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Faces of an African city: versions of Harare in the poetry of Musaemura Zimunya and Chenjerai Hove

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[T]he city is like the throat of a crocodile; it swallows both the dirty and the clean (Hove 1988: 13)

In human culture and imagination the “contrast between country and city, as fundamental ways of life, reaches back into classical times” (Williams 1975: 9). Raymond Williams (1975:9) rightly observes that “[o]n the country has gathered the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence, and simple virtue. On the city has gathered the idea of an achieved centre: of learning, communication, light.” He goes on to say that “[p]owerful hostile associations have also developed: on the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition; on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation.”

The aim of this paper is to examine the manner in which the city of Harare, in particular, and urban life in Zimbabwe, in general, is represented in the poetry of two second generation Zimbabwean writers, Musaemura Zimunya and Chenjerai Hove.¹ Special focus in my analysis of the poetry will be on the ways in which animals, the migratory bird and the dog respectively, are used as iconic images that represent the tragedy of the city in the work of the two poets. Although critics have commented on the various thematic concerns, including the rural/city binary (Ngara 1990, Muponde 2000, Muchemwa 2008) in the poetry of Hove and Zimunya, to my knowledge, not much has been said on the significance and role of animals in the poems about the city. Focusing on animals in the poetry reveals the poets’ skewed conception of, and attitudes to, the otherwise dynamic cultural space of urban Zimbabwe. I argue in the paper that the picture of the city that emerges in the poetry of Hove and Zimunya is not nuanced, is one-dimensional and is, therefore, unsatisfactory and unconvincing as the intricacies and paradoxes of city life are conspicuously absent leading to the distortion of the picture of ‘cityness’ in, not only Zimbabwe, but Africa as whole.

In my analysis of the poems I use the social theory concepts of alienation and anomie in engaging with the textualities of Harare as encountered in the poetry. As used in this paper the term alienation should be understood simply as “separation or estrangement of human beings either from each other, from their own life or self, or from society” in a subjective sense, meaning the agent feels alienated (Crossley 2010: 3). The term should also be understood in a Marxist sense where capitalism reduces labour to “basic mechanical actions in a production line process” (Crossley 2010: 5) leading to the commodification of labour and labourers who fail to realise their full potential as human beings. The Durkheimian concept of anomie which is related to alienation here refers to the “break down in normative systems” or to a situation where systems of norms “cease to be passed effectively to new generations or slip out of alignment with the demands and exigencies imposed upon agents by other forces in society” (Crossley 2010: 9). For example, the migration of people to the city and the demands of city life create anomie, as norms people live by in the rural areas are ruptured and overturned, leading to a situation where human desires and expectations “rise above and beyond what is attainable, and also become unstable, in both cases leading to disappointment, disillusionment and dissatisfaction” (Crossley 2010: 10).

A reading of Zimunya’s and Hove’s poetry reveals the poets’ conceptions of rural and urban landscapes as sharply divided, with rural spaces being “seen as more ‘authentic’ than urban” spaces (Primorac and Muponde 2005: xiv). In some of their poems the old agrarian way of life contrasts with the new atomistic modern way of life in the city such as Harare. In the poems dealing with urban Zimbabwe, Zimunya and Hove dwell on “worldliness and ambition” of the city, its corrupt, evil and decadent nature. The city therefore emerges as a wasteland, a place of death, as its positive associations are suppressed.

Cities have engaged the imagination of many people, both in Africa and beyond since their very beginning. While some people see the city as paradise, a place of hope and fulfilment, freedom and opportunity, others view it as a version of hell on earth, an emblem of cultural decay and a nexus of corruption, perversion, greed, destruction and death. Ambivalence and contradictory views therefore surround the ways in which the city has been perceived and imagined in literature and culture over the years, since the days of Babylon, Troy, Carthage and Sodom and Gomorrah (Pike 1981: 6-7). In Western literature contradictory

perceptions of the city abound (Williams 1975, Pike 1981, Lees 1985, Preston and Simpson-Housley 1994, Lehan 1998). While some writers focus on the alienation, oppression, and greed, among other evils in the city, others dwell on the opportunities and freedom the city can offer. And yet others show the ambiguity of the city which “may be a location both threatening and alluring, menacing and exciting” (Preston and Simpson-Housley 1994: 4).

Cities such as London, Paris and New York, among many others, have been “celebrated and condemned, reprobated and praised, loved and hated by writers who discerned in them the worst and the best that life had to offer” (Lees 1985: 6). Charles Dickens saw the city (London especially) both as “lure and trap: a lure to those who are called to it as if by a magnet, because only the city offers the means of realizing a heightened conception of self; a trap in its workings, which lead to human destruction,” desolation and death (Lehan 1998: 39-40, Lees 1985: 37, see also Welsh 1971). Although London inspired his writings in the sense that the city provided the setting and the material or subject matter for most of his writings he, as Lees observes, understood the city in general and London in particular “in terms of what he [...] called ‘the attraction of repulsion’” (Lees 1985: 37). The experiences of the Romantic writer William Blake in the city, “the misery [he] observed and the loneliness [he] felt while walking among [his] fellow urbanites,” resulted in his association of the city with a “sense of gloomy foreboding and alienation” (Lees 1985: 9).

For many people in Africa, writers and ordinary people alike, (like those in Western Europe or America) the city is a place of suffering, struggle and evil. It is a place of “witness to the growing loss of shared conventions and values, with consequent weakening of the social fabric” (Pike 1981: 100) that leads to anomie. In the city morality is suspended and the struggle for survival guides all human endeavours. For many others still, the city is a place of opportunities where the brave realise their dreams of a good life and reinvent themselves. It is a place of hopes and dreams of a good life, a factor that motivates people to migrate from the rural areas to the city (Barnes and Win 1992). Like elsewhere in the world, in Africa, the pull of the city rests in its “prospect of economic advancement” (Lees 1985: 2).

The root of the contradictoriness and ambivalence in the ways in which the city is perceived and imagined may lie in the experiential aspect of the urban space, the various ways in which people experience the city. As Preston and Simpson-

Housley (1994: 1-2) rightly note “[t]he city is an aggregation or accumulation, not just in demographic, economic or planning terms, but also in terms of feeling and emotion. Cities thus become more than their built environment, more than a set of class or economic relationships; they are also an experience to be lived, suffered, undergone[.]” an experience full of “challenges, opportunities, stresses and frustrations.” The city is a place where a lot of people from different backgrounds congregate. In a place like that conflicts and contradiction of beliefs, world views, interests and behaviour in the struggle for survival are bound to be more pronounced and conspicuous as opposed to the rural areas. It is partly because of the conspicuous clash of interests and worldviews and the differences in ways of experiencing the urban space that the city becomes a site for angst and the projection of fears of social and political change or a scapegoat for social ills affecting society at particular moments in history, in which case writers often “suggest that [cities] are degrading the moral and cultural life of the country” (Kurtz 1998: 85).

In their poetry Chenjerai Hove and Musaemura Zimunya act as critics rather than supporters of the city. Their poetry shows that unlike the country, there are no roots in the city, no memories and no happy moments remembered. In the city all is engulfed in a dark cloud of despair and suffering. For these poets, the country is beautiful, the city is ugly; the country is life-giving and sustaining, the city is destructive; the country holds memories of ancestors and sacred caves, the city is Godless and evil. The city is a place of struggle, indifference, loss of purpose and loss of meaning of life; a place of existential despair (Park nd: np).

The contextual background of this negative perception and portrayal of the city by members of the second generation of Zimbabwean writers to which Hove and Zimunya belong lies in a number of factors. To begin with, “Zimbabwe’s urban system, including Harare, is [...] a colonial invention” (Rakodi 1995: 5) intended for the benefit of whites. Black people were admitted into the city as a source of cheap contracted labour and were expected to return to their rural homelands at the end of their contracts. From the earliest days of urbanisation in Zimbabwe therefore the black person was made to feel as an alien in an urban environment, a place he was not supposed to regard as home. The need for cheap labour and racial segregation with regard to residential areas in the city meant that black people had to be “systematically herded into the sordid depths” of black residential areas such as Harare or Mbare Location, among others, “which

existed purely for the convenience and profit of the white man.” In these locations the black people’s “moral and physical fibre was rapidly undermined” and “the old bonds of tribal and family cohesion, loyalty, discipline and other things which had kept the [...] people together in the past” disintegrated (Vambe, 1976: 88; 1972: 199), thereby heightening alienation and creating anomic conditions.² In the black locations the migrant labourers succumbed to “a regimented existence, in which each person’s movements, income, opinions and even visitors, and of course drink, interested the big white brother,” that is, whites (Vambe, 1976: 184). Amongst the measures taken by the colonial authorities to regulate relations between blacks and whites in the city were “checking African ‘passes’ by the police, a night curfew, banning of Africans using sidewalks, rigorous traffic controls over ‘native scorchers’ (African cyclists) and ‘ricksha boys’, and regulating a new ‘etiquette of race relations’ (removing the hat before any Europeans, taking off shoes at government offices, etc.)” (Yoshikuni 2007: 15). The pass system, according to Tsuneo Yoshikuni, helped to regulate African labour market in favour of the white employers (Yoshikuni 2007: 33). Further, the police in colonial Harare (Salisbury at the time) also frequently raided black locations, thereby keeping “the African population in a permanent state of fear and suspicion” (Veit-Wild, 1993: 27). Thus from the beginning, black people associated the city with violence, perpetrated by the colonial police and the black people themselves (as a result of the tough conditions under which they lived), moral decay and fragmentation of the social fabric. This in spite of the fact that they also found it an exciting place that promised happiness and the good things in life, which is why they flocked there in the first place.

In contrasting the manner of writing of the first and second generations of Zimbabwean writers, Veit-Wild observes that “the writers of Generation 2 developed the urge to write out of negative sentiments: feeling dejected, lost, torn between different sets of values.” She goes on to say “[w]hereas the older authors wrote out of hope, the younger ones wrote out of suffering; whereas the first generation’s approach was didactic, the second generation wrote, to some extent, for therapeutic reasons.” For her this is basically because “[f]or the [second] generation [...] the turmoil of migration, urbanisation and rapid social change became the very stuff of life, formed their daily experience from early childhood on and thus shaped their feeling, thinking and writing” (Veit-Wild, 1993: 155-156).

