughter an official identity. No one at the Registrar's Office will help them. The two women's efforts are stymied by underpaid government workers who refuse to fulfill their duty to help the public. Instead, Fiso and Sue have to pay someone from the immigration office to get them the birth certificates. Again, they find their solutions in the parallel world where you pay government workers under the table to get services that are the right of Zimbabwean citizens. That is how government offices work now, through corruption. Zanu-PF may blame the rest of the world for the economic problems, but these are problems with how most government offices work. When a frustrated Fiso shows up at the Registrar's office, the registrar is only concerned about what she might say about his office and not actually helping her. He only responds in the interest of his department's reputation, interested only in "smothering public objections" (29).

It is ironic that even though the Registrar does nothing to help Fiso when she comes to his office, once it is established that the police cannot charge her as she does not have an Identity Card, he is ready to fast-track the production of a card for her. Only when it is in their interest will the government work to give the nameless a name. There is no room for Fiso in the official

narrative and she is “invisible to the official structure, despite being arrested (ironically in pursuit of official visibility)” (Musila 139). In the end, Fiso is released without being charged, written off as “only an ageing whore” (30). This is the role that the government’s narrative has given her and when she tries to change this, she and her daughter “find the door out of their parallel existence shut and bolted” (23).

Petina Gappah’s “Elegy for Easterly”

Whilst Chikwava seems to apportion all the blame for the trials and tribulations of the people who inhabit the world of his short story to Mugabe’s regime, Gappah goes further by examining the society that created an environment that could support such a regime. Her story was published in 2009 after Zimbabwe’s worst year of 2008 and so her characters face a much-changed Zimbabwe with tougher problems that are not so easily attributed to the government alone. French political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) said “In democracy we get the government we deserve”. So, Zanu-PF’s lack of tolerance for criticism can be seen as stemming from the Shona philosophy that *Baba havabvunzwe*. No one questions the head of the house. Gappah juxtaposes the things the government does with the things the individuals do to each other to show that whilst the government has played a large part in creating the so-called lost decade, the people are not free of blame.

Most of the residents can blame the government for their current situation and for living in Easterly, but Martha is different. She was not forced into the area by a government trying to keep up appearances. Indeed, she “just appeared, as though from nowhere,” a throwaway from a society that ostracizes the mentally handicapped. She simply moves into the house that has been empty since Titus Zunguza killed his wife, sleeping on the blood-spattered mattress that is the evidence of what a man can do to a woman.

In response to the government's narrative, a counter-narrative has emerged, typified by the "Seventh Street Alchemy". Here, the entire blame for what is happening in Zimbabwe is placed on the government and the actions of the people, however questionable, are deemed as being a result of trying to survive this hostile environment created by Zanu-PF. This narrative does not hold when the story of Martha Mupengo is brought into question. The economic situation in Zimbabwe has led Martha to Easterly, but the people around her do nothing to help her, instead exploiting her mental illnesses. The children taunt her mercilessly with minimal reprimands from their parents (23). Josephat, in a moment of unbridled lust, rapes Martha, knowing that she has no voice to explain what has happened to her (42). The child his wife so violently takes is his illegitimate child, a reminder of his act of violation (40). In this way, Gappah shows that Zimbabweans should not be too quick to portray themselves as victims. A counter narrative to the government narrative is just as dangerous, if it too only shows one perspective.

Women have not been given a role in the government's narrative, but that stems from the patriarchal society that also denies women roles except those of mother and wife; women are viewed only as an extension of someone else. The women of Easterly are known in relation to their children like MaToby, the mother of Toby. Those without children are denied a name. In the hierarchy of women, Josephat's wife is beneath the other women because she has no child. It is only when she is cradling the child she has pulled out of Martha's womb that the reader learns that her name is Ellen. The patriarchal society that has taken her name away is the same patriarchal system that has allowed for the existence of a regime like the Zanu-PF government. When Josephat's wife reaches into Martha's unconscious body and pulls out the baby, when like a crazy woman she bites through the umbilical cord to free the child, it is not the government that

has driven her to that state of madness. It is a society that has said that a woman has no value if she has no child. In “Seventh Street Alchemy”, it was the government that denied Fiso and Sue an identity. In “Elegy for Easterly,” society does so.

That is not to say the government escapes with no blame in “Elegy for Easterly”. The story brings into question Operation Murambatsvina and how it was presented in the media. The national media presented it as a success and the private media used apocalyptic rhetoric to describe the event (Chari 142). In all this, no one asked the people whose homes had been destroyed how they felt. By moving them to farms far from the capital city, the government had effectively silenced them. The reader encounters these people at Easterly Farm. The reader examines the lives of these people living in illegal shacks on the edge of society.

The government hides away people who do not fit in with their narrative. When the Queen of England visits the country, the government removes anything that does not fit in with the image they want to present.

She did not come with those who arrived after the government cleaned the townships to make Harare pristine for the three-day visit of the Queen of England. All the women who walk alone at night are prostitutes, *the government said* – lock them up, the Queen is coming. There are illegal structures in the townships, *they said* – clean them up. The townships are too full of people, *they said*, gather them up and put them in the places that the Queen will not see, in Porta Farm, in Hatcliffe, in Dzivaresekwa Extension, in Easterly. Allow them temporary structures, and promise them real walls and doors, windows and toilets. And so the government hid away the poverty, the people put on plastic smiles and the city council planted new flowers in the streets. (Gappah 27 – emphasis my own).

