

## ESSAY REVIEW

### ZIMBABWEAN FICTION IN ENGLISH

THE YEAR 1980 has gone down in Zimbabwean history as a watershed which marks the end of ninety years of White settler rule and the beginning of a new era, a time when the long-suffering African assumes the responsibility, at least politically, of shaping his own destiny. It is a time when the Black man who has been maimed by ninety years of exploitation and oppression limps to the finishing line and claims his trophy — independence and freedom. For the Zimbabwean writer this belated freedom offers boundless possibilities since the censorship and other shackles of the past have been swept away. This essay review attempts to assess the quality and orientation of the new novels which have been published since Zimbabwe attained its independence. But in order to ascertain whether this recent fiction is, indeed, new in terms of content and orientation, a brief outline of the main features of pre-Independence fiction written by Blacks is necessary.

In many ways the birth of Zimbabwean fiction in English has been influenced largely by the peculiar history of Zimbabwe and the various crises which Blacks experienced between 1890 and 1980. Essential to underline here is that the abrupt and brutal intrusion of the White settlers into the land between the Zambezi and the Limpopo rivers was part of a larger imperial vision which sought to subjugate the African continent in order to exploit its economic and human resources. Therefore, on their arrival, the White settlers embarked on a systematic programme of dispossessing Africans of their rich ancestral lands and resettling them in crowded and infertile areas. The material deprivation which ensued was also compounded by the relentless assault on African culture by White missionaries and other educationists. Native life was seen as primitive, and, as such, had to be wiped out and replaced by a more civilized Christian culture. Here is how one of the missionaries proposed to solve the 'native' problem:

'Father Biehler is so convinced of the hopelessness of regenerating the Mashonas,' wrote Lord Grey from Chishawasha in January 1897, 'whom he regards as the most hopeless of mankind . . . that he states that the only chance for the future of the race is to exterminate the whole people, both male and female, over the age of 14! This pessimistic conclusion', Grey continued, 'I find it hard to accept.'<sup>1</sup>

While the radical and unchristian solution proposed by Father Biehler was never considered seriously by most of the missionaries in Zimbabwe at that time, it underlines the depth of hostility which some of them harboured against African religion in particular and African culture in general. Consequently Africans found themselves not only deprived of their land but also condemned

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in T. O. Ranger, *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia 1896-7: A Study in African Resistance* (London, Heinemann, 1967), 3.

culturally. They became an endangered species, hence the theme of identity crisis which preoccupies almost all the Black writers whose works were published before 1980. The cultural crisis was deepened further by the gradual but inexorable process of industrialization and urbanization.

Therefore, it is not surprising that Stanlake Samkange's novel entitled *On Trial for My Country* (1965) is preoccupied with the injustice meted out to Africans at the turn of the last century.<sup>2</sup> Even his second novel, *Year of the Uprising* (1978),<sup>3</sup> expresses the moral outrage of a people who bitterly resented the brutal manner in which Africans were dispossessed of their land, as does Solomon Mutswairo's *Mapondera: Soldier of Zimbabwe* (1978).<sup>4</sup> The pre-colonial past is seen in these works as having been morally superior to the so-called Western Civilization. African heroes are resurrected in these historical novels and shown as models which subjugated Africans should emulate as they struggle for national liberation. Inspiring these two writers is their desire to refute the White man's fraudulent claims that the Black man had no history and no culture to speak of. Also Mutswairo's second English novel, *Chaminuka: Prophet of Zimbabwe* (1983), seeks to project the pre-colonial past as having been shaped and influenced by a philosophy and a vision that was humane.<sup>5</sup> At another level these two writers are also seeking to re-establish a meaningful relationship with the African past (which had been deliberately distorted by the settlers) in order to enable the Black man to shape his future. Unfortunately their progressive historical vision is not always matched by their artistic performance. Consequently these historical novels will be remembered more for their rich oral material and the vision found in them rather than for their literary merit.

The theme of culture conflict and protest is further explored in Stanlake Samkange's more successful novel *The Mourned One* (1975),<sup>6</sup> as well as in Wilson Katiyo's *A Son of the Soil* (1976)<sup>7</sup> and Geoffrey Ndhlala's *Jikinya* (1979).<sup>8</sup> Motivating these writers is their desire to show that in disregarding and destroying African culture, notwithstanding its limitations, the White man is trampling on something invaluable and creating a racist and exploitative society which not only deforms the Black man but also impoverishes the human spirit. These novels will remain invaluable as works which seek to expose the cultural contradictions which bedevilled African society during the colonial era.

The role of establishing an equally serious but more accomplished tradition of fiction writing has to be accorded to Charles Mungoshi, Dambudzo Marechera and Stanley Nyamfukudza. These young writers belong to a generation that is

<sup>2</sup> S. Samkange, *On Trial for My Country* (London, Heinemann, 1966).

<sup>3</sup> S. Samkange, *Year of the Uprising* (London, Heinemann, 1978).

<sup>4</sup> S. M. Mutswairo, *Mapondera: Soldier of Zimbabwe* (Harare, Longman Zimbabwe, 1983) also published as *Mapondera: Soldier of Fortune* (Washington DC, Three Continents Press, 1983).

<sup>5</sup> S. M. Mutswairo, *Chaminuka: Prophet of Zimbabwe* (Washington DC, Three Continents Press, 1983).

<sup>6</sup> S. Samkange, *The Mourned One* (London, Heinemann, 1975).

<sup>7</sup> W. Katiyo, *A Son of the Soil* (London, Rex Collings, 1976).

<sup>8</sup> G. C. T. Ndhlala, *Jikinya* (Salisbury, Macmillan, 1979).

more conscious of the demands of the novel as a genre as well as of the peculiar nature of the experience which they ask it to accommodate.