As children of the 1950s, Hove and Zimunya, like other members of their generation, were witness to “the disintegration of the family through a greatly increased mobility of the African population” into the mines and city at the time (Veit-Wild 1993: 156). The boom in trade, commerce and industry experienced by Southern Rhodesia after the Second World War and the loss of rural livelihood following the deprivation of their land under the Land Apportionment Act of 1930, resulted in the disintegration of many sections of African society in Southern Rhodesia. The pain and suffering that accompanied this mobility, the racist policies that the Africans encountered in the towns and cities, and the “materialism and brutalised human relationships, pervasive control and violent oppression by the colonial power” (Veit-Wild 1993: 164) engendered feelings of fear and hatred for the oppressor and his creation, the city. Stories of woe, more than of newfound joy and happiness, must have travelled from the city to the rural areas to cement negative attitudes towards the city. Later, as adults in post-independence Harare, Zimunya and Hove must have witnessed firsthand the decadence, atomism, indifference and the physical and spiritual struggle to survive in the city. The huge volume of stories of woe as compared to the scanty ones of success has resulted in failure, suffering and squalor in the city being reflected more in the poetry than success and happiness. For these poets, the city is a monster which, from the epigram above, swallows and destroys both good and bad people and provokes fear and a sense of insecurity as it destabilises the moral and social values of the rural areas.

In what follows I wish to examine a series of contexts for the “city as wasteland” trope explored above and also hinted at by the epigrammatic quote from Hove’s *Bones* (1988). In my analysis I focus on themes of alienation, existential struggle/suffering and despair, and moral decay.

One of the images of the city that one encounters in the poetry of Hove and Zimunya is that of the city as a jungle – an iron/concrete jungle, that is, a place of great hardships. In the poem “Ask Grandpa” (1982: 26) the speaker urges the addressee to ask Grandpa “who knows / why cities are jungles / too rough for you.” The idea of a city as a jungle suggests hard life, struggle and suffering where only the brave and strong, like epic heroes, emerge victorious. Most of Zimunya’s poems about the city, except for “Ask Grandpa,” are found in *Country Dawns and City Lights*, henceforth *CDCL*, particularly in the second section of the collection called “City Lights,” the longest section of the volume.

This section boasts of thirty-eight poems, fifteen poems more than the first section dealing with country life called “Country Dawns.”

In a poem titled “The City’s Beauty” (1985: 34) Zimunya exposes the lure and attraction of the city as artificial, fake and short-lived like “the lick of an ice-cream,” “the melting of chewing gum / or the coolness of beer / or the groan of a prostitute.” The sexual imagery of an orgasm contained in the phrase “the groan of a prostitute” underlines the briefness of the attraction of the city. Sooner, rather than later, the reality of the pain and struggle associated with life in the city hits migrants from the rural areas. In the title poem of the second section of Zimunya’s *CDCL*, “City Lights” (1985: 45-49), images of death are set side by side with popular perceptions of the city: clean boys and girls and abundance of good things such as toothpaste, sugar, Fanta and Coke. But whatever conceptions the rural dweller might have of the city, for the poet “It’s a world contest of ugliness” where the dead are eaten by dogs (1985: 48).

Like Zimunya, for Hove the city is a place of suffering, alienation and death. To underline the ugliness of the city he focuses on the plight of migrants from the rural areas that he poeticises under the symbol of the migratory bird. As he explains in a footnote for the poem “Lost Birds” found in *Red Hills of Home*, henceforth *RHH* (1985: 36-37), “[t]he migratory bird is the harbinger of the rainy season in Shona” (1985: 36). The migratory bird’s behaviour of following the seasons or taking “flight in obedience to the season’s call” (“Migratory Bird I” [1985: 41]) is compared to the migrant from the country who fails to resist the lure of the city’s Fanta and Coca-Cola.

Birds in general also act as a symbol of freedom in Hove’s poetry (see “When the Sky is Clear” [*Blind Moon*, henceforth *BM* (2004: 1)] and “Birds” [2004: 3]). The bird’s possession of “the power of flight” is a “powerful symbol of freedom” (Lutwack 1994: 153) in literature, and it comes as no surprise that Hove considers the bird an appropriate metaphor for freedom in his poetry. In characterising the migrant as a bird, Hove underscores the freedom of the migrant. But it is the sort of freedom that only lasts until he arrives in the city where struggles for survival and anomie lead to death or loss of freedom. In the poem “Lost Bird” (1985: 36-37) a migratory bird fails to navigate the airspace of the city and falls to his death. In the poem

The bird dragged his breast over the city
compressed by smog.
His wings wagged, his heart beat
As he missed his airy path
over the smoke laden city (1985: 36)

The bird's dragging of "his breast over the city" and the wagging of his wings suggests struggle as he fights to navigate the city's airspace, but to no avail. Smog or smoke (a symbol of squalor and pollution or corruption) from the factories and chimneys in the city's industrial area where, as speculation has it, the bird died, militate against the migratory bird's ability to survive in the city. The city here symbolises death. The migrant bird flies to the city to his death or entrapment/bondage in a factory which will suck his energy as a labourer till his death or, if he is lucky, until he is cast aside by the capitalist system as a spent force.

In the poem "Migratory Bird II" (1985: 42) the persona (a migratory bird) asks in consternation: "Why so do we migrate?" and later "why did I migrate?" as he feels alienated and uncomfortable in this environment where the streets vomit him and "new-born lovers/ drag each other's hearts ashore to their destiny." The sense of loss of meaning of life for the speaker is underlined by his realisation that

My seasons breathe their last, then limp:
And I shall never sing
The season's flow again
Till my people rescue me
With yesterday's echoes. (1985: 42)

These lines reveal how the city interferes with or disrupts the rural people's relationship with time. Instead of the familiar "life-cycle" of the country which includes celebrating the seasons ("sing[ing] / The seasons flow" in the poem), the city introduces a temporality of "interruption" and "inexplicability" that leads to a loss of sequence of events known in the country. The migrant to the city finds him/herself disconnected from nature more generally, and from the elements, cosmic powers, and the lives of animals, in particular. In the countryside, as Emmanuel Obiechina observes, "[s]unshine, rainfall, clouds, forests, bushes, trees, streams, brooks, winds, rocks, hills, mountains, valleys, plains are part of the perennial human quest for livelihood, economic survival and, in some

cases, religious and mystical security.” As such these natural elements are “intimately woven into the traditional consciousness [where nature] is an ever-present reality constantly within view” (Obiechina 1975: 43). In the city this connectedness to, and dependence on, nature is interrupted as the agricultural economy of the country is replaced by industrial economy and human relations and labour are commodified.

Commenting on time in rural West Africa in ways that apply to most of rural Africa, Emmanuel Obiechina (1975: 123) observes that

apart from being reckoned by such events as the first and second cock-crow, sunrise, sunset, overhead sun, or the length of shadows, [time] is also reckoned by meal-times, [...] time of return from the farm and so on. These factors are not arbitrary. For instance, the use of meal-periods does not imply that all eat their meals at exactly the same time, but that everyone has a reasonably accurate idea what time is meant.

People in the country also “use the seasons, the rhythm of agricultural work and the fixed festivals to demarcate the year by cycle. The seasons are clearly marked” (Obiechina 1975: 124) and the people know or anticipate the type of work or activities to engage in during a particular season.

In rural Africa, therefore, “[t]he fixed nature of the seasons, the rhythm of agricultural work, and the distribution of festivals give important temporal signposts” (Obiechina 1975: 125). Significantly too, the names for the subdivisions of the four main diurnal time segments among the Shona of the Zezuru group in Zimbabwe are “denoted by some chore or some phenomenon that is found in the culture or physical environment,” (Pfukwe 2008: 61) especially the behaviour of animals.³ Some of the subdivisions have names such as *runyanhiriri* (1-3 am) which in “Shona tradition [...] is the time when the *nhiriri* – wild cats roam around homesteads raiding fowl runs”; *marirangwe* (2-3 am) which is “[t]he time when leopards (*ingwe*) cough”; *mashambanzou* (3-4 am) which is “[t]he time when elephants go bathing”; *mazambambira* (7-9 am) which is “[t]ime for the rockrabbits (*mbira*) to bask (*kuzambira*) in the sun”; and *rufurambembwe* (3-5 pm) which is “late afternoon when mhembwe – the impala and other browsers, come out to graze (*kufura*)” (ibid. 62-63, italics in original). These time names show the people’s indigenous knowledge of their

environment, their closeness to the lives of animals and the integration of these lives into the people's language and knowledge systems.

Unlike in the country where the moon, the sun, the stars, the seasons, and the behaviour of animals act as markers of time, in the city "[p]eople's lives are [...] controlled by the clock." The strict nature of "[t]he tempo of life" in the city as "many things mak[e] demands on the time of the [city dweller]" requires a lot of physical and mental mobility and punctuality from him/her. Life then becomes an inexplicable "nightmare rush to keep up with things – with one's profession, with social engagements, with trade union and political meetings, with funerals," and many other things, and consequently time becomes a "master and the townsman its slave" (Obiechina 1975: 136). The urban dweller is disconnected from nature and from the lives of animals, and so, like the "caged city dwellers" in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, urban Zimbabweans, as the poem "Migratory Bird II" (1985: 42) shows, "live out of harmony with the seasons" (Saunders 1988: 32). This disconnectedness from nature, in general, and animals, in particular, is what prompts the migrant in the poem to lament: "My seasons breathe their last, then limp: / And I shall never sing / The season's flow again." The speaker's life here has lost all purpose and he hopes that a return to the values of the past might rejuvenate and rescue him from the quagmire of despair.

Anomie, despair and alienation are also the subject of Hove's "Delirium in the Street" (1985: 8). The poet-protagonist here engages in soul-searching and wonders if there is more that his life can still offer: "Could there be more in the clouds / than the rain that falls? / Or more in the day / than the footsteps to the full moon?" These searching questions highlight the disconnectedness of the urban resident from nature. As I mentioned above, in the rural areas natural elements such as clouds, sunshine, rainfall and wind are not only "part of the perennial human quest for livelihood [and] economic survival," but also part of a "human quest" for "religious and mystical security" (Obiechina 1975: 43). In the city these cultural meanings of nature are lost, making the speaker wonder if, in the city, there could "be more in the clouds / than the rain that falls [...]." Although it is not clear what Hove means by "the footsteps to the full moon," the mention of the moon here reminds us that in the city the moon which is often "obliterated by the street lights" (Obiechina 1975: 49) fails to play the role it plays for the country folk, that of telling time and the seasons, among others.

In the poem the city itself is not conducive to a meaningful life, as conversation is only in fragments and “Pavements [are] littered with broken engagements/ [like] Empty bits of wrapping paper” (1985: 8). Eliotsque hopelessness and despair that one encounters in *The Waste Land* pervades the poem which reveals the impermanence (“broken engagements”) and meaninglessness (“Empty bits of wrapping paper”) of human bonds in the city; things that heighten the alienation and make the speaker in his delirious state to ask, “why did I come here?”

Unlike Hove, Zimunya uses the figure of the domestic dog to portray the murky and evil side of Harare. In using the dog in this way, Zimunya highlights the ambivalence that surrounds both the city and the dog in human culture and imagination. Like the city, the domestic dog is a victim of ambivalence and contradictoriness in the way it is perceived, imagined and represented. For some people the dog is the epitome of friendliness, loyalty and companionship. In Britain and North America, for example, the dog, which is greatly admired and loved is regarded as “Man’s best friend.” It is unsurprising therefore that it is anthropomorphised and treated like a human child. For others, the dog is a filthy, ugly and vicious creature that attacks harmless people without provocation and spreads fatal diseases, a creature whose presence in society they have no choice but to endure. However, even among those who regard it as a friend, a hunting partner or companion, equivocal feelings about the dog are the norm and the creature is often treated with contempt and brutality. In some cases the dog’s other admirable qualities have not stopped it from being a victim of the pot (Serpell 1995: 249-250). Ambivalence therefore attends the life of the dog from the day of its birth to its grave, be it underground or on the earth’s surface.

Symbolically dogs have also proved useful to the fertile human imagination. Their names have been used among the Shona, for example, as a means of communication with an unlikeable neighbour (Tatira 2004). In myth, sometimes even in those belonging to the same community, the dog is both a traitor and a saviour.⁴ In the bible the dog is associated with evil, moral degeneration and wicked people who will not inherit the kingdom of Heaven, such people as fornicators, murderers and idolaters, among others (Sax 2001).

It is not surprising therefore that in many traditions the epithet ‘dog’ is a marker of contempt and mistrust (Sax 2001: 90) which at once presents the creature and the person thus designated “as a symbol of the pariah, the degraded outcast of

human society” (Serpell 1995: 250). More often than not in allegorical use it is the dog’s less attractive characteristics that are referred to. Being called a dog, therefore, like being called an animal, is degrading and belittling. It means one is less than human; one is at the base of humanity. The epithet dog, as Njabulo Ndebele (2007: 253) shows in his essay “The Year of the Dog: A Journey of the Imagination” “is a pervasive metaphor regularly used [in South Africa] to justify righteous brutality.”

Steve Baker (1993: 113) observes that “casting of a hated or despised human into the role or image of an animal is [...] a very frequent and effective means of stereotyping them, of objectifying them, and rendering them inferior,” thereby justifying their abuse, oppression and exploitation, on racial, class, or political grounds, among others. Besides, unlike the epithet “animal”, “dog” carries with it associations of filthy and disgusting behaviour, promiscuity, sycophancy, obsequiousness, stupidity, and immorality.

It is some of these negative attributes and associations of the dog that Musaemura Zimunya draws from when he uses the mangy dog as a metaphor in his poems about the city in *Country Dawns and City Lights*. The city, like the dog, suggests for some people squalor, moral degeneration and death. The use of the dog as a metaphor for the city therefore exploits this symbolic similarity between the two entities. The association of the dog and the city also has to do with the imagined “predatoriness[...] in the city organism” (Preston and Simpson-Housley 1994: 10), which swallows up people from the country and destroys them, and the alleged corrupt nature of the city which compares with that of the dog. Like the dog, the city is an epitome of greed, and like the dog the city is vicious and antithetical to life. Further, like the dog, the city is associated with prostitution and promiscuity. It is not uncommon to hear people say men are dogs. This statement is meant to highlight the sexist and stereotypical view of men as promiscuous. Promiscuity as a common denominator between the dog and the city necessitates the symbolic use of the dog in the moralist reading of the city in Zimunya’s poetry. As we shall see later, figures of sexual promiscuity feature predominantly in Zimunya’s poetry about the city.

One thing that stands out in the poetry of Zimunya regarding the city is immorality or the loss and suspension of social values, a development which is underscored by the use of the metaphor of the dog. From what we gather in the poetry, Zimunya finds the dog an ideal animal to illustrate the moral degeneration or

even absence of morality in the city for three of its behavioural aspects, namely its eating habits, its closeness to humans, and its alleged promiscuity. For some people a dog is unclean because it eats filth and carrion, including bodies of humans (Sax 2001: 88). For others the dog is a source of embarrassment for what is viewed as its promiscuous behaviour. The dog's closeness to humans and yet acting in ways that are inhuman reduces it to a whipping boy or a scapegoat, even in societies where it's commendable role in a hunt is acknowledged and respected. It is the above attributes and associations of the dog that make it a suitable animal to carry the weight of Zimunya's moral censure for urban life. Through the metaphor of the dog Zimunya exposes eroticism and promiscuity as well as violence and lack of respect for the sacredness of human life in the city.

The place in the city where all evil unfolds and thrives is a backstreet called Delivery Lane or simply The Lane. This is one of the alleyways in Harare frequented by the poor, the helpless and mangy dogs. In his *Shebeen Tales* (1994: 63) Hove tells us: "The alleyway is not a thing of the past. The real Harare is a city of alleyways. For every bright street, lit day and night, [...] there is, right behind, in the shadows, the alleyway, the byway which seems immune from municipal by-laws, tucked away like the shadow of a dead man." Zimunya's poem named after the lane ("The Lane" [1985: 52]) explicitly identifies it as a place where all hell breaks loose after dark as we read:

The lane is a place of flesh
Dog flesh, human flesh
Female flesh male flesh
Human blood and infant flesh
Blood of the mangy's penis
The red raw of the bitch's vagina
When darkness comes.

The biblical allusion to evil through the use of the term "flesh" that Zimunya uses here signals his moral censure of the ways of the lane and the people who frequent it after dark, while the scatological language signals the poet's moral outrage. Like in other poems in the "City Lights" section, the men and women here are referred to as mangy dogs and bitches, respectively, to exclude them from the heavily protected category of "human" because of their animal-like behaviour. Besides, the use of the term "flesh" underlines the loss of

subjectivity for the humans and the dogs who have become objects. Here then the city represents loss of subjectivity, reducing humans to “flesh,” an object, and leading to loss of rationality. The human, like the dog, becomes soulless, since by metamorphosing into a dog s/he loses one of the attributes of humanity – possession of a soul – and becomes mere “flesh.” In using the term “flesh” rather than “body” as a way of drawing the human and the animal together under the sign of “cityness,” Zimunya highlights the city’s corrupting influence on some of its inhabitants.

Beside the human mangys and bitches, stray dogs – simply referred to as mangy dogs – exist in the city and frequent The (Delivery) Lane which, as we learn from the poem “City Voices in Delivery Lane” (1985: 62-63) is a neglected part of the city. In this area refuse and bins are never in short supply, which is why stray dogs are attracted to it while humans of suspect morals find it ideal for their purposes. In “City Voices in Delivery Lane” the poet calls this part of the city “the buttock of the city / where mangy dog sniffs bins / and raises his hind legs for a dripping jet” or “the backside of the city / [where] the walls have been rusting and peeling since 1927” despite its being “the inside of town” (1985: 62). The delivery lane is therefore a squalid place, an eyesore to decent humans, where dogs and humans coalesce into one hateful figure of a mangy dog. It is here where the girl who migrates to the city loses her innocence as the mangy dogs (men) who at first watch and sniff her “timidly from a distance” pounce on her (“Pilgrim” [1985: 55]). It is also here where cheating husbands catch STIs (“Python” [1985: 71]).

Zimunya’s portrait of Harare as a place where prostitution is rife may strike us as heavily exaggerated, but evidence has shown that, like in other cities of the world, prostitution has always been a problem in Harare (see Yoshikuni 2007: 15-18). Interviews by Terri Barnes and Everjoyce Win with an older generation of women living in Harare revealed how some women survived in the city through prostitution. One interviewee revealed seeing men standing in a queue as they waited for their turn to have sex with a prostitute in the 1950s (Barnes and Win 1992: 123). In his *The Ill-Fated People* and *From Rhodesia to Zimbabwe* (especially chapter 14) Lawrence Vambe (1972: 199) also mentions prostitution, which he regards as one of the “first and most

loathsome importations of European civilization into Africa,” as one of the evils of Salisbury (Harare). The police in independent Zimbabwe have on several occasions (1982, 1983, 1986 and 1990) also arrested hundreds of women in Harare, accusing them of prostitution (Barnes and Win 1992:126).

Apart from prostitution, violence and complete disregard for human life are some of the problems of the city. Delivery Lane has its fair share of these. In Delivery Lane people “get cleaned out” (robbed) of their monthly earning when they pass through it, only to be left “With a broken jaw / and toothless pain – / cleaned out of all words” (“Wonder” [1985: 68]). The expression “cleaned out of all words” suggests (in a slightly clumsy poetic formulation) that the victims are left speechless after the ordeal, as if their words/voices too have been stolen. The clumsiness and flatness of the language here seems to suggest that the poet is not fully invested in his material; he fails to find a language and make it his own. Further, the lane’s bins become preferred receptacles of unwanted babies as we learn in “The Philosopher” (1985: 59) and “Mangy Dogs of Delivery Lane” (1985: 64).

