

An overview seeks to establish patterns that emerge from a given field. It is a mapping of the territory where beacons are placed and contours traced. In the case of Zimbabwean poetry, the stylistic and thematic features are so varied as to complicate the broader picture that we want to establish here. In the variety there are connections, disconnections and reconnections that we want to trace as these are shaped by historical context. These flow from creative processes and purposes, thematic clusters, formal and stylistic patterns, and the poet's relation to literary tradition. These often cut across the tentative chronological categories that we have tried to impose here.

Dambudzo Marechera's poetry, for example, consistently proves the instability of historical categories. Chirikure Chirikure, Albert Nyathi, Freedom Nyamubaya and Ignatius Mabasa use a retrospective gaze to construct a modern poetic idiom. Despite this instability, we want, as a starting point, to offer a historical background that explains the context and purpose of writing. This background includes a period that has not yet been posted in Zimbabwean cultural consciousness, 1970–79; the decade of promise and hidden skeletons, the decade of ESAP and rising discontent; and then the post-2000 era. Each decade is crowded with social, economic and political events that have a bearing on culture.

The decade of the Liberation war, 1970–79, provides a critical reference point against which the postcolonial experience is measured in much of Zimbabwe's poetry, particularly in the work of poets like Musaemura Zimunya, Chenjerai Hove, Freedom Nyamubaya, Chris Magadza and Chirikure Chirikure. The memory of war continues to infect post-independence political discourse and literary creativity. It is also liberating in that modern post-colonial subjects reject the docility that is demanded of them by cultures of terror.

The heady 1980s are characterised by euphoria and the insertion of the amnesic imagination into the national consciousness. It is the decade of reconciliation, exuberance, false promises, and the civil war that poets have chosen to ignore. It is associated with in-flows of international capital and populations from the continent. It is also a period of extended goodwill in which the founding president globetrotts, receives accolades and honorary degrees. It is a period of looking back west for a socialist political movement that had relied so much on the east. It is sadly the official enactment of ZANU PF culture of political intolerance and violence that led to the emasculation, containment and ultimately destruction of ZAPU in the Unity Accord of 1987. It is also a period that promises vibrant debate and uncompromised and unembedded public media. The dissenting voice of Dambudzo Marechera assumes a prophetic significance.

The 1990s unmask the socialist trappings of ZANU PF. The decade is marked by the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) (1991–95), the drought of 1991–92, the War Veterans Compensation Act (1996–97) and DRC military adventure. The last two have disastrous effects on the economy. Its downward spiral gives birth to a vibrant trade-union movement, civil society, and political opposition movements with which the ruling party has to contend using the tactics of infiltration, ruthlessness, disinformation, harassment and decimation.

In order to forestall articulations of rising discontent and hijack the process of constitutional reform initiated by the opposition, the government crafts what was seen as a flawed draft constitution and puts it to a referendum in 2000. The rejection of the constitution is the beginning of the electorate regaining power. The millennium is marked by fractures of the national imaginary despite the shrill sounds of sovereignty. That which was repressed in the 1980s returns to haunt the nation. State violence against its citizens has now exceeded geographical and ethnic frontiers to engulf the whole nation. This violence is marked by arbitrary arrest, mysterious disappearances and inexplicable deaths of political dissidents. This is followed by a militarisation of state apparatus and the brutal violence visited upon the ordinary citizens during the June re-run of the presidential elections.

While it is tempting to establish generational dynamics in the growth of Zimbabwean poetry, it is important to acknowledge the way in which writers continue to exceed the limits of their times. There are re-connections, reversions and in some instances a simultaneous occupation of many creative temporalities. This is particularly demonstrated in the poets of the 1980s who emerged from the

colonial and Second Chimurenga background. The poetry of Musaemura Zimunya, Dambudzo Marechera, Shimmer Chinodya, Christopher Magadza, Julius Chingono and Charles Mungoshi continues to have thematic and stylistic resonance in the 21st century. Marechera, the wordsmith with an Icarian imagination, despite the deployment of the parodic imagination in prose fiction, continues to have strong influence on emerging poets, especially the protest and dub poets. Some post-1995 poets like Chirikure Chirikure and Ignatius Mabasa adopt a backward gaze to anchor their creativity in traditional aesthetics while subjecting this to a revolutionary revaluation.

