

**OPERATION RESTORE ORDER: RE-COMPREHENDING
ZIMBABWE'S 2005 URBAN SLUM CLEARANCE
IN VALERIE TAGWIRA'S AWARD-WINNING
NOVEL THE UNCERTAINTY OF HOPE**

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ABSTRACT

Coming in the wake of yet another (2005) disputed election, the slum clearance controversy in Zimbabwe in 2005 created a ruinous setback to the government's concerted efforts to construct and reassert its legitimacy. The state narrative, being one of the establishment's hegemonic apparatuses for power retention tends to be characterised by omissions and inflations and to some extent a discernible mendacity that serves the government's political grand plan. The spin inherent in the conception of such narratives constructs and retraces conventions and patterns that guide the social and political conduct of the citizens, consequently reconfiguring perceptions of reality. But the potency of literary narratives to construct, deconstruct and reconstruct power relations in the public sphere makes them a cultural site for the reformulation and criticism of dominant (state) narratives. This paper is concerned with the evocative representation of the 2005 urban slum demolitions code-named "Operation Murambatsvina" in the novel *The Uncertainty of Hope* (2006). The paper gives especial emphasis on the value of novelistic description in the swaying of emotions and the representation of arresting scenes of the ensuing violence, homelessness, child labour, HIV/AIDS and the deterioration of the victims' everyday life, which can potentially sway the reader to alternative apprehensions of the urban slum clearances and lead them to doubt the state's versions of the event and its aftermath.

Keywords: Operation Restore Order, Anna Tibaijuka, compassion, egoistic reciprocity.

INTRODUCTION: THE POLITICAL YET LITERARY DIMENSIONS OF OPERATION MURAMBATSVINA

The urban slum clearances of post-election 2005 in Zimbabwe have been inscribed in the nation's history as a major public policy and political scandal that amplified the already heightened tension and suspicion between the rulers and the ruled in this politically volatile period (discussed) above. The timing and the setting of the mass displacements particularly have come under intense debate, with pro-government voices seeking to project a positive picture of the demolitions while most non-governmental organizations and civic societies on the other hand perceived a subtle backlash on the 'dissident' urban population. Within the latter framework of perception, the demolitions were meant to force the 'oppositional' urban shack dweller to return to his/her rural home for some political re-education (Moore 35), and (given the dominance of ZANU PF in the rural communities) such a returnee victim's political re-orientation and acquiescence to the rule of ZANU PF was almost certain. But as Mickias Musiyiwa (with reference to earlier similar demolitions in the 1980s) infers, the "bulldozer policy" has always been the post-independence establishment's response to urban migration that was straining the capacities of urban structures. Whatever the motive, what gives Operation Murambatsvina an immense political significance is the resulting magnitude of human suffering which made it a humanitarian catastrophe warranting the intervention of the United Nations. Furthermore, the extensive sympathy for the displaced from non-governmental organizations and opposition political parties transformed the victims into potential political expendables. Consequently, analyses and representations of Operation Murambatsvina became a contest of binary oppositions where the government sought to sanitize its image, while some non-governmental organisations, opposition political parties and other civic pressure groups used it to vindicate their regime change agenda. This paper reads Valerie Tagwira's novel *The Uncertainty of Hope* as an important cultural site to experience alternative perspectives (especially to the state's grand narrative of time-space) into one of Zimbabwe's humanitarian crisis in history.

THE HISTORIC "OPERATION MURAMBATSVINA" AND THE DEBATE ON HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSE:

In order historically to contextualise the various ways through which *The Uncertainty of Hope* makes possible otherwise "concealed", under-represented, exaggerated or misleading conceptions of the humanitarian consequences of the slum demolitions, it is necessary to trace the socio-historic background to Operation Murambatsvina, particularly relating to the dichotomous nature of the ensuing debate on the motive, impact, merits and demerits of the exercise. The political polarisation in the country tends to reduplicate in analyses of Operation Murambatsvina. At one pole, the ZANU PF government defended the demolitions as a noble act undertaken to arrest the continuing urban rot and to curtail illicit commercial transactions – touted as the major causes of the cataclysmic state of the national economy. Sekesai Makwavarara, the then state-appointed chairperson of the Harare Commission, in launching Operation Murambatsvina vaunted the programme as the logical culmination of the city of Harare's efforts to bring back the city's "sunshine status":