Despite the sad human situation in the city implied in the poem, “The Philosopher” is a humorous, if inauspicious poem in which a mangy dog complains to another of having lost “a tender thing,” a human baby that he found in a bin. Ascribing speech to animals in literature is a popular and old device for humour and satire. The mangy dog in the poem blames God who he refers to as a true devil for conspiring against his success. The dog here believes that God

Whispered to the mangy tribe
who came and chased me and exposed me to the streets
where humans seeing the infant in my mouth
gave me greater chase. (1985: 59)

The dog later loses his juicy find and goes hungry. For the mangy dog’s interlocutor (the philosopher of the title who is later referred to as Socrates), however, “neither God nor the Devil has any affection / for the mangy race” who he believes it is their lot “To clean up the streets / and starve when the bones / have been picked dry and clean” (1985: 59), a situation that leads to their slow death. While Zimunya here may appear to sympathise with the dogs, the subject matter in the poem is such that we are made to sympathise more with the abandoned infant than the scavenging dogs. The poet here, therefore,

emerges as someone who is not fully in control of his material. Although myths about dogs nursing human children exist, the intentions of the dog in this poem are to make a meal out of the hapless child as he complains that he is “hungry again” because of his loss of the baby.⁵ The emphasis on the mangy appearance and diseased state (“fat tick[...]” and “purple tumour on his paw”) of the dog here and in other poems emphasises the dog’s association with degeneration and disease in the city and it is these attributes that make the dogs useful as symbols of the monstrosity and corruption of the city.

While the city remains unidentified in the other poems in Zimunya’s *Country Dawns and City Lights*, the last poem in the collection titled “O Harare!” (1985: 73) leads one to conclude that the squalor and moral decay exposed in the preceding poems takes place in Harare, Zimbabwe’s capital and largest city. In this poem Zimunya dispenses with dog imagery (yet retains the same set of metaphors) and censures the city for its immorality – its cheating wives and husbands, and its prostitution and corruption of the youth, especially girls who fall prey to sugar-daddies. The city lures young girls to their destruction as the poet laments:

O Harare! your lipstick and beauty soap and perm salons
have courted the little girl now she blushes and touches,
kisses and turns endlessly before the mirror,
returns to it from her cooking and books
before she escapes into the night through the window.

One notices here that the city is blamed for all that is bad and evil. Whatever positive qualities it may have are ignored. One suspects that this excoriation of the city is inspired by fear, fear of the city’s monstrosity as it swallows and corrupts the migrants from the rural areas, metamorphosing them into mangy dogs, thereby destabilising the rural hierarchy of animal and human. It is fear shaped also by lack of resources. This fear and excoriation of the city, as I will show in due course, also has something to do with its colonial legacy. But in depicting migrants and inhabitants of the city’s “underground” as undesirable hateful elements (mangy dogs), Zimunya perpetuates the colonial perception of migrant blacks as unwelcome spoilers of the cityscape (in spite of the fact that their labour was indispensable to the colonialists). Zimunya’s metaphorical perception of the migrants who inhabit the alleys and other interstices of the city

as diseased mangy dogs who do not belong to the city resonates with the views of Zimbabwe's ruling elites who in 2005 forcefully evicted some of them from the city in the controversial Operation Murambatsvina.

Given the immorality and squalor exposed in Zimunya's poetry, the state of man in Harare is best summed by Muponde when he observes that in the city "[m]an has metamorphosed into something subhuman, into scum, into something feline, predatory, a thing of the lower depth, a marauding beast" (2000: 22).

I should mention here that through sheer repetition and single-mindedness, Zimunya successfully exposes the negative side of the city in his poetry. This negative perception and depiction of the city seems to trace its origin to the city's colonial legacy. As a colonial invention, it represented for this generation of writers all that was evil about colonialism, its racist policies, domination and exploitation of the colonised, and therefore the codes of invisibility into which black bodies were forcefully written. As Frantz Fanon famously observes in *The Wretched of the Earth*, "colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it." Fanon goes on to say that

[w]hen we consider the efforts made to carry out the cultural estrangement so characteristic of the colonial epoch, we realize that nothing has been left to chance and that the total result looked for by colonial domination was indeed to convince the natives that colonialism came to lighten their darkness. The effect consciously sought by colonialism was to drive into the natives' heads the idea that if the settlers were to leave, they would at once fall back into barbarism, degradation and bestiality. (1967: 169)

The colonial encounter in Zimbabwe, like elsewhere in Africa, led to the distortion of the country's pre-colonial past (Vambe 1972) and presented the colonised with a picture of the past that evoked shame and reduced the African to an inferior status. It is unsurprising that after colonialism African scholars, including Zimunya, called for a journey of rediscovery, of retrieval of the distorted past (Introduction, *Thought Tracks* 1982). In this process of cultural retrieval and corrective reading of history, the colonial brainchild, the city, is rejected and demonised "as a symbol of an alien culture introduced by the

Western presence” (Zhuwarara 1985: iv), leading to the depiction of a skewed picture of urban space as we only see the unpleasant side alone. The city’s buildings, its shapes and colours, its sounds and aromatic smells are suppressed. The people, who also remain misty or shadowy, are painted with the same brush strokes as bad. Yet, even during the colonial period, life in the city, as Vambe tells us, “was at once miserable and intensely exciting” (Vambe 1976: 184). Besides, the city is a mixture of both good and bad experiences as well as good and bad people. A more impartial poetic rendering of the city would go a long way in painting a conceivable picture of Harare. Besides, mere exposure of evil alone does not make for good poetry.

Further, Zimunya’s perception of immigrants and the urban poor perpetuates the views of the colonialists who regarded Africans as undesirable aliens in the city. Lawrence Vambe (1976: 146) has this to say about the attitudes of whites towards black people in the urban areas of Southern Rhodesia: “In Rhodesian towns it seems the African is considered as a form of pollution, a menace, a hazard, to the [white] urban dweller. Of course he is accepted everywhere as a source of labour, but once he steps outside the factory gates, or residence of his white master he assumes a totally different aspect.” Like the African in the colonial towns, the mangy dog (and the black urban poor person he represents) is “a form of pollution, a menace, a hazard” in the postcolonial Harare of Zimunya’s poetry. One notices then that Zimunya’s views about the urban poor resonate with those of the ruling elites who in the year 2005 undertook to clean the cities and towns of Zimbabwe of undesirable squatters in an infamous operation called Operation Murambatsvina (Operation Drive Out Trash or Operation Drive Out Rubbish), which has been criticised by many people and organisations including the UN for its abuse of human rights, cruelty and exploitation of the poor (Report 2005, Centre on Housing 2007). During the operation, which was carried out by the police and the army, many people were harassed, their goods and property destroyed or stolen and thousands were left homeless. It is striking that the government’s behaviour here was like a response to Zimunya’s exposure of the existence of mangy dogs (in the language of the government, squatters, trash or rubbish) in the city in his poetry. The idea of cleaning the city of trash or rubbish associated with the operation points to the colonial attitude to poor blacks in the city as a peril. It is also revealing that the operation, according to a report by the UN fact-finding mission to Zimbabwe, was “based on a set of colonial-era laws and policies that were used as a tool

of segregation and social exclusion” (Report 2005: 7-8). And so, as in colonial times, the poor in Harare were, and still are, seen by the postcolonial government as a peril, a menace, a disease, or a form of pollution (mangy dogs). In this case the alleyways inhabited by the poor (the dogs) in the poetry become a metaphor for the squatter camps and black locations in the city.⁶

In quality, Zimunya’s poems about the city discussed above are less satisfactory. The poems lack the technical sophistication that one would expect from such a seasoned poet. In rhythm and syntactic structure the poems read like prose chopped at random to form lines of verse. It is for this reason, perhaps, that Michael Chapman (1996) considers Zimunya’s poems about the city as his worst poems. Zimunya himself has indicated that in *Country Dawns and City Lights* he “attempted to exploit something like street conversations and also some folkloric devices” to escape the problem of “unreadability” or obscurity that he fell prey to once ([Veit]-Wild 1988: 64). Clearly, through the use of oral forms and simple style, Zimunya’s aim was to make his poems accessible to the peasants in Zimbabwe. But in trying to avoid “unreadability” he compromises the quality of his poems in this collection. This is despite the fact that, it is possible to view the “choppiness” of the city poems in part as suggesting the disruptiveness and chaotic nature of the city itself. Some of the poems by Hove show technical sophistication and engaging technique, although in some cases this obscures the meaning.

By way of conclusion, I wish to reiterate that in the poetry of Zimunya and Hove the positive aspects of the city are suppressed and only its hostile associations emerge. In the poetry the intricacies, paradoxes and tensions of city life are ignored in favour of narratives of evil and suffering. Hove and Zimunya’s city residents, for instance, are shadowy individuals that are inarticulate, devoid of deep subjectivity, and moral reflection as they transmogrify into lascivious mangy dogs. They are subject to poverty and suffering, and are always products of their biological makeup and immediate environment. This picture of the city is unsophisticated, unsatisfactory and unconvincing. It is a picture born out of failure by the poets to transcend historical, cultural, and socio-economic contexts of colonial subjugation, rurality and capitalism to provide an informed and impartial assessment of the colonial inheritance that is the African city.

Notes

1. Second generation Zimbabwean writers are writers who were born between 1940 and 1959 (Veit-Wild (1993: 7). Zimunya and Hove were born in 1949 and 1956, respectively.
2. After independence Zimbabwe's colonial city of Salisbury was renamed Harare after the oldest black location in the city.
3. The main diurnal time segments among the Shona, according to Charles Pfukwe are: mangwanani – morning [3 am – 11 am], masikati – afternoon [11 am – 5 pm], Mauro/Manheru – evening [sunset to bedtime], and usiku – night [9 pm-3/4 am].
4. In one myth among the Beng of Ivory Coast (Côte d'Ivoire) for example, the dog is held responsible for death that confronts humanity. Yet in another Beng myth the first human pair hatched from an egg that Dog found and protected in an enclosure (Gottlieb 1986).
5. Boria Sax (2001: 88) tells us that dogs “were held in special reverence in Persia” because legend has it that Cyrus, the founder of the Persian Empire, “was left out to die at birth but was suckled by a dog.”
6. Justifications for the Operation given by the government include “arresting disorderly or chaotic urbanization, including its health consequences; stopping illegal, parallel market transactions, especially foreign currency dealing and hoarding of consumer commodities in short supply; and reversing environmental damage caused by inappropriate urban agricultural practices” (Report 2005: 20).

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