The Liberation-war poets Christopher Magadza, Freedom Nyamubaya and Thomas Bvuma share a common ideological background. Two of these, Nyamubaya and Bvuma, focus on the fighter's experience of the war, although the former transcends this by offering an inclusive nationalist and transnationalist perspective. All three poets question the direction the postcolonial state has taken. Magadza, despite the conservatism of form and diction, uses language of indictment associated with African oral literature to castigate cultural and political defilement, and short national memory in his poems 'Ghosts in the Maize Fields' and 'Quiet Diplomacy'. It is not just bodies that are eliminated and disappear but also the nation's capacity to remember and mourn those destroyed by a revolution that has gone wrong. His poems provide a powerful critique of the postcolonial order using images of cultural and political defilement as he castigates political hirelings masquerading as 'war veterans' who, in a re-working of Chenjerai Hunzvi's malapropism ('masquandering' as war-veterans), recklessly squander the dearly bought reputation of the freedom fighter.

Years of Promise: 1980–95

In music and writing, poetry included, poets during this period benefitted from state and private patronage to the extent that they were never short of funds for the support of schools, urban areas, clubs and individual enterprises in the cultural economy. Thus the Rhodesian Poetry Society and its various branches or affiliates across the land became the most successful unifying cultural organization catering for poets. The work of many white poets and novelists at this time reflected the ideologies of a society protective of its "God-given" land, and which felt under constant threat from "the black barbarian". However, in spite of their poverty and underprivileged status, black people soon began to exercise their own talents in the writing of poetry, short stories and novels. And white writers, poets especially, soon realised that there were voices stirring within the land whose suppression would be immoral.

Aptly, a poetry quarterly named Two Tone had been established in 1964 for the express purpose of affording space for both black and white aspiring and established poets. Black poets were concerned with the traumas of colonial rape: cultural, social, economic and political upheaval which destroyed African institutions, leaving Africans alienated from their land and the very farms, mines and factories to which the settler policies forced them. Ironically, the bunching together of black and white poets created a strange mix, whose dynamic was to test this forced cultural integration of divergent ethnicities with equally disparate concerns.

By 1980, African poets had become more and more disillusioned with the colonial system and had thus begun to explore their condition in a more aggressive tone than would have been anticipated at the birth of Two Tone. In any case, Kizito Muchemwa's *Zimbabwean Poetry in English* (1978) had struck a bald and decisive blow to any illusory notions of cultural integration between the downtrodden African peasants and the oppressive and privileged colonials. In this collection, Muchemwa had drawn together the hitherto isolated African voices in a surprisingly eloquent chorus of the dispossessed afflicted by an acute sense of political despair, loss of identity and alienation. Until then, this noble quest had been stuck in the quagmire of fake and patronising racial integration. Nor was Muchemwa's effort an isolated development. Mudereri Kadhani, soon to team up with Musaemura Zimunya in co-editing *And Now the Poets Speak* (1981) had already published another militant anti-colonial collection entitled *Quarantine Rhythms* (1976), and in due course, Charles Mungoshi added his own collection entitled *The Milkman Does Not Only Deliver Milk*, while Zimunya published *Zimbabwe (After the Ruins)*. The last two were published as joint publications with white writers under the auspices of the Poetry Society of Rhodesia in a continuing forced-coupling. A much more drastic parting of ways was the publication of *Smoke and Flames* (1978) which heralded the long overdue arrival of Samuel Chimsoro, who for almost a decade since his graduation from Nyatsime College had been working in isolation. Even more significant was the identity of his publishers, Mambo Press, which had been working more

closely with the nationalist movement since the late 1960s and was the first local publishing house to “touch” African creative writing.