In general, Mungoshi's novel, *Waiting for the Rain* (1975), and his collections of short stories entitled *Coming of the Dry Season* (1972) and *Some Kinds of Wounds* (1980), focus on a variety of characters who belong to an African family whose bonds of kinship are slowly unravelling.<sup>9</sup> The new economic forces introduced into the country as well as Western culture that is strengthened to conform with settler ideology have taken their toll on African tradition, especially when the material base of that tradition, the land, has been taken away for settler use. The Old Man and Garabha in *Waiting for the Rain* are a more or less marooned species trying desperately to cling on to a spiritual heritage in an environment that is fiercely hostile to its preservation. Even the majestic and rather imposing Matandangoma, the traditional spirit medium, is, so we feel, harping on a seemingly impotent belief system whose material base has been viciously corroded. Her diagnosis of the spiritual malaise which sits at the heart of the Tongoon family is not likely to resolve what is essentially a larger, national problem. Even those characters who admirably cling on to their cultural identity do not possess the kind of awareness which could enable them to comprehend fully the material forces impinging upon their world view. In other words, Mungoshi's characters are ill-equipped, in terms of consciousness, to readjust to and fight for their place in the new hostile world introduced by the West.

If Mungoshi's vision is somewhat pessimistic, Marechera's is one of total disillusionment. His *The House of Hunger* (1978) and *Black Sunlight* (1980) are works which relentlessly catalogue the horrors which beset the African community well after the onset of colonialism.<sup>10</sup> African society has become so debased and diseased that it is almost unrecognizable. Everything and everybody have been 'eaten to the core by the White man's coming'. It is a bleak and awesome vision in which nothing survives. While Mungoshi excels in the manner in which he meticulously and sensitively renders the inner crisis of a culturally beleaguered people, Marechera's strength lies in his idiosyncratic use of language and in his unrivalled depiction of characters whose impulses and psyche have been perverted in a fundamentally irredeemable way. In his works new levels of feeling and perceptions are reached. However, the question that readers are bound to ask is: Is the African condemned to futility, to this existential nightmare which terrorizes even those who dare to hope that the African continent has a future?

In a sense, Stanley Nyamfukudza's *The Non-believer's Journey* (1980) continues to express an aspect of the disillusionment found in the works of Marechera.<sup>11</sup> Sam, the protagonist, is a university graduate teacher sceptical of the beliefs and aspirations of his people. Being a sceptic he remains aloof, a spectator, an outsider watching and criticizing but not contributing to the struggle for

<sup>9</sup> C. L. Mungoshi, *Waiting for the Rain* (London, Heinemann, 1975; Salisbury, Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1981); *Coming of the Dry Season* (Oxford, Oxford Univ. Press, 1972; Salisbury, Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1981); *Some Kinds of Wounds and Other Short Stories* (Gwelo, Mambo Press, 1980).

<sup>10</sup> D. Marechera, *The House of Hunger: Short Stories* (London, Heinemann, 1978; Harare, Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1982); *Black Sunlight* (London, Heinemann, 1980).

<sup>11</sup> S. Nyamfukudza, *The Non-believer's Journey* (London, Heinemann; Salisbury, Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1980).

freedom as his less-learned companions do. He, like many a protagonist in Zimbabwean fiction, does not possess the kind of historical vision, or the commitment, which could enable him to participate meaningfully in the creation of history. He is suspicious of the White racist and equally so of the African politician and the struggle. In a way Sam is a more persuasive and more confused version of Mungoshi's Lucifer. Both are characters who, in the long run, risk being rudely cast aside by history as redundant.

In broad terms, therefore, all three authors write the kind of fiction which, while rooted in the protest tradition of modern African literature, is preoccupied with the cultural malaise which gripped Black Zimbabweans during the 1960s and 1970s. One can also argue that Mungoshi's vision of cultural anomy, legitimate and profoundly meaningful as it is, unduly plays down the vitality and versatility of a people who we know from history struggle relentlessly to readjust and cope with the peculiar demands of the twentieth century. By the same token, Marechera's disillusionment is overwhelmingly insisted upon as if man is under the grip of an unappeasable force. Man is doomed to live a life of futility, and, as such, his hopes for a better future are dashed the moment he is born. In Nyamfukudza's *The Non-believer's Journey* one senses an overall grasp of the social, political and economic forces which are operating in the country as history unfolds. The colonial ideology with its attendant values and attitudes is locked in deadly combat against an African culture of resistance. The dialectical relationship between a dying Rhodesia and an emerging Zimbabwe is outlined in Nyamfukudza's novel. However, the writer's grasp of the issues which are shaping history is qualified by the all too real fear of the betrayal which could occur during the struggle for independence as well as after its attainment. It is fair to conclude that both Marechera and Nyamfukudza write their works with the sombre recognition that the masses in post-independence Africa have often been betrayed by their leaders.

Interesting to observe is that the first novel to be published after 1980 does not express the pessimism and despair of the earlier novels. Shimmer Chinodya's *Dew in the Morning* (1982) eschews the overtly political and historical in favour of simply the depiction of the kind of rural life which millions of Zimbabweans experienced during the colonial era.<sup>12</sup> The conflict between the country and the White man's city and between the cultural and economic forces which these places represent is implied rather than explored. More specifically, the novel is about Masiziva who heroically and almost single-handedly builds a home in the countryside while her husband works and educates the children in the city. But if one expects Chinodya to explore the forces which have brought about a situation which separates members of the same family, or the reasons why families keep on moving to new areas to settle, one is bound to be disappointed. Chinodya's passion as an artist lies in the rhythms of rural life as they change in line with the tropical seasons. Here is how the narrator, Godfrey, describes a tropical summer with its accompanying activities:

We followed behind the plough, dropping the seeds into neat brown furrows and savouring the smell of the oxen and newly turned earth. The seeds soon germinated, small

<sup>12</sup> S. Chinodya, *Dew in the Morning* (Gwelo, Mambo Press, 1982).

and tender in the dew. We rose early in the blue-grey dawn to the shouts of the plough boys and the bustle of yoking the oxen. We walked across glistening green, dew-laden grass to the fields. While the sun steadily ascended the sky, getting hotter, we sweated in the fields. Our backs ached and the hot sand burnt our feet, and the hoe-handles cut blisters on our hands. We drank maheu, worked again, then went home for a late breakfast. As we went home tiredly at noon we usually met herdboys bringing home the cows to be milked.<sup>13</sup>

Very few Zimbabwean novelists have evoked with such exquisite sensitivity and realism the sights and sounds of rural life. Chinodya's poetic sensibility thrives on physical details which he builds up continuously throughout the book until a vivid picture of rural existence emerges. He also has a facility for drawing portraits of memorable peasant characters as well as for rendering appropriate seasonal moods and feelings. His major achievement, perhaps, lies in the way he paints a realistic picture which encompasses the joys as well as the sorrows of life in the country. Like Musaemura Zimunya in his own portrayal of that rural life in *Country Dawns and City Lights* (1985),<sup>14</sup> Chinodya does not hesitate to reveal the darker side of country living with its menacing superstitions, jealousies and occasional violence.

A glaring limitation, however, which severely undermines what could have been a unique novel is the inability of the narrator to possess a credible controlling consciousness which highlights the importance of events and incidents according to their overall significance in the book. Godfrey seems to be satisfied with the role of merely recording experience without necessarily making his rural scenes an integral part of a chain linked in a causal process. The result is an impressive accumulation of scenes that are sometimes only tenuously related to one another. Compounding the problem of the narrative structure is the absence of an overall central theme. In fact, there are too many of them and none is treated with sufficient depth so as to amount to an insightful exploration. In brief, the book is so diffuse in focus and so disastrous in form that one wonders whether it should be regarded as a novel or as a collection of (sometimes) loosely-related rural tales.

A second novel written by Chinodya, entitled *Farai's Girls* (1984), is about the experiences of a boy growing up at a time when the guerrillas are waging the national war of liberation.<sup>15</sup> Ironically, the news about 'the boys' who fight for the country's freedom and the student protests against the settler regime during the 1970s do not seem to make a lasting impression on Farai. Instead, lavish attention is given to Farai's experiences with women: these range from innocent flirting with young girls during childhood to platonic love affairs with the Letwinas and Noriahs of the female world. A lot of cuddling and petting takes place before our egocentric hero is initiated into manhood. By the time Farai attaches himself to a relatively more mature woman called Vongai, he has had his fair share of sexual encounters without the accompanying responsibility. In fact, he has by that time changed his women as thoughtlessly as he has changed his shirts. And throughout the whole book Farai remains almost cushioned from the life-and-death struggle taking place around him.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>14</sup> M. B. Zimunya, *Country Dawns and City Lights* (Harare, Longman Zimbabwe, 1985).

<sup>15</sup> S. Chinodya, *Farai's Girls* (Harare, College Press, 1984).

In *Farai's Girls* the reader cannot help feeling that the author placed the real substance of the novel at the periphery of his story in favour of narrating the private experiences of a sexual and emotional parasite who takes too long to grow up and assume a responsible attitude towards life and society. Ironically, on several occasions, the guerrilla struggle that is taking place threatens to rob Farai of his women. Historical events keep on intruding, rather rudely, into his personal life and private dreams but, to our surprise, Farai studiously refuses to see how private and personal relationships are affected by the larger historical processes. The freedom fighters are seeking to bring about a better society in which men and women relate to each other in a way that is materially as well as spiritually fulfilling. Farai fails to relate to the larger historical drama in a way which makes him an actor, or a fighter for freedom. His interest in coming to a meaningful accommodation with the female world is a natural and legitimate concern which has preoccupied mankind for centuries, but the scope and quality of his experiences do not amount to much. They are predictably banal and nowhere near the kind of vision readers come across in the works of D. H. Lawrence. *Farai's Girls* does not make a statement about life which could reveal more about the problems of existence. At the end of the novel Farai has not matured in a fundamental way, neither has he worked out his position in regard to life and its demands.

In an ironic way Farai's individualistic preoccupations reveal more about the influence which the colonial educational system had on its supposed beneficiaries. Farai seems to belong to a self-indulgent Black educated élite that is obsessed with its own appetites. In a sense Farai is a far less serious version of Sam Mapfeka in *The Non-believer's Journey*. The difference between the two characters is that Sam's life and fate reflect those serious issues which affect a colonial society caught up in a painful process of transition while Farai's life reveals far less.

What is distressing in regard to Chinodya's work is that readers do come to recognize as they read his work that the writer has a genuine feel for words and situations. There is genuine talent reflected in his work, particularly as the writer is a poet whose work has appeared in *New Writing in Rhodesia* (1976) as well as in the now celebrated anthology *Zimbabwean Poetry in English* (1978).<sup>16</sup> He has also had a short story published in a collection entitled *The March and Other Pieces* (1983).<sup>17</sup> In all these publications, no one doubts Shimmer Chinodya's budding talent. What seems to undermine his more ambitious work is the absence of a guiding vision or a profound philosophical framework.

Another novel published after the attainment of independence was Geoffrey Ndhla's *The Southern Circle* (1984).<sup>18</sup> The novel covers a more or less similar historical period to that in which Chinodya's *Farai's Girls* is set. The new novel is in many ways a logical sequel to Ndhla's earlier novel, *Jikinya*. Ndhla's narrative strategy in *The Southern Circle* is to rely on a forty-year-old, guilt-ridden narrator whose reminiscences portray the fate of three generations belonging to the same family. In essence the story is about Zengeza, his son,

<sup>16</sup> T. O. McLoughlin (comp.), *New Writing in Rhodesia* (Gwelo, Mambo Press, 1976); K. Z. Muchemwa, (comp.), *Zimbabwean Poetry in English: An Anthology* (Gwelo, Mambo Press, 1978).

<sup>17</sup> S. Chinodya, 'The march', in *The March and Other Pieces: Literature Bureau Workshop Anthology* (Harare, Longman, in association with the Literature Bureau, 1983), 1-11.

<sup>18</sup> G. Ndhla, *The Southern Circle* (Harlow, Longman, 1984).

Masutu, and the narrator himself, Rugare. Although remnants of that idyllic rural life depicted in *Jikinya* are still discernible in the new novel, these are manifested as an aspect of childhood nostalgia. The narrator is haunted by the past, when his grandfather was in his prime and the world looked reassuring:

We were the children of happiness. In the arms of our fathers and mothers; in the warm hand of our dear earth which, even then, unknown to us, was shifting its hold, its euphoric grasp; oblivious to the world beyond where cities and dwarfing things were rearing their heads. We frolicked in the grass and the bush looking after our cattle; we sucked from the cows udder; we robbed the hive of its moon-white honey and rubbed amicably the sores of stings. Oh, what a time! We fought among ourselves too; we laughed. Why do we have to grow old . . .<sup>19</sup>

Rugare's recollections of childhood days are, in fact, an evocation of an idyllic rural existence characterized by rhythms of communal living. The countryside is lush, the cows produce milk aplenty as if to say that nature provides everything mankind requires. There is warmth in human relationships as the African community thrives. But as White Rhodesia extends its grip into all the four corners of the colony the family fortunes of Zengeza's family disappear. The narrator bemoans the coming of the White man and the subsequent resettlement of the African into desert-like areas. Later on in the novel, Zengeza reappears as a refugee at his son's home, a shadowy ghost of his former self.

As the situation in the rural areas deteriorates further, thousands of Africans are compelled to attend school in order to prepare themselves to tackle the new hostile world introduced by the settlers. A typical example is Zengeza's son, Masutu, who is literate enough to find a job in the city. Masutu has the energy, the heady optimism, the generosity and showmanship which make him all the more admired and envied by his less-successful kinsman. For a time he feels, and everybody agrees, that he has made it in the new world. Masutu's uncritical addiction to the White man's clothes and food and his irrepressible and extrovert temperament make him a proverbial success. But, of course, Masutu's fortunes dwindle the moment he is mysteriously dismissed from his job. Rhodesia has no permanent or meaningful role to offer Blacks.

In desperation Masutu builds a home at a semi-urban place called Ruva Township, located on the outskirts of the White man's city. He feels marginalized, but, the human spirit being what it is, he soon becomes resilient enough to start cultivating a patch of land — which is constantly smitten by drought, as if to mock his attempts at improving his material conditions. The formerly irrepressible Masutu succumbs to brooding moroseness; he is a defeated man whose only remaining hope lies in his relatively better-educated son, Rugare.

In a way reminiscent of the relationship between Lucifer and Tongoona in *Waiting for the Rain*, the relationship between Rugare and Masutu is one of misplaced trust. Rugare turns out to be the wrong person to shoulder the burden of looking after the family. Compounding Masutu's dilemma is the fact that his son cherishes his alcohol and women more than he does the family role assigned him. In this sense he suffers from some of the hedonistic and more or less anarchic

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 4.

traits which characterize Sam's behaviour in *The Non-Believer's Journey*. The only difference is that Sam is relatively more perceptive and more mature than the delinquent and adolescent Rugare. The latter's irresponsibility goes to the extent of celebrating a job that is not yet offered him.

What is painfully obvious in all these three generations is that they are not well placed to comprehend fully the economic and political forces operating in the country. Zengeza simply belongs to an earlier traditional era and cannot cope with the new one; Masutu's attempts to readjust to the colonial era are hopelessly inadequate. His attempts are not based on an accurate understanding of the settler state which oppresses him in its own smugly exclusive and racist manner. As for Rugare, he is temperamentally as well as intellectually incapable of comprehending the larger historical forces affecting the colony. Throughout the novel, allusions are made in regard to freedom fighters but these allusions do not awaken him in such a way that he can define the role he should play in removing the obstacles placed in his way by settler rule. Even his budding cultural nationalism is brought about by a fortuitous event. In other words, Rugare is another version of Farai in *Farai's Girls* and Sam in *The Non-believer's Journey*. All these characters wait for others to create history. In this sense one can argue that *The Southern Circle* does not cover new ground at all, that is, in relation to pre-Independence fiction. The novel simply amplifies issues which are explored more convincingly in the works of Mungoshi, Nyamfukudza and Marechera.

As a novel, *The Southern Circle* is far more ambitious in scope than *Jikinya* but not as well executed artistically as one would wish. Rugare's narrative role is not disciplined enough to offer an in-depth exploration of the nature of settler society against which he protests. Also the protests themselves are often muffled by periodic bouts of moralistic self-criticisms and feelings of helplessness as well as personal speculations about the meaning of existence. These fictional elements do not cohere well enough to constitute a carefully structured story — hence the diffuseness in focus which pervades the novel.

Another novel which explores the fate of Blacks during the 1970s is Samuel Chimsoro's *Nothing Is Impossible* (1983).<sup>20</sup> Unlike Rugare in *The Southern Circle*, who continually laments the fate allotted him in life, Simbai in Chimsoro's novel is depicted as a poverty-stricken character whose parents are hard-working destitutes. The story is about how Simbai struggles to escape from the subhuman situation which characterizes his life. Interesting to note is that Simbai's background is far more precarious than that of any characters in the novels dealt with so far. Rhodesia has turned his parents into landless farm-labourers who are brutally overworked and grossly underpaid by White farmers. Survival demands that Simbai himself becomes a farm-labourer-cum-house-servant at an early age.

But what is surprising is the fact that the main focus of the story is not aimed at protesting against the colonial authorities who dehumanize Blacks. Instead, the main thrust of the novel is meant to capture how the hard-working and humble parents bequeath virtues such as determination, honesty and hard work to their son. Simbai has the added advantage that his grandmother, Mbuya Muhondo, provides a cultural context which rationalizes the suffering that he experiences together with others of his generation:

<sup>20</sup> S. Chimsoro, *Nothing Is Impossible* (Harlow, Longman, 1983).



All that is expected from us is the vision of the seed, to accept to be buried and then germinate and then grow. You are a man. Manhood should be your ground. You are a man, so make mankind your ground. . . . I am saying this to all of you so that you can be people at whom other people can point without shame, just like when they point at Mount Wedza.<sup>21</sup>

Mbuya Muhondo's thesis, which sounds similar to that of Booker T. Washington, is that hard work, diligence and patience will offer rewards to the suffering Black man. The harsh and unpalatable colonial environment should elicit a tough and resilient response from Blacks. The despair and pessimism which almost paralyse the characters of Mungoshi and Marechera are simply a luxury which Simbai cannot afford. He is wise enough to listen to the voice from the African past and, as a result, Simbai excels in his studies at Tegwani Secondary School and Bulawayo Polytechnic. At the end of his educational career Simbai is armed with a certificate in Hotel Management and Catering.

Simbai's relentless struggle for survival continues even after school. Rhodesia with its racial bigotry has no decent role to offer to such a young man raring to succeed. He finds that his dedication and competence are not only unappreciated but also unrewarded by White bosses who run the Jameson and Federal Hotels. In disgust but undaunted he opts to assist a Black businessman struggling to set up a business at Machipisa. The business prospers because of Simbai's resourcefulness. Ultimately Simbai's restlessness and insatiable appetite for work catapult him into the insurance business. And, as if to reward his indomitable will-power to succeed, Simbai becomes the owner of a kiosk, a butchery, a garage and a petrol service station. To crown it all he is also admitted as a member of the Million Dollar Round Table — and all these successes are achieved during the colonial era!

Essential to observe is that *Nothing Is Impossible* is a novel whose vision stands in sharp contrast to the rest of the novels set in the period during the 1970s. The cultural malaise which is meticulously delineated in Mungoshi's works and ferociously insisted upon in Marechera's books as an overwhelming aspect of the human condition is deliberately played down in Chimisoro's novel. It is as if Chimisoro is saying that the dirge lamenting the death of African culture has gone on far too long; the time has come for Blacks to stress the vitality and versatility which are needed for the Black man to survive. In brief, Chimisoro's vision is meant to shed some light on the struggle for survival which the majority of Africans undertook during the colonial era.

The limitation, however, which readers are bound to notice in *Nothing Is Impossible* is the singular narrowness of Simbai's outlook. He is so propelled by his ambition to overcome the material deprivation suffered by his family that he fails to attain a higher state of consciousness which can enable him to see his position in relation to the larger society. At no time does he pause to reflect on how the rampant racism and injustice he struggles against could be got rid of at a national level. His vision of individual material success is not the ultimate solution to the larger national problem. It is painfully obvious that not all Blacks can become members of the Million Dollar Round Table. At best the vision can only

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 49.

create a class-ridden society in which the gulf separating the haves from the have-nots will widen.

In terms of form, Chimisoro is content to render his vision through the conventional narrative. The story is chronologically told by the third person omniscient narrator and there is hardly a hint of the kind of experimentation with form and narrative technique that one finds in Marechera's work. Perhaps this can be partly explained by the fact that *Nothing Is Impossible* is his first novel in English, and, because of this, he is understandably cautious. His contribution to the growth of the Zimbabwean novel lies more in the fact that the content and focus of his work differ from other novels of the same period. And talking about some of these novels it is interesting to notice that Shimmer Chinodya's works as well as those of Ndhlala and Chimisoro, although published a few years after Independence, keep on going back to the issues which preoccupied Blacks before Independence, as if to say that the full story of that period has not yet been told. Part of the explanation could be that some of the issues pertaining to that period have continued to haunt the new Zimbabwe. And, of course, there is always the possibility that some of these works were conceived during the colonial era.

Also significant in all the four novels discussed so far is the fact that they portray characters who are preoccupied with their individual lives. For instance, the rural characters in *Dew in the Morning* are so caught up in the business of surviving in their rural world that they hardly have the opportunity to broaden their horizon to the extent of grasping how their local existence is influenced by external forces emanating from the White man's government in the city. Yet, ironically, these are the very peasants who were to be profoundly affected by the war of liberation as it gathered momentum during the late 1970s. In addition, the allegiance of these people was to be a decisive factor in favour of the Black man's struggle for freedom.<sup>22</sup> As for Farai in *Farai's Girls*, he is so busy trying to relate to women and attaining an education that is reactionary in content that he fails to come to terms with the more serious struggle going on around him. One wonders how such a character will cope with the new woman who is going to emerge from the struggle and demand equal treatment in all spheres of life. The same applies to Rugare in *The Southern Circle*. The world created by the settler is so big and so complex that he can hardly address the root cause of the problems he faces as an individual. He is a man dominated by false consciousness and, as such, he is not positioned well enough to cope with the new Zimbabwe that is to emerge in 1980. As for Simbai in *Nothing Is Impossible*, survival during the Ian Smith era becomes a form of struggle that takes away all his energy from the larger, national concerns. In all these novels the guerrilla war is a mere reference point alluded to in passing. The war of liberation that is so crucial to Zimbabwe's history is consistently shown as a peripheral issue. One cannot help but conclude that all these characters will, one day, be caught up in a maelstrom which, for better or worse, will change their lives in a fundamental way.

The publication of Edmund Chipamaunga's *A Fighter for Freedom* (1983) is

<sup>22</sup> See T. O. Ranger, *Peasant Consciousness and Guerrilla War in Zimbabwe: A Comparative Study* (London, James Currey 1985); and D. Lan, *Guns and Rain: Guerrillas and Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe* (London, James Currey, 1985).

important symbolically in the sense that it marks an attempt by a Zimbabwean writer to explore the experiences of a Black fighter who, unlike characters in the novels discussed so far, aligns himself with the struggle for independence.<sup>23</sup> The novel is about Tinashe, who starts off as a precocious schoolboy who senses at an early age that all is not well in the African family. His father, Gari, is an archetypal Uncle Tom of a headmaster, running a mission school controlled by a dictatorial White missionary, Father Truss. The latter is a member of Ian Smith's Rhodesia Front and believes whole-heartedly in the philosophy of White supremacy. Speaking about the role of teachers and the educated African élite, Father Truss states his mission and that of his government in no uncertain terms:

'The only reason why you teach is to give the children some idea of culture, the culture that matters. That culture is British and that is the only culture that matters the world over . . .' I am not saying we want you to be partners with us Whites. No! You should stand aside or aloof, neither with us nor with the common black man. If you do that you are well on your way to becoming educated, that is, acquiring British culture completely. Of course we will only be too pleased if you take our side during a crisis.<sup>24</sup>

Father Truss is a crude and violent missionary who does not hesitate to humiliate Gari in public. As if to nurse his bruised ego, Gari, in turn, runs the school like a dictatorial village headman who despises his own wife and children. But Tinashe is so perceptive that he comes to see his father as a mere underling who is meant to assist the White man in oppressing Blacks. The content of his education has alienated him from his own family and people. Tinashe becomes aware of the fact that education in such a colonial context is a tool with which the White government demobilizes the African élite. But unlike Sam, Farai and Rugare, Tinashe is not content to remain a mere observer in the colonial scheme of things.

Instinctively he begins to gravitate towards his more traditionally inclined Uncle Roro. With the help of the spirit medium, VaTendayi, Uncle Roro is able to educate Tinashe about the importance of African culture and dignity. More importantly, he also introduces him to some of the freedom fighters operating in his area. From then on, Tinashe's rise in the ranks of the liberation army is meteoric. As a former competent sportsman he finds the guerrilla training easy. In fact, he turns out to be a first-class trainee who is better than his military instructors. In no time he replaces his wounded instructor and becomes a regional commander. He turns out to be a cunning strategist who knows his terrain better than the locals of the area. As a marksman his performance is unparalleled; he is able to decimate scores of well-mechanized Rhodesian troops. His military insight serves him so well that during the numerous battles waged all over the country Tinashe's military genius towers well above that of his senior colleagues as well as the second-rate Rhodesians. In brief, Tinashe becomes a local version of the legendary Napoleon. At the close of the novel there is no doubt at all that the freedom fighters will triumph over the White Rhodesian army and its Black sell-outs. And the Black nation will owe a great deal to Tinashe — the new hero.

<sup>23</sup> E. Chipamaunga, *A Fighter for Freedom* (Gweru, Mambo Press, 1983).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 50-1.

The question, which readers are bound to ask however, is: Why does Chipamaunga over-indulge himself in his romanticization of Tinashe and other Black fighters? Tinashe seems to be a figure coming straight out of the romance tale and is much larger than life. Anyone familiar with the actual Zimbabwean struggle will know that the liberation struggle was a slow, painful, and sometimes discouraging process fraught with perilous contradictions and costly mistakes. The creation of history is far more complex and more protracted than the Hollywood version which Chipamaunga offers in his only novel to date. Is there not a danger here that this kind of fiction oversimplifies history to the point of almost making it farcical?

In a sense Chipamaunga is responding as a writer to some of the most pernicious myths about Africans which were assiduously spread and faithfully believed in by some of the Rhodesian Whites. In a recent novel which exposes some of these myths about Africans, T. O. McLoughlin has one of his characters, Powell, say this: 'You know and I know those terrors out there can't shoot straight. If they tried to run anything more than a beer drink they would make a mess of it in six months.'<sup>25</sup> In the same novel, there are a number of White characters who regard Blacks as a race that is congenitally incompetent — a race that is flawed genetically and, therefore, incapable of running the country. However, in the same novel, there is a priest, Falkland, who does not necessarily believe in some of these myths; here is how he tries to comfort a small White community that is fumbling in its own way to come to terms with the guerrilla war that is steadily mounting in the country:

'In the gospel, Jesus gives us another way of looking at man's predicament. He tells us that even though we have become lost He is always on the search for us. Like a good shepherd, like the assiduous woman sweeping out her house in search of her silver piece, God yearns to find us. God is on our side.'<sup>26</sup>

Strictly speaking, Falkland is not claiming that the Christian God is a tribal one out there to redeem Whites alone, but to a war-weary and abysmally prejudiced White community such a statement seems to say as much. The polarization of the races in Rhodesia was a logical outcome of the policies carried out by the Smith government.

It is, therefore, not surprising that Chipamaunga calls his hero Tinashe, which means in Shona, 'God is with us too'. As such, one can argue that Chipamaunga's story is a predictable response to some of the assumptions which some Rhodesians had about their Black countrymen. Tinashe is shown as a genius in organizing and fighting. Even his visit to Great Zimbabwe *en route* to the Eastern Highlands is a symbolic one in that it enables the hero to refute some of the claims made by settlers that the fort was not built by Blacks. The rationale is not difficult to see: Africans had a proud past and a civilization which some of the prejudiced Whites and their scholars have refused to recognize. In many ways the vision of Chipamaunga is informed by African cultural nationalism — hence the emphasis on African identity and dignity. Tinashe's role is that of rehabilitating the African

<sup>25</sup> T. O. McLoughlin, *Karima* (Gweru, Mambo Press, 1985), 43.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 175-6.

in relation to his culture and history. As such, the guerrillas know what they are fighting against at the level of culture and identity but the novel offers very little in terms of the progressive revolutionary consciousness which should help bring about a new Zimbabwean society.

Another disturbing aspect with regard to the novel is the implicit emphasis placed on the individual as a creator of history. The attention given to other Black fighters as well as to the local population is, so the reader feels, mere tokenism. They provide the necessary social setting for the great man to act out his historical mission. The preoccupation with uniquely endowed individuals may be more appropriate when using a romance mode, but one wonders if indeed history is created that way any longer in the twentieth century. As a result, Chipamaunga's hero is a figure whose achievements have more to do with the need to heal a wounded racial psyche than to offer the reader a convincing vision appropriate for a post-Independence Zimbabwe.

Another novel which focuses on the experiences of the liberation war is Garikai Mutasa's *The Contact* (1985).<sup>27</sup> Fascinating to observe in this short novel, which is barely one hundred and twenty-five pages long, is the gulf of incomprehension separating Black people and their freedom fighters from the White generals and their settler community. Heading the White army stationed at Shabani is Turnbull, a White army veteran who has fought against guerrillas in the Centenary area, lost a son, and is now sceptical about the chances of winning the war. He has the ability to see how the Americans, in spite of their superior technology, failed to win the Vietnam War. And he can see a similar fate awaiting the Rhodesians. He keeps on asking, 'What the hell are we fighting for then?' — a question that is also echoed by the war-weary wife of Mercati, a fire-breathing racist bigot who would like to teach the 'munts' a lesson once and for all. His confidence, like that of his White compatriots in *Karima*, lies in the superior technology possessed by Whites and the contempt with which he holds the African.

Unlike the Whites in this novel who are motivated by their desire to advance professionally and thus make more money, the Black guerrillas fighting in the Shiku area feel spiritually attached to their ancestral land. They can also relate to the people and feel strengthened in their cause as they succeed in conscientizing the people. Inspiring them is the idea that history is on their side and the future is theirs. They are also motivated by the vision of bringing about a non-racial society in which all the injustices enshrined in the colonial society are done away with.

Significant to underline is that the battlefield becomes the meeting-point of the two races. In one instance we are told about the response made by the two sides after a fierce battle involving hand-to-hand fighting:

'No need to kill him. He is a good fighter. Guns against guns and fists against fists. And with fists an opponent is defeated when he collapses,' said Tichatora. They ran to the gathering point.

Half an hour later the Rhodesian came to. He was baffled and surprised. Why hadn't they killed him. They had started the ambush. They had taken his guns and left him alive. The man he had fought with had been a fighter. The first person to wield him a knockout blow since he was a twelve-year-old. How good it would be to spar with someone of his

<sup>27</sup> G. Mutasa, *The Contact* (Gweru, Mambo Press, 1985).

own calibre like that. He stopped, he was beginning to think of his opponent in almost likeable terms . . . he was after all a terrorist . . . <sup>28</sup>

Tichatora is a guerrilla fighter who fights according to a prescribed military code. He is a professional man who relishes a good and fair fight, not a blood-thirsty and senseless savage determined to kill Whites merely because they are White. On the other side is a Rhodesian soldier who is begrudgingly compelled to respect the Black man for his military prowess. The false consciousness which taught him to see Blacks as incurably bad shots and incorrigible cowards begins to recede. In other words, the battlefield becomes an arena where the White man's prejudices are severely put to the test. The White characters are often compelled to re-assess their own perception of Blacks. In this sense, the war becomes an educational process which is potentially capable of getting rid of the false consciousness which characterizes the White man's mentality. As for the Blacks themselves, the struggle offers them an opportunity to win back their sense of manhood and self-respect. Often the violence of the struggle is regarded as a necessary redemptive phenomenon which restores the humanity of Black people.

Both Mutasa and Chipamaunga write novels which seek to redeem Blacks as people capable of shaping their own history and identity. Both writers are responding to the White myths which often portrayed Blacks as children who need a senior White brother to protect them from the consequences of their own deficiencies. Consequently, Mutasa, like Chipamaunga, does not hesitate to award all the significant military victories to the freedom fighters. The only notable difference in their treatment of war experiences is that Mutasa does not romanticize Black fighters to the same degree evinced in *A Fighter for Freedom*. Marx, Mao, Hondoinopisa and Gadzirai are recognizable figures who have painfully acquired their fighting skills through experience and dedication. Also, Mutasa is aware of the fact that the mechanical role of guns needs to be complemented by an intensive programme of politicization — hence the involvement of the local population in the struggle.

A limitation, however, which undermines *The Contact* as a novel is the fact that the fighters themselves do not display a serious and profound ideological commitment. Their political programme aimed at conscientizing the masses does not go beyond the articulation of the injustice perpetrated by the White authorities. It is true that the fighters win the moral argument, but there is no attempt to offer a convincing socialist vision appropriate for an independent Zimbabwe. It is not accidental that Marx is named after Karl Marx because he sported a beard similar to that of the famous thinker and revolutionary. The Zimbabwean Marx can neither read nor write and, therefore, he has not benefited directly from reading Karl Marx's works. Similarly, the Zimbabwean Mao, although exposed to Mao Zedong's works, prefers to read James Bond novels. At the end of the novel, Gadzirai, who acts as the leader of the fighters, has no qualms at all when he becomes a personnel officer for a large multinational company that is exploiting the resources of the country. In brief, the ideological issue is given superficial treatment in Mutasa's novel.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 31-2.

Spencer Tizora's *Crossroads* (1985) is another novel which explores the experiences connected with the Zimbabwean struggle for independence.<sup>29</sup> But, unlike *A Fighter for Freedom* and *The Contact* which place heavy emphasis on the actual physical combat which takes place between the Rhodesian army and the freedom fighters, *Crossroads* is mainly concerned about the impact of the larger historical conflict on the lives of ordinary individuals. The fate of these individuals is explored against the background of mounting guerrilla pressure on White Rhodesia during the latter part of the 1970s. Caught up in the crisis are several individuals who have planned their lives without taking into account the fact that the struggle for freedom will affect them in a fundamental way.

For instance, here is how Priscilla, who is married to David Moyo and who finds herself compelled to supply drugs to guerrillas, perceives her role:

'True, she had started off as a kind of non-believer, an agnostic who had not quite been saved from the sin of non-commitment. Not exactly a fence-seater [*sic*], for there was no fence to sit on. No one had the time to erect it.'<sup>30</sup>

The tide of events is so strong that Priscilla does not have the opportunity to choose sides. Similarly, David, after much soul-searching, is compelled to forgo his role as a teacher and join the struggle, thus sacrificing his marriage in the process.

What ensues is a tale of woe as Priscilla gets imprisoned, humiliated and tortured by the Rhodesian security personnel. After imprisonment, Priscilla cannot bear loneliness; she falls in love with a student teacher, Nwabu Zhou, who impregnates her but is not keen to marry her. She gives birth to a son, but as the harrowing pressures of existence increase she loses her grip on reality and becomes insane. She has to be separated from her son. After hospital treatment she lives as a tramp, desperate to find her son who has been adopted by a White woman named Betty. Yet the irony is that at the end of the war David is keen to re-establish contact with Priscilla. The central question raised in the novel is, Can the national policy of reconciliation be extended further to affect the manner in which individuals come to terms with very private and painful experiences? Priscilla is a casualty of history who needs an enormous amount of sympathy and understanding. Can David overlook all that has happened in his absence and relate to a deformed Priscilla and her illegitimate son? His dilemma is more problematical than that of Gikonyo in *A Grain of Wheat*.

Similarly, the theme of reconciliation between Blacks and Whites is tentatively explored in the novel. Betty is a White woman who has experienced loneliness and lived insecurely during the war. She is glad the war is over and is anxious to reach out to Blacks:

'My husband taught me about the world. That's why I go out the way I do these days. He taught me about the outside world, about other people's needs and I brought up quite a few African boys and girls.

<sup>29</sup> S. M. Tizora, *Crossroads* (Gweru, Mambo Press, 1985).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

'They grew up in my home . . . as if they were my own children; and, mind you, they were my servants, but I treated them like my children.'<sup>31</sup>

The difficulties that have to be surmounted before Blacks and Whites understand each other are great. To the African audience Betty is a superficial character, clutching on to liberal credentials. Her mode of perception as well as her speech idiom reveal a patronizing attitude characteristic of liberals. Yet, as the story in the novel unfolds, it becomes clear that the woman has actually looked after Priscilla's son notwithstanding the opposition from her husband.

The novel also explores the national problems which confront the new African government immediately after the attainment of Independence. As ZIMCORD money starts pouring into the country, Nwabu Zhou, who is now part of the government security machinery, wonders how the profit motives of foreign companies can be reconciled with the original aspirations of the Black majority. On a personal level, he also wonders whether the role he is now playing, as he drives his smart-looking Bluebird car, can be reconciled to his original visions of serving, with dedication, his own people in Mwauya Reserve.

As a whole, *Crossroads* is a sensitively written novel which poses serious questions throughout, and it does not pretend to offer answers at all. Its limitation, perhaps, is that it tries to do too many things at once, and none of the fundamental issues raised in it are followed up in the end. Also the life-history of Priscilla and Nwabu Zhou sometimes degenerates into sheer melodrama which distracts the reader's attention away from the serious issues being raised. It is a novel whose vision is delicately poised between hope for a better future and fear of betrayal.

In conclusion, therefore, it is clear that the novels published since the attainment of Independence can be divided into two distinct groups on the basis of theme. The first group involves works by Chinodya, Ndhala and Chimisoro. These works are basically looking back to the colonial era and amplifying some of the issues which were more ably dealt with by writers such as Mungoshi, Marechera and Nyamfukudza. What is significant is that new voices have emerged to broaden the scope of the literary tradition that is in the making. The new voices may not be as accomplished as the established writers, but they either modify or confirm what the more accomplished writers have said and this is important. As for the second group, it is mainly a group of novels dealing with the liberation war. As was said earlier, both Chipamaunga and Mutasa are writing works which are deeply influenced by their response to the White man's perception of Blacks. African cultural nationalism becomes a potent force offering spiritual strength to Africans locked in a deadly combat against the Rhodesian forces. The version they offer of that struggle is a highly partisan one and this review has tried to explain why this is so. As for Tizora's *Crossroads*, it is a novel that is Janus-faced: looking back to what happened to individuals as their lives got mangled by the horrors of war as well as looking forward to another form of struggle about the cultural and economic problems which face the new nation.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 6.