The White Man in Black Zimbabwean Literature

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THE WHITES CAME TO THEN Rhodesia in 1890, and remained for ninety years, radically altering and disrupting the traditional, pastoral lives of the Shona and Matabele inhabitants of the country. They bowed out in 1980, except for a residuum staying on as a powerless minority, after a war that escalated in ferocity over fifteen years.

In spite of this, the presence of the white man in the work of the black novelists, poets, and playwrights of Zimbabwe, has always been fleeting and tenuous. Only in very recent years, has a group of younger writers faced the white squarely, and incorporated him, for good or ill, in its work. From the first published writers, of the early 1950's, there has been a consistent failure, not just to offer rounded characterization of the white, but to introduce him at all. (White writers, incidentally, are equally deficient in their handling of the black. Even as transcendent a talent as Doris Lessing, in *The Grass Is Singing*, only treats the black man as a terrifying symbol in the white psyche. White fear of the black is the dominant motif of the book.[1])

Much of the black avoidance of white characters, of course, stems from a certain cultural distaste created by the class divisions of the society. Black writers have not tended to like writing about whites, nor have black readers particularly wished to read about them. Writers prefer to deal with familiar material. Just as Henry James wrote about middle to upper class American cosmopolitans, and D. H. Lawrence (notwithstanding Lady Chatterly) was happiest with characters from the Midlands' working class, like Ursula Brangwen, so, blacks have been most comfortable writing about blacks.

Even accepting this natural enough tendency, there are accentuating historical and social obstructions to the white man appearing in more than a shallow, unsubstantial way. A survey of the future might disclose the white in the same position, culturally, as the Roman occupation of Britain — obliterated, with tips, signs showing here and there above the surface. Often, the white is in the nature of a non-event, a hiccup in the plot, a curious interpolation, or else a *deus ex machina.* Even in so recent a novel as *Dew in the Morning*, Shimmer Chinodya writes:

> In the front of the congregation the priest was performing the last rites of the service. He was probably Portuguese, perhaps twenty-four years of age with a dishevelled head of brown hair falling across his forehead. He had sharp features — a long narrow face, thin lips and a straight nose barely separating the corners of his deep blue eyes. There was a starved look and an air of melancholy about him. He was small and lean and wore dirty faded jeans under his robes. He spoke the local dialect fairly fluently.[2]

This is the most lavish description given to a white in the book. It might be classified as a curious interpolation. The priest is put up front, described in mildly satirical terms, and then dropped. He never appears again. Uncertain technique is also contributory — if falsely suggesting the promise of future life in the plot for a character can be so described.

Censorship, the then Rhodesia Literature Bureau, and lack of confidence, all combined to inhibit black writers. White censorship immediately blocked political writings and, most especially, unfavourable characterization of whites. So, cultural avoidance was reinforced by political suppression. Fleeting reference to faceless whites quickly hardened into a literary convention.

The Literature Bureau reinforced the effect of censorship, not so much by being a direct tool, although it was that, but by its success. Established in 1953 to publish and market indigenous books, its covert aim was to canalize and take the heat out of subversive nationalist writings. It published and paid authors, and, touring with mobile vans, sold books all over the country.

The Bureau encouraged a clean, entertainment genre of writing and would not publish or disseminate politically suspect books.

Black writers found the opportunities offered by the Bureau difficult to resist. But, again, it meant that characterization of whites was blocked. Since for blacks to write about whites (and whites about blacks) demands a difficult cultural leap, an approach via the path of political invective often is the most promising. It provides a creative lubricant. But censorship and publication opportunities barred this. As a result, a number of good writers were drawn into employing more acceptable modes of naturalistic tales about township life and studies of morality — authors like Bishop Patrick Chakaipa, Paul Chidyausiku, T. K. Tsodzo, and N. S. Sigogo. In such tales and studies, the white man appears and disappears like a disembodied dream. Arguably, this is, or was, the reality of then Rhodesian society. The white and black either clashed head-on, with the white handing it out and the black having to take it, or else passed each other like ships in the night. So, black writers were truthful, and yet superficial. They correctly reflected one aspect of reality of the interface, but were inhibited from getting under the skin of another race.

Notwithstanding the political and technical impact of the arrival of the whites, at the social, day to day level, whites and blacks impinged on each other rather less than has been supposed — particularly in the first decades of the century. The following extract of oral history was recorded, by the National Archives of Zimbabwe, from an old man in the Marondera district:

> That is when the whites came. They came one by one with each white man bringing cloth, selling this cloth and then going back. Year after year this is what they did. Then they came *en masse* and settled at Ruzai near Marondera. Before that time there was no white settlement at Marondera. The very first white house was built at Ruzai and from there they spread to Mutare, Marondera and other places.[3]

The old man is referring to a process that occurred not just in the first years of colonization but continued into the 1920's and even 1930's. It explains why the degree of black resentment (although the Shona and the Matabele did rise, once, in 1896-

97) ran at an apparently low level for decades. The actuality of white impingement and penetration, area by area, was slow, reducing friction.

The first generation of black writers, coming to maturity in the 1950's, grew up in this patchy contact. The child is the father of the man: they did not aggregate sufficient experience of whites, at this crucial phase, to be able to write of them with consolidated perception. (The lack of white penetration was not due to any particular restraint, but to the smallness of population and the slow rate of spread and development.) When, however, a crop of talented young black writers emerged in the 1970's, it had grown up under structures of much intenser white pressures and proximity. These young writers are considerably less inhibited and provide much fuller, clearer, and harder outlines.

Another consideration inhibiting attention to white character is that so many of the early black Zimbabwean writers were poets — epic poets and lyricists, like Solomon Mutswairo, Wilson Chivaura, and Herbert Chitepo. Poetical approach and perception are not associated with characterization. Solomon Mutswairo wrote *Feso*, the first novel in Shona, in 1957.[4] It is set in the ancient, legendary kingdom of Monomotapa, (in the Zambesi Valley of today's Zimbabwe), and paints a portrait of a golden age of Shona culture. The work contains covert attacks against white domination and colonization, such as in the poem to Nehanda, a powerful sorceress of the kingdom:

> "O Nehanda Nyakasikana!
> How long shall we, the Vanyai, groan and suffer?
> Holy tutelary spirit!
> How long shall we, the Vanyai, suffer oppression?
> We are weary of drinking our tears.
> . . ."[5]

Mutswairo's limpid, yet fervent, lyric style encompasses symbols, archetypes, rather than hard physical presences. Again, he writes:

> ". . . The land in which
> you used to roam freely is now fenced everywhere and a
> stranger is now its lord.
> . . ."[6]

He is clearly referring to the white man, but in such terms as to be a faceless symbol.

If the pleasures of publication are frustrated by censorship, why not publish outside the country? Some black Zimbabweans, like Lawrence Vambe and Stanlake Samkange, *did* publish in London and New York, and *did* introduce the white more freely. Both these writers used quasi-fiction. Their aims were to offer rewrites of settler interpretations of Rhodesian history — a concern to correct the inflated portraits of Cecil Rhodes, Leander Starr Jameson, and other white heroes. Samkange's *On Trial for My Country* calls back the shades of Lobengula, Mzilikazi, and Cecil Rhodes to stand trial and recount the colonization of Rhodesia over again, from the black point of view.[7]

However (though I risk seeming to adopt an over-demanding criterion) the white presence was as intangible as ever. Exposing the base motives of historical figures represents a circling movement around the baffling nucleus of the white ethos. Samkange and Vambe took the opportunity, for political rather than literary motives, to use freedom from censorship to redress the black case. This, of course, is not only legitimate but laudable, but it indicates how censorship can persist within the boundaries of the mind. The immediate effect of liberation from censorship is not, generally, to encourage literature, but to release pent-up resentments, distracting serious literary aims.

Stanlake Samkange's *The Mourned One* concerns the rape of a white woman by a black man and his subsequent trial and execution. The time was Rhodesia of 1935 and the author puts together a compact, readable account of the oppressive structures of the day. There is a perfectly understandable defence of African social and ethical values. White values are derogated:

> Wake up and see the white man's true God. Yes, the white man has a God he has not told you about. That God is MONEY.[8]

In the wedges of anger, however, there are interstices:

> The jail guards, both black and white, have suddenly become kind, sympathetic, friendly and even understanding. One of them, a white one — he whom they call "Nyamambishi', raw meat, because he is tough and rough — came to my cell this morning and told me that even though he strongly disapproves of

> a black man having anything to do with a white woman, he did not agree with the law under which I had been sentenced to death. 'I do not think you should be executed for it. A good whipping and a long stretch in prison would have reminded you who you are and taught you to respect white women and leave them alone,' he said. (p. 2)

The issue, however, is not to interpret tangible white characterization as being synonymous with sympathy. Doris Lessing, for example, is highly unsympathetic to white society in *The Grass Is Singing*, but she has created first-class fictional characters in the haggard, self-destructive protagonists of the novel, Dick and Mary Turner. The consideration, of course, is of factors such as technique and a literary life outside polemics and stereotyping. In the extract from *The Mourned One* I detect stirrings of a characterization with literary, prose fictional value. One expects a highly partisan presentation, but instead, it is suddenly softened and modified; we have something approaching subtle ambiguity as "Nyamambishi" says something unexpected. The death-sentence is so unjust that even the toughest protests.

As the 1970's wore on, and the countdown to majority rule was generally admitted, the obstructions discussed began to fall away. The pressures of the war and the desperate need of the dominant white minority to find an accommodation with the blacks (as in the agreement with Bishop Muzorewa) eased literary censorship. White Rhodesia liberalized as it staggered through its last days. Charles Mungoshi's *Coming of the Dry Season* was banned in 1972: the ban was lifted in 1976, and this collection of short stories was awarded the Rhodesia PEN Literary Award.[9] Alternate outlets to the Literature Bureau expanded opportunities — like the growth of the radical, religious publishing house, Mambo Press. Young writers had grown up, often in the towns, and within a more pervasive white presence. The black poets, too, influenced by Soweto and the West African poets, became less lyrical and interested in looking back to a pastoral age where the white man, fallen from grace, was not present. So, the poets moved closer to the mode of prose fiction and were prepared, as were the writers, to deal with intractable realities and avoided options.

Consistency is impossible, and there are always exceptions. For example, the most realistic of today's young writers, and, arguably one of the most gifted, is Charles Mungoshi. He dichotomizes the thesis by failing to deal with the white successfully while making the most courageous attempt to confront him. In one of his short stories he writes in the persona of a young white, but the result is false and melodramatic.[10] Other young black writers make substantial efforts, with varying success, which can be typified. In *Going to Heaven*, Wilson Katiyo recounts how young Alexio, fleeing from the white Rhodesian Security Branch, escapes to England.[11] His reaction to white society, including an affair with a white girl, represents complete willingness to make a total confrontation. Operating through the catalyst of sexual envy between races, Katiyo intuits how individuals between the races communicate by a sort of creeping barrage — concealing motives, laying down what they want to take as well as give. Geoffrey Ndhlala resorts to the laboratory culture technique — offering the story of a white child growing up within a black tribe.[12]

The great novel of the Zimbabwean war is still to be written, although S. Nyamfukudza, in *The Non-Believer's Journey*, presents an able account of an anti-hero's embroilment.[13] Arguably, the war unleashed experience, liberated censorship, and created the confidence and vision to enhance literature over the long-term. In presenting the white, however, the process of communication was filtered, clogged, then stopped by the war. Thus:

> 'What did I tell you, so much lolly!' He shook his head, smiling into Sam's face. Suddenly, his face froze. 'Dammit, man!' he shouted, 'why are you carrying so much cash on you? What are you going to do out there, get married? You want to pay lobola and buy yourself a wife out there in the bush? Who the hell do you want to buy things for, out in the bundu where you are heading?' Deliberately, he had turned into a red-faced, raving maniac, his shining hair spilling messily all over his angry, deeply tanned face.[14]

Without denying the authenticity of this dialogue, its very reality prevents any further insight. As in studies of apartheid, confron-

tation has a simplicity, even a monotony. It leads nowhere and is self-sufficient.

Honours seem divided as to who deserves the accolade, "Zimbabwe's leading writer," Charles Mungoshi or Dambudzo Marechera. Mungoshi is the more balanced, rounded of the two. Yet, he is less able to assimilate experience of the white. Instead, he has turned inwards, into the bowels of black township life, pursuing a theme of social violence as the workers shuttle between their traditional rural lives and the tomb-like hostels in the white man's towns. So, it is tempting to place Marechera as the apotheosis of Zimbabwe's writers, since he is completely free of the constraints hedging in black writers' treatment of the white man. Ability to handle white character is not the complete touchstone, as I have taken care to maintain. But, in Marechera's case, it exhibits how completely open he is to all experience. In the spirit of negative capability, he is accessible and vulnerable to it, and, at the same time, above it. In the same way, he is rampantly hostile to the whites, yet his artistry in characterization is unaffected by it. (To be fair, as a total iconoclast, he is rampantly anti-everything.) Marechera writes in English as his first language and has just completed a seven-year sojourn in England. He is now back in Zimbabwe. So, like a long-captive predator, he knows the white species.

Marechera's first book, *House of Hunger*, won *The Guardian* Fiction Award in 1981. It is a collection of stories about a brutalized personal life and a society ground by the white penal system of then Rhodesia. And, if he treats the white with complete cynicism, it is no more nor less than how he treats all experience. Nothing gets special treatment; it is informed by a consistent vision, which puts the book into the class of one that had to be written. He spares no-one, as in this extract of a conversation with a liberal white girl student:

> 'I'm from Zimbabwe.'
> 'What's that?'
> 'Rhodesia.'
> 'O. I'm from London. Hey (with distinct lack of interest), Smith's a bastard, isn't he?'
> And he eagerly:

'As a matter of fact, I have just addressed the Africa Society on the thesis that Ian Smith blah blah blah blah blah blah blah . . . '

(Yawning) 'Interesting. Very interesting.'

'Smith blah blah blah blah blah blah . . . (Suddenly) Would you like to dance?'

Startled:

'Well . . . I . . . yes, why not.'[15]

Marechera is by no means the complete artist yet. In his second book, *Black Sunlight*, he perversely exaggerates all the qualities praised in his first book and renders up a concoction.[16] Nonetheless, he is the first black Zimbabwean writer to enjoy freedom, not freedom, of course, in a purely political sense, but freedom of experience and access to his material, without the obstructions and shibboleths of the past. His handling of the theme of the white is my touchstone to this judgement. It is the climate in which *the* great Zimbabwean writer will emerge (who might be the matured Marechera himself). And, it is one which the whites were not able to achieve for themselves, for all their privileges. After all, excepting the single figure of Doris Lessing, they were not able to produce a writer of international stature in ninety years.

NOTES

[1] Doris Lessing, *The Grass is Singing* (London: Heinemann, 1973), p. 131.

[2] Shimmer Chinodya, *Dew in the Morning*, Mambo Writers Series: English Section, 8 (Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 1982), p. 165.

[3] The passage quoted is from the unpublished transcript of a taped recording, originally in Shona, with an English translation, by National Archives of Zimbabwe. Kind permission to use this extract from 'Chanji Jera [Je], at Jera Village, on 17 May 1982. Interviewer Dawson Munjeri [Mu]' is acknowledged.

[4] S. M. Mutswairo, *Feso*, original Shona edition (Cape Town: OUP with Rhodesia Literature Bureau, 1957).

[5] *Feso*, p. 66. Reference is to the Three Continents Press edition (Washington, D.C., 1974) *viz.* Solomon M. Mutswairo, *Zimbabwe: Prose and Poetry in English: with original Zezuru (Zimbabwean) texts of the verse* [an anthology], with "Translations and English version of *'Feso'* and poetry by S. M. Mutswairo and D. E. Herdeck except Chitepo's *'Soko Risina Musoro'* which is by H. Carter."

[6] *Rhodesian Poetry, 12: 1974-1975* (Salisbury [Harare]: Poetry Society of Rhodesia, 1974), contains (p. 23) Solomon M. Mutswairo, "The Grave

of an Unknown Person," translated into English by Mambo Press from the original Shona "Guva Raasozikanwa." (An alternative translation, by the author with D. E. Herdeck, is in *Zimbabwe: Prose and Poetry* . . ., *op. cit.*, pp. 157-59.)

[7] Stanlake Samkange, *On Trial for My Country* (London: Heinemann, 1967).

[8] Stanlake Samkange, *The Mourned One* (London: Heinemann, 1975), p. 121.

[9] Charles Mungoshi, *Coming of the Dry Season*, ZPH Writers, 2, (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1981).

[10] Reference is to "A Need for Shelter." *In* Charles Mungoshi, *Some Kinds of Wounds and Other Short Stories*, Mambo Writers Series: English Section, 7 (Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 1980), pp. 133-40.

[11] Wilson Katiyo, *Going to Heaven* (London: Rex Collings, 1979).

[12] Geoffrey C. T. Ndhlala, *Jikinya* (Salisbury [Harare]: Macmillan with The Literature Bureau, 1979).

[13] S. Nyamfukudza, *The Non-Believer's Journey* (London: Heinemann, 1980).

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 34.

[15] Dambudzo Marechera, *House of Hunger* (London: Heinemann, 1978), p. 95.

[16] Dambudzo Marechera, *Black Sunlight* (London: Heinemann, 1980).