The people live in illegal structures because the government has not provided adequate housing for a growing population. The townships are overcrowded for the same reason, but the government retells the story in a way that flatters it. Women brave enough to walk alone at night are deemed prostitutes. Illegal structures are deemed rubbish that has to be cleaned up. The people who live in them are viewed more as objects that can easily be picked up and put elsewhere without seeking their consent. The government's only concern is how it appears. The repetition of "they said" emphasizes that what the government says may not be a true reflection of what really is. Instead, what is stated is merely the government's interpretation of what they see, an interpretation that never criticizes the government, instead finding someone else to blame. The government "hid the poverty" (27), unable to fit it into a narrative that presents them as the nation's defender.

Gappah, like Chikwava, spends quite a bit of time showing what the people of Easterly are doing in an attempt to survive. She shows the women selling mealies by the side of the road. She shows the men putting on their coal-ironed shirts before going to work. She shows the women at the markets where they source their produce and follows them into the high-density suburbs where they try to make a living. She watches the men and boys selling anything they can at the *Siyaso* marketplace, and watches the vendors trying to attract customers at *Mupedzanhamo*. She takes time to describe these people, so that when the bulldozers appear at the end of the story tearing down what the government termed as rubbish, the reader knows these people are not rubbish. They are people trying to make a living in a country that has become an economic warzone. The government is not cleaning the city; it is destroying livelihoods.

The Writer's Responsibility to the Narrative

What is the responsibility of the writer to the narrative? This paper has highlighted the role that Zimbabwean writers have assumed of questioning the government's narrative, but is it a role that society should assign the writer? The writer must have space to write and it seems as if saddling them with the responsibility to tell the story right is encroaching on this space. Yet it seems writers African writer especially, due to the turbulent and often corrupt natures of their governments, are often expected to tell their nation's story right, highlighting what is wrong and providing potential solutions.

The question of what is the writer's responsibility of the writer to the narrative seems to be linked to that of what is the role of the writer. By assigning a role, one is assigning responsibility, and again, that seems like encroaching on the writers space to create by deciding what types of subjects they should address and how. In Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*, one of the characters, a writer, says that "Writers give headaches not prescriptions." The character is stating that it is the job of the writer to highlight the problems causing discomfort that will lead to the solution yet in that statement a writer is giving other writers a prescription on what their job is.

No writer wants to be told what kind of writer he or she should be. African writers often speak of feeling the weight of being labeled the "African writer." It is a term that comes with loaded meaning. The first generation of African writers like Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o embraced the idea of retelling the colonial story to show the natives' tales, but the current generation of writers seems unwilling to be burdened with such responsibility. Petina Gappah in particular asserts a reluctance to be labeled. In early press releases for her short story collection *Elegy for Easterly*, she was touted as "the Voice of Zimbabwe." When she saw these, she insisted that her publisher remove the title declaring that writing about a place was different

from writing for a place. To her, just because a writer tells stories about a place does not necessarily mean that they are making bold statements about this place, but someone like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o might argue that it does. In his essay "Writing for Peace", he says, "Literature provides us with images of the world in which we live. Through these images, it shapes our consciousness to look at the world in a certain way. Our propensity to action or inaction or to a certain kind of action or inaction can be profoundly affected by the way we look at the world." A writer gives the reader a way to look at the world in which they exist.

In an interview with the BBC, Gappah said, "I think as an artist you are responsible only to yourself. I don't at all accept this idea of the artist, the writer, the musician as some sort of social barometer who's there to speak about the ills of society. I think every artist should speak the truth that he or she sees...I think that each artist, each writer gives him or herself the role that he or she wants to play" (BBC World Service). The fact that she repeatedly addresses this issue of a writer's role is indicative of how often people try to assign her a role. Furthermore, the desire to label her as "the voice of Zimbabwe" can be seen as a response to the dearth of true stories coming out of Zimbabwe that are not doctored by Mugabe's regime.

Perhaps it is unfair to label her as anything after only one short story collection, but her short stories will always be viewed as directly engaging in conversation with the narrative of Zanu-PF. Their importance is heightened by the fact that they reveal the reality of what was happening in Zimbabwe during the lost decade. Her short story collection was published just as Zimbabwe began to emerge from the worst of its economic crisis. It is impossible for a reader to go through *Elegy for Easterly* without feeling that they are seeing what life really was like during the lost decade, instead of what the government said it was. It has to be a cathartic process for people who lived through that decade to see finally the reality that they experienced

acknowledged on paper. Gappah may be uneasy with the role she has been assigned, but she has been forced into it by the government's tight grip on the national narrative. Writers are assigned the roles that society needs them to fill. In good times, they can choose to merely entertain, but in a political climate like that of Zimbabwe in the 2000's, there is no way to write without engaging the government's narrative. By merely telling things as they are, the writer creates a parallel narrative. Regardless of how the writers may feel about it, their stories are deemed as important because how they work as parallel narratives to that of Mugabe's regime.

Chikwava and Gappah show that there are different ways to explore life in Zimbabwe during the lost decade. In "Seventh Street Alchemy," Chikwava seems to place the entire blame for what is happening on the government and its policies. Gappah shows the horrible situation created by a poor government policy, but also examines how society has affected the people of Easterly. The two writers look at Zimbabwe with different lenses. So which of these two approaches is the right one? I would say both. They can and should coexist. It is not the job of the creative writer to produce the single story for a nation, but to introduce many that reflect the complexity of a nation's narrative.

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