1995 to the Present: A New Creative Ferment

This ferment is marked by the abandonment of nativist aesthetics by the poets who had begun to make their mark in the late 1970s and the 1980–95 periods, especially Chris Magadza, Charles Mungoshi, Musaemura Zimunya, Chenjerai Hove and Julius Chingono. New talent has emerged, taking poetic creativity in new directions encompassing new themes, forms and styles. The new poets show little or no influence of the war and nativism. Of particular interest is the rapid development of popular and dub poetry; the increasing importance of the posthumous avant garde and revolutionary influence of Dambudzo Marechera on young poets; and the growth of poetry by women (Kristina Rungano, Joyce Chigiya, Freedom Nyamubaya, Zvisinei Sandi). It is also important to acknowledge the accomplished poetry of Togara Muzanenhamo, which is marked by remarkable control of language and precision of imagery, and the rich promise of Phillip Zhuwawo’s poetry.

Landscapes of identity

In his introduction to the 1978 Mambo anthology of Zimbabwean poetry, Kizito Muchemwa identified the land as an important site in the creation of subjectivity. Land is associated with spatial mapping and ideological contestation in both colonial and postcolonial Zimbabwe. Poets use land as trope and site for locating identity.

Landscape in the poetry of Musaemura Zimunya and John Eppel is fraught with the politics of identity. Reading the poetry of these two as innocently descriptive would be to miss the way each poet locates self in landscapes of identity. The rural-urban binary is used in Zimunya’s poetry, especially in *Country Dawns and City Lights*, to carry a nationalist ideology in which the city is made foreign. Eppel’s landscape in *Songs My Country Taught Me* is that of the ornithologist, the botanist, and the zoologist. He inserts himself into the land but attempts at claiming indigeneity are marred by an exoticising tendency in his poetry that captures the crisis of white identity in postcolonial Zimbabwe. Eppel is good at evoking the special character of the landscape in the western part of the country and makes it carry personal and public memory.

Poetry and the Academy

It is not our wish to resurrect the excoriation of the university poets here. We simply want to suggest ways in which university education and culture may influence university-educated poets, particularly those like Dambudzo Marechera, Musaemura Zimunya, and Chenjerai Hove who have been exposed to the influence of English and World Literatures. There are subtle ways in which these influence their poetry. Marechera stands out as the most erudite of the Zimbabwean poets, and as a result his connection with Zimbabwean oral poetry, like his connection with nativist aesthetics and the cultural ideologies they carry, is very slight, if not non-existent. He strives for a cosmopolitan artistic identity and whether he achieves this is another matter. What is important is his unconditional commitment to the craft of poetry.

Less flamboyant but more mature, confident and conversant with the demands of bilingual aesthetics that continue to dominate Zimbabwean literary aesthetics is Musaemura Zimunya, a scholar who has played a significant role in the development of literature in Zimbabwe. He, like Dambudzo Marechera, started writing poetry in the 1970s. Zimunya has not been turned into an iconic figure by angry young writers, yet his poetry articulates the ambivalences and opportunities that exist in writing in a second language. He is able in his poetry, when not focusing on the country-city binary which carries ideologies held in opposition, to clear the ground for the creation of a new poetic canon, especially in poems in the collection *Kingfisher*, *Jikinya* and other poems. He shares this position with Chenjerai Hove, who, however, has consistently presented himself as the poet of resistance.

The other poet who can be associated with university, especially in his style, is Togara Muzanenhamo. He reveals the effortless use of conceits in the manner of English Metaphysical poets, though without their riotous exuberance, in a poem like ‘Captain of the Lighthouse’ and ‘Skaters’. The joys of a childlike imagination combine with the maturity of thought to create a world of nostalgia and wonder. He also has an ability to evoke a sharply observed scene, to resurrect past emotion without sinking into

maudlin self-flagellation in poems such as the 'Pallbearer', 'The Pool' and 'Roads'. His images are always sharp and precise evocations of a lived experience.