The city of Harare wishes to advise that in its effort to improve service delivery within the city, it will embark on Operation Murambatsvina, in conjunction with the Zimbabwe Republic Police. This is a programme to enforce bylaws to stop all forms of illegal activity. (qtd. "In Order out of Chaos")

Makwavarara's position was founded on the sentiments expressed in the 2005 monetary policy statement of Gideon Gono, the Reserve Bank governor, which prioritised counter measures against the rampant informalisation of the national economy and the flourishing black market. The slums were seen as the "breeding grounds" of economic saboteurs who engaged in illegal foreign exchange deals. Such informal foreign currency dealings (like those we see sustaining John and his family in *The Uncertainty of Hope*) were held responsible for the depreciating value of the local currency and consequently for fuelling inflation. The official position was that the demolitions were a necessary evil in the ongoing attempts to regularise the national economy and rescue it from an unprecedented collapse. The government therefore created an impression that with Operation Murambatsvina, there was more to be gained than lost. With little or no interest in the root causes of the informalisation of the foreign exchange system, the illegal vending stalls and expansion of slum shelters, the government imposed a declaration of intended demolition at short notice, without any ready mitigating measures to alleviate the obvious consequences for the affected communities.

Despite the envisaged national benefits (financial discipline) supposed to accrue from Operation Murambatsvina, the government also used the idea of responsible citizenship to validate the undertaking. In her launch speech, Makwavarara intimated that a culture of collective participation was needed to safeguard the beauty of the city of Harare:

These violations of the by-laws in areas of vending, traffic control, illegal structures, touting/abuse of commuters by rank marshals, street-life/prostitution, vandalism of property infrastructure, stock theft, and illegal cultivation, among others have led to the deterioration of standards thus negatively

affecting the image of the City. The attitude of the members of the public as well as some City officials has led to a point whereby Harare has lost its glow. We are determined to bring it back. (qtd. in “Order out of chaos”)

In his study of cartoon representations of Operation Murambatsvina, Kudzai Nyamanhindi (2008) observes the “partiality” with which cartoons in the state media portrayed the causes and effects of Operation Murambatsvina. In one of the cartoons that Nyamanhindi analyses, the cartoonist focuses his attack on a damning UN report as funded and therefore influenced by Zimbabwe’s ‘archenemy’, Britain.

Given the manifest government failure to assist residents to put up proper legal infrastructure for the informal sector, the city’s ‘glow’ could never become a priority to the ordinary citizen straining to eke out a living in a restrictive economic space. John, a character in *The Uncertainty of Hope*, transcends the boundaries of his fictional life-world to give a convincing critique of the real world when he argues that the failing economy has produced a situation whereby “the line between what is legal and what is not, has never been as blurred” (Tagwira 2005, p.27), allusively inferring that the “urban rot” defiling the “sunshine” in the city is in reality symptomatic of the public policy rot. Anna Tibaijuka, the United Nations special envoy who investigated the extent of the humanitarian impact of Operation Murambatsvina, categorically stated the government’s budgetary ineptitude – which crippled the envisaged reconstruction phase (Operation Garikai [Rebuilding]) – and the inadequacy of measures taken to assist the displaced with the building of habitable lodgings and functioning vending stalls:

Operation Garikai gives the impression of being hastily put together. It does not appear to have accounted for the immediate shelter needs of people who have been rendered homeless at the onset of winter. The mission was able to witness thousands of people, including small children, pregnant women and the elderly, who were sleeping in the open without adequate protection from the elements either on the rubble of their destroyed homes, in rural areas or in official transit camps. (2005:49)

There was clearly no justification on the part of the government for starting with the demolitions (rendering some 700 000 people homeless) before the construction of alternative accommodation. In effect, the government created a humanitarian catastrophe in the name of avoiding one. The international Human Rights watchdogs Amnesty International and Coalition against Forced Evictions recently noted the continuing vulnerability of the victims of Operation Murambatsvina – five years after the demolitions and the rebuilding programme Operation Garikai:

It is a scandal that five years on, victims [of Operation Murambatsvina] are left to survive in plastic shacks without basic essential services. The needs of these victims are at risk of being forgotten because their voices are consistently ignored [...] the few houses that were built under the Garikai/Hlalani Kuhle scheme are completely un-inhabitable [...] They have no floors, windows, water or toilets. (Amnesty International)

What becomes clear in view of the dismal failure of the rebuilding exercise is that the government either underestimated the humanitarian consequences of Operation Murambatsvina, or it simply did not care about the affected people’s welfare. The fact that it seemed obvious that rebuilding under Operation Garikai would not live up to the government’s prognostications feeds into opposition political contentions that the whole “clean-up” programme was a backlash move to punish the urban electorate for voting for the MDC in the 2005 plebiscite – “to depopulate the cities of MDC supporters by driving them into the rural areas where the ruling ZANU (PF) party dominates, and where they can be effectively controlled” (“Order out of Chaos”).

Operation Murambatsvina targeted illegal structures, especially in the high density areas of the cities. Such structures ranged from vending stalls, self-help small scale manufacturing industries and shanty dwellings to houses built outside official municipal plans. The thriving informal sector in Zimbabwe was fuelled by a combination of high unemployment levels and the ever acclivitous inflation rate. As a result, most of the victims of Operation Murambatsvina were some of the poorest citizens, who could not afford to regularise their small businesses and/or build municipal-approved shelters. The extensive displacement that followed led to Deborah Potts concluding that “the impacts of Operation Murambatsvina were unprecedented by African standards in terms of the scale of destruction and livelihoods” (53). Paradoxically, a government minister had in the past protested the arresting of vendors as unjustified from “a moral, social and economic point of view” (“Order out of Chaos”), which casts a shadow of doubt on the sudden change of government policy on illegal vending.

While previously the government’s dominance of the expressive space was used to contest local and

international accusations of human rights abuse, on the basis of its historical role as the harbinger of black people's rights, Operation Murambatsvina turned out to be an "own goal" that presented a clear case for the regime's accusers. Another independent report, "Order out of Chaos, or Chaos out of Order? A Preliminary Report on Operation Murambatsvina" by a non-governmental organisation Human Rights Forum of Zimbabwe, details (as cited below) the wide range of Human Rights violated during and after Operation Murambatsvina:

1. Every individual shall have the right to the respect of the dignity inherent in a human being. [Article 5 of the African Charter]
2. Everyone has the right to a reasonable standard of living which is necessary for the family's health and well-being. This includes adequate food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services. Those who cannot provide for themselves and their family because they have no job, or if they are sick, disabled or elderly are entitled to support. Mothers and their children must be given special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, have the same rights." [Article 25 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights]
3. Everyone has the right to work and to choose where to work. Everyone must be given a fair salary so that they can support themselves and their family. [Article 23 of United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights]
4. Everyone has the right to receive education. [Article 26 of United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights]
5. The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions. [Article 22 of International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights]
6. The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health." [Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights]. ("Order out of Chaos")

The international criticism in response to the ensuing humanitarian crisis became yet another hurdle in the regime's attempts to "clean up" its reputation. UN recommendations that "immediate measures need to be taken to bring those responsible to account" (Tibaijuka 2005, p.7) and that "the Government of Zimbabwe should set a good example and adhere to the rule of law before it can credibly ask its citizens to do the same", underscores perceptions of the government's conduct as morally deficient.

However, the government's position never wavered, in spite of the damning reports and the glaring reality of thousands rendered homeless. The official argument remained defensive; that Operation Murambatsvina was a noble exercise to curb the growth of urban slums – ironically identified by the UN report as one of the serious problems bedeviling African cities. The idea of clean, slum-free cities envisaged by Operation Murambatsvina would therefore seem to intersect with the United Nations' "goals of the Habitat Agenda and of the Millennium Declaration" (Tibaijuka 2005:71). However, the magnitude of the humanitarian crisis triggered by the demolitions outweighs any claims of improvements resulting from the exercise. Operation Murambatsvina, then, emerges as a bone of contention and a phenomenon conducive to political interpretations. Evidently, institutions like the MDC and civil society found enough political fodder in the catastrophic consequences of the forced displacements, the suffering caused by exposure and lost livelihoods, to attack the government for its insensitivity and total disregard of the welfare of its citizens.

In view of the foregoing, any serious discussion and/or representation of Operation Murambatsvina would necessarily invoke the political dimension of the demolitions. Nyamanhindi argues that the cultural space became an arena of competing representations, where cartoonists in the independent media joined the UN Commission in subtly debunking reductive and even phony representations of Operation Murambatsvina. One of Zimbabwe's best known cartoonists Tony Namate's cartoon was captioned: "A government of the government, by the government, for the government" which shows a giant police boot crushing a makeshift house together with its occupant. Nyamanhindi (2008) argues that the cartoonists managed to bring out the concealed and "inconvenient", violent and brutal, side of Operation Murambatsvina. My approach to *The Uncertainty of Hope* is two-pronged. Firstly, I seek to demonstrate how the novel (as compared to state's grand narratives) creates a fictional sphere in which the reader can experience the tragedy of Operation Murambatsvina in ways that steer him/her towards certain perceptions of the operation which have not found expression in the state narrative. While much has been said and debated (and sometimes settled) about the physical impact of the demolitions, I instead attempt to demonstrate the power of *The Uncertainty of Hope* as a cultural construct that in a complex manner, but effectively, illuminates certain aspects of Operation Murambatsvina that differ markedly from the government's representation and validation of the event.

Secondly, and adjunct to the first approach, I read the power of the novel to move its readers as carrying an implicit political charge, particularly focusing on the vivid descriptions of suffering of those affected and the callousness of the authorities, considering how these evocations ultimately guide the reader to certain cognitive apprehensions of Operation Murambatsvina which, apart from being in conflict with the state narrative, nurture in the reader a disapproval of the responsible governing authorities. The novel therefore enters the often dreaded political zone, albeit as a social and cultural artefact, exposing the glaring malfeasance of the political elite in this humanitarian calamity, thus contributing to the on-going quest for a moral and just society.

The actual Operation Murambatsvina evoked a deep sense of the vulnerability of the urban poor. These are the “raw materials” upon which the fictional textuality of *The Uncertainty of Hope* is formed and a reason for an analytical focus on the affective potential of the novel, as well as on the political consequences of the emotions aroused by its depictions. To situate my reading in some theoretical perspective, I invoke Lara’s concept of the interconnectedness of the moral and the political spheres, as she asserts: “societies can change their self-understandings precisely because moral, aesthetic and political issues are intertwined” (1998:170). Following on Lara, I take on board Martha Nussbaum’s congeneric reconstruction of the Aristotelian tradition of compassion and its ethical and moral significance in her book *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, as well as some of the opinions articulated in response to her concept. As Martha Nussbaum (2001:300) argues, the “self” is “constituted by its evaluative judgments with the areas of the world outside itself”. In the fictional world of *The Uncertainty of Hope*, the “self”/reader is guided to a judgmental perception by the narrative’s affective rendering of troubled life-worlds, of victimised poor urban dwellers and unfeeling authorities. A consequent of this emotional guidance is the buildup of compassion, functionally defined by Nussbaum as the “painful emotion occasioned by the awareness of another person’s undeserved misfortune” (2001:301), which effectively paves the way for an “egoistic reciprocity” (2001:301) between the reader and the sufferer. Defined (by Nussbaum 2001:301) as “a painful emotion occasioned by the awareness of another person’s undeserved misfortune” (301), compassion “pushes the boundaries of the self further outwards than many types of love” (2001:300). Nussbaum is here pointing to the “personalisation” of other people’s afflictive experiences which occur at the realisation that the afflicted do not deserve their plight. In her attempt to distinguish between “sympathy” and “compassion”, Nussbaum brings out the most fundamental dimension of compassion, that it is (as compared to sympathy) “more intense and suggests a greater degree of suffering, both on the part of the afflicted person and on the part of the person having the emotion” (Nussbaum 2001:302). The painful experience is contagious and has the power to transform the person having the emotion from an initial state of impassive witnessing to a certain level of involvement, in which the cause of the suffering is condemnable both by the victim and the witness. Compassion therefore leads to a “judgement that the other person’s distress is bad” (Nussbaum 2001:302).

In her response to Nussbaum’s theorisation, Diana Fritz Cates (2003:326) assents to the notion of compassion as involving of “thought, judgment and evaluation”, but further invokes Buddhists dogma about compassion stirred by man’s suffering as a consequence of his own religious ignorance in order to contest Nussbaum’s claim that “insofar as we believe that a person has come to grief through his or her own fault, we blame and reproach, rather than having compassion” (2003:311). Cates offers the example of the Dalai Lama’s compassion for both the oppressed Tibetan people and their oppressor, the Chinese leadership and also Jesus’s preaching on unconditional love (in the parable of the prodigal son), to debunk Nussbaum’s conception of the victim as the only object of compassion. But what emerges in this Nussbaum/Cates standoff is that victimhood actually takes multifarious forms, and in Cates’s mentioned case, there are the physically pained Tibetan victims suffering injustices perpetrated by the mentally and spiritually afflicted or handicapped Chinese oppressors. In both instances, compassion becomes, as Brian Carr (1999:411) says, an “altruistic emotion [...] directed at the needs of others and ha[s] a prima facie case for the status of social virtue” (ibid 411).

In *The Uncertainty of Hope* Valerie Tagwira invokes the historic “raw material” of Operation Murambatsvina to offer a fictional account of intense suffering of women, children and vulnerable men who are discernibly our objects of compassion. What is depicted evokes an overwhelming impression of a patriarchy losing touch with its moral duty and instead seeking to flourish at the expense of the “weaker” members of society, the women and children and certain men. The distinction between the victims and the victimised is made glaringly open as the plot unfolds and Onai, one of the major characters falls into the abyss of affliction from where she eventually emerges with the help of a man to whom she had shown some kindness. But my focus here is on the affecting nature of Tagwira’s representations of the impact of the shack demolitions which pervade the plot and of the setting in which Onai’s journey into and out of ruin occurs. Such evocations of pain and injustice facilitate our understanding of the novel’s ethical and political dimensions; as Anna-Leena Toivanen (2011:18) says: “it is indeed the very dystopian visions that provide in their own reversed logic, insights into what [the] ethical future looks like”. Onai’s problems are foreshadowed on the very first page of the first chapter where a

sense of insecurity is overpoweringly present. Such vulnerability and timidity, though at the familial level, are symbolic of the susceptibility of the Mbare residents to the impending mass demolitions of shack dwellings. Of more significance to my approach here is the atmosphere of vulnerability, anxiety and uncertainty that results from the glaring absence of protection. This dangerous absence is illuminated through the evocation of enigmatic and slippery character of Onai's absent husband, Gari. The vulnerability of Gari's family, caused by his abscondment from the traditional duty of protecting the family, can be read as symbolic of the broader social challenges that threaten the poor as a consequence of the authorities' reneging from their role – as Onai, terrorised by a burglary she cannot stop, reveals in her diatribe against her undutiful husband:

She was certain, moreover, that her loudest screams would not coerce her neighbours out of the safety and comfort of their homes. Nobody in their right mind would risk their lives by coming to her aid. Not at this time of night. So, apart from her children, she was well and truly alone. She swore under her breath at her absent husband. 'Uripiko nhai Gari? Where are you Gari?' (2)

Interestingly, Christopher Mlalazi's short story "The Bulldozers are coming" in his short story anthology *Dancing with Life: Tales from the Township* (2008) also employs the absconding husband motif to reflect on the vulnerability and terror suffered by the wife who, like Onai in *The Uncertainty of Hope*, despairingly wonders why her husband disappears, leaving her to face the wrath of the demolishing bulldozer: "Where are you my husband? Her heart called out to the greying sky" (69). Returning to Gari, one notices that his moral delinquency not only reveals his fecklessness as a father, but also shows the extent of his irrationality, as he comes home to blame and assault Onai for the theft of the television. In the quotation above, Onai prepares the reader to witness Gari's irrationality and inconsideration that is reminiscent of the authorities' heavy-handedness in Operation Murambatsvina. The terrifying awareness that she cannot find help, the helplessness of the children she cannot protect and the tension-filled speculation about Gari's whereabouts reflect intensely on the lack of family safety nets which also (easily) translates metaphorically into a dearth of social safety nets in the advent of Operation Murambatsvina. This familial handicap, signified in the person of Gari comes to function more as an allusive precursor to the reproduction of the same defect, now at the national level, when victims of shack demolitions find no security from their "political fathers" and (just like Ruva, Onai's eldest daughter) have to deal with their "fiery but impotent anger" (3).

The setting of the novel, Mbare (where much, but not all, of the action happens) helps the author historically to contextualise her fictional narrative, and at the same time to sketch the novel's intended "meaning" effectively and vividly. In the racial politics of colonial housing, Mbare was demarcated a native suburb for blacks working in menial jobs in Salisbury, both as an "apartheid" segregative mechanism and a hegemonic tactic to have blacks compartmentalised in survable areas. The increasing rural-urban migration pattern resulted in the overcrowding of the suburb and that, coupled with the government's neglect, led to its squalid condition – which has become a permanent feature of the area up to the present. Since the colonial period, Mbare has functioned as a dropping zone for emigrating rural blacks, because it hosts the only long distance bus terminus for the city of Harare. The resultant population density that still characterise Mbare today is therefore a striking sign of the suburb's neglect and further deterioration, even after more than three decades of self-rule in Zimbabwe.

Mbare's history of overcrowding, neglect and anarchy makes it a suitable site for the scripting of the convincingly imagined social impact of Operation Murambatsvina in *The Uncertainty of Hope*. The represented worlds of burglaries, illegal shack dwellers and vendors (in the text) is given more urgency and impetus when read in the context of these historical facts. Mbare (in the novel) is home to Mawaya, the ritual vagrant, because the "kutanda botso" ritual he is performing requires him to experience extremes of poverty and suffering, but it is his description as we first encounter him in the novel that resonates with what Mbare has done to its habitants:

The man occasionally stopped by her house to beg for something to eat. Quite frequently, she had spotted him competing with stray dogs for rare bits of food from people's bins. Nobody could afford to throw away anything that was remotely edible, nowadays. These were lean times and it showed. Both Mawaya and the neighbourhood's stray dogs looked like walking skeletons. Mawaya's cheek bones jutted out like twin peaks on his gaunt face. Onai had no doubt that under his mass of rags, you could count the bones of his ribcage. (57)

The emaciated images of Mawaya and the stray dog become metaphors of the anguish of life in Mbare, metaphors which highlight the degree to which the residents of Mbare have suffered and do not deserve further calamities. With this vivid description of deprivation, the author stimulates the reader's imagination to perceive such a man as one who has been pushed down to the level of dirt and in so doing "guide [the reader's] attention" (Currie 2010: 98) to extreme levels of commiseration with the man, which accompanies a deep abhorrence of the forces responsible for his situation. In identifying Mawaya with the dog, the author is therefore not only

“dirtying” Mawaya to prepare him (and the Mbare residents he symbolises) for the “dirt removal” of Operation Murambatsvina, but more importantly, to transform him and the Mbare victims into a figure of pathos deserving compassion.

In Shona culture, the dog is the most dirty and unhygienic of the domestic creatures (often contrasted with the “cleanliness” of the cat) and people who are despised are generally called “dogs”. We therefore envision Mawaya as symbolic of the dirt that is Mbare, and deserving of “cleaning”. But the dirt here is given a human form to distinguish it from the infamous “maggots” as slum inhabitants were described by Augustine Chihuri, the Zimbabwe Police Commissioner to stigmatise them as deserving mass clearance. Thus any attempt to “clean ‘it’ up” is exposed as inhumane. Dirt acquires an ambiguous significance. It is, at once, solid filth that should be cleared (in state narratives, this is the *prima facie* reason for Operation Murambatsvina, as signified in the Shona name “Murambatsvina” – one who detests filth), whilst (as Ashleigh Harris (2008) argues) on the political level, dirt becomes a symbol for all types of hurdles inhibiting ZANU PF’s hegemonic control in the urban areas. For Harris (ibid 41), dirt has had political and sometimes racial overtones and undertones of exclusion and xenophobia since the colonial times when “[r]acialisation of dirt and illness played a significant role in justifying the creation of segregated African locations in colonial Zimbabwe”. Harris (ibid 44) further notes how the ZANU PF government has similarly constructed the Third Chimurenga discourse as the final decolonising phase in which the country is returned to its “pure” state: “Mugabe places among the impure: the West; any political opposition to his rule; whites; and homosexuals, arguing, in each of these cases, that these ‘impurities are *unAfrican*’”.

The dirt in *The Uncertainty of Hope* is pictured to us metaphorically in the form of the two emaciated bodies of Mawaya and the dog. As hinted to above, the “dirt” of Mawaya’s state covers a human form, begging for food from Onai. This too takes a symbolic dimension. Mawaya becomes “dirt” appealing and deserving help and not destruction. Any interventionist strategy that harms him further affects the reader to feel compassion with him and all the victims of Mbare who (later on in the novel) suffer the consequences of forced displacement. Compassion is evoked in the reader through the author’s vivid descriptions of Mbare inhabitants’ sufferings even prior to the demolition of hovels and vending stalls. Such vivid descriptions foreground the intensity of the people’s problems, so that when the bulldozers finally come, the reader’s compassion for the residents rises in direct proportion to the intensity of their crisis. This emotional impact of Tagwira’s descriptions can be largely felt, for instance, if one considers the fate of another victim of shack clearances, the AIDS patient Sheila and her child. This is how they are described before the operation:

Suddenly, Sheila’s loud, racking coughs emanated from the shack and broke the noon silence. A grubby baby girl crawled cautiously out of the shack and looked apathetically at Onai. Her eyes were like pools sunk deeply within her skull. Sparse wisps of hair covered a scalp festooned with ringworm. Her undersized vest was overstretched tightly across her abdomen. She wore a dirty-brown nappy that looked no better than a rag. Emaciated limbs seemed to stick out from her distended belly, which accentuated her thinness. (Tagwira 2005, p.60)

The physiological images of sickness, pain and total hopelessness tell the whole story of the dystopian space occupied by the poor. The implicit sense of social injustice, then, readies the reader for the shock of experiencing even more catastrophes added to their slum dwellers’ wretchedness by Operation Murambatsvina. Additionally, Tagwira’s subtle condemnation of the mass displacement of poor urban dwellers can be realised in her characterisation, descriptions of action, setting, dialogue and symbolic allusions. Arresting descriptions of the aftermath of the bulldozer’s demolitions in Mbare, “emotionally [guide]” (Currie ibid 98) the reader to experience the pain of loss and homelessness. In the process, (as Nussbaum argues), the judgment that the other person’s distress is bad” (ibid 302) is generated. That “judgment” is felt strongly as the reader encounters the events leading to the destruction of Hondo’s house and his subsequent suicidal death. Hondo is a veteran of the liberation war whose house to him is symbolically as well as actually represents his reward for his participation in the national liberation struggle. In the wake of the demolition, the sense of the magnitude of this destruction foreshadows his own demise:

When the work [demolition] was completed, the remaining rooms stood in the early morning sun looking crooked, casting an irregular, unhappy shadow over the ground. It was only a figment of Onai’s imagination. Shadows had no capacity to feel or show human pain. The demolition team left for the next house in the line without a backward glance. (Tagwira 2005, p.151)

The irony of the “bad in good” is unmistakable as the deformed remnants of Hondo’s house pollute the beauty of the morning sun and in the process sensitise the reader to the onset of the ensuing chaos and woe. The moving image of Hondo’s “distraught” wife in Onai’s embrace further discloses the emotional terror that

afflicted the victims.

Nussbaum (ibid 314-315) describes compassion as provoked by a context of inability to influence outcomes: “valuable things are not always safely under a person’s control, but can in some ways be damaged by fortune”. But where the “fortune” is man-made, the suffering tends to intensify as the victims become conscious of the preventability of their fate, but are unable to convince those harming them to stop. Such is Hondo’s calamity. Tagwira inverts traditional gender stereotypes to show his psychological devastation, not only at contemplating the destruction of his house, but most importantly, upon registering the callousness with which the people whom he sacrificed his life to liberate destroy his only independence “trophy”, the house:

Was this the reward for his sacrifice? How could this happen to him of all people? Flinging his hands in the air, in a heartfelt display of anguish, he cried out again and again: ‘why? Why? Why? Nobody could answer him [...] They did not know what it really meant to have fought in the war of liberation; so despite having also lost their homes, they could not fully identify with the sheer magnitude of his pain. (Tagwira 2005, p.152)

Unlike his wife who accepts Onai’s consolation, Hondo’s dejection leads him to a ghastly suicidal death in spite of the advice – too matter-of-fact and insensitive to alleviate his outrage and sense of betrayal and devastation – to “be a man [and] get over it” (Tagwira 152). In this distressing portrayal of the demolition of Hondo’s house and its agonising result, the reader is moved by the power of the description of the characters’ pain to perceive the harm wrought by the slum demolitions. The empathy aroused an image such as that evoked in the laconic description, “the train’s wheels had sliced him across his torso and abdomen” (Tagwira 152) moves the reader to a state of passionate condemnation of the system that has killed Hondo. In this way, the author’s vivid fictional depiction can be read as an affective way of adding an interpretive, personal voice to the descriptions of the historic crisis – one that arouses denunciation of the callous irresponsibility of those in power. More importantly, the pain pervading Hondo’s life-world may be read as demystifying the official master fictions that projected the slum demolitions as benignly intended and executed in the interests of the urban population to return Harare to glory as the ‘sunshine city’.

Tagwira’s bleak portrayal of Hondo’s losses draws the reader affectively away from the “optimism” of the pronouncements of state rhetoric. Through its control of *The Herald* newspaper, for instance, the state sought to promote an image of ‘gracious’ authorities by concentrating on supposed benefits of the demolitions, such as recovery of Harare’s beauty and cleanliness and the halting of the flourishing black market. Apparent here is the conscious construction of a “master fiction” – a form of “malignant fiction” that falsifies and misrepresents reality for political expediency, validating actual callous conduct and cruelty as benignity. The doctrine of cleanliness is used to oppress and exclude certain people from certain spaces, a practice which ironically echoes Anne McClintock’s notion of (colonial Britain’s) “commodity racism” in which soap advertisements added an avowing voice in justifying colonialism as a ‘cleansing’ agent in the ‘dark’ parts of the world as can be inferred in the following caption on a Pears’ soap advertisement:

The first step towards lightening: the white man’s burden is through teaching the virtues of cleanliness. Pears’ soap is a potent factor in brightening the dark corners of the earth as civilization advances. Whilst amongst the cultured of all nations it holds the highest place – it is the ideal toilet soap. (2005, p.33)

Tagwira’s fictional representations show the subversive potential of narratives of pain which allows them to solicit compassion and become political in the way that they expand the boundaries of what the state demarcate as important. Compassion here fuels indignation and moral condemnation as politically oppositional energies and in this way Tagwira’s narrative participates in the public and has a political effect without being an overtly political text (or tract).

CONCLUSION:

In a historical context characterised by polarised, even competing perspectives on unfolding reality – a poverty of consensus about what constitutes the national interest/memory, Tagwira’s novel is a fruitful site to encounter complex, alternative notions of time-space that supplements (by countering) the state’s grand narrative. *The Uncertainty of Hope* has been shown in this paper to be inherently endowed with a cognitive force that arouses emotions which can, in turn, potentially stir readers to new comprehensions of the nature and the impact of Operation Murambatsvina-kind of urban slum clearances. Through the affectively rendered tribulations of the

victims of the slum demolitions, the novel engenders an apprehension of previously, strategically sidelined, erased and politically incorrect representations of the historic 2005 urban slum clearances. Imaginative literature, then, can be viewed not only as a site to experience the vivid and moving story of characters caught up in the slum demolitions, but more importantly, as a critical site to encounter other, previously stifled information about the slum demolitions.

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