Beyond the Academy

There are a number of poets like Charles Mungoshi and Julius Chingono who are not driven by theory or by any school or ideology because they operate outside of the academy where these powerful influences prevail. Neither are they influenced by political programmes. They are keen observers of the often 'everyday practices of life' that they transform through clarity and simplicity of language. They are the very antithesis of the erudite poets like Dambudzo Marechera, Musaemura Zimunya and Togara Muzanenhamo. They are closer to the concerns of the common people, not seeking to speak on their behalf but allowing the experience of the subaltern to speak for itself. Excluded from this category are poets who, although exposed to the literary influence of the university, consciously go out of their way to subvert writing and reject poetic styles that are influenced by Western poetic canon. This strategic rejection is part of the battle for authenticity and sovereignty transferred to the arts as shown in popular poetry and poetry of performance.

Popular poetry

This category encompasses poets from a variety of artistic backgrounds and who bring to poetry different skills and aesthetic programmes. Shona and Ndebele oral traditions have been of considerable significance in the development of the popular in poetry. This is seen in the bilingual poetic aesthetics of Chirikure Chirikure, Albert Nyathi, Ignatius Mabasa, and the growing body of contemporary Ndebele protest poetry. There is also a growing body of protest dub poetry by young poets like Comrade Fatso. Each variety of the popular has a distinct character that we wish to briefly discuss here.

In the work of bilingual poets the accent is on translation poetics. Popular poetry draws its images, symbols, and themes from a common repertoire in either the Shona or Ndebele oral tradition. This popularity shows a number of interesting facets. First, there is a reversion to classical oral literature in a way that is not different from that of dancers in traditional regalia performing for tourist audiences at airports and holiday resorts. Not much can be said about this false popular. Second, there is the use of traditional orature to recover continuities that shape the present. Mnemonic devices on the other hand are not only part of this popularity but also its memorability. The general impression, shaped by modern Western literary criticism and prejudices, is that popular poetry is simple and easy to compose. This simplicity masks craftsmanship that transgresses boundaries of mediality as the art moves from the medium of print to that of performance and back again.

The poets who significantly stand out in this tradition are Chirikure Chirikure, Ignatius Mabasa and Albert Nyathi. Chirikure sets out to revitalise Shona popular poetry by taking it beyond the stuffy containment of traditionalism and making it articulate the concerns of modern Zimbabwean citizens in an increasingly globalised world. Chirikure and Mabasa perceptively use traditional poetic images and symbols to negotiate complex themes of governance, social and political responsibility, and freedom.

Resistance/Protest Poetry

The chief poet of resistance is Dambudzo Marechera, who writes against all forms of artistic, political and social repression. He is the chief articulator of untrammelled freedom of expression and freedom to differ from the pursuit of homogeneity that is at the centre of nativism. He has come to inspire a new generation of angry young men and women. The current practitioner of resistance is Chenjerai Hove, whose poetic career, like that of the musician Thomas Mapfumo, displays an ironic trajectory. Both started their careers as artists of resistance/protest speaking truth to colonial /settler power, Mapfumo in the 1970s and Hove retrospectively at least in the 1980s. They shared the same dream and used the same rhetoric with the nationalist politicians. They were also instrumental in the construction of a nativist aesthetic whose limitations they are currently questioning. The trajectory that has been taken by Hove should not come as a surprise since it is consistent with the origins of his poetic creativity. *Up in Arms* (1985), *Red Hills of Home* (1985) and, most recently, *Rainbows in the Dust* (1998) and *Blind Moon* (2003) have one thing that runs through them – resistance to power that violently shapes space and identity.

Protest or revolutionary poetry by many young writers, although holding promise, may fail in the end to rise above ideological posturing in the style of the very centre of power it sets out to critique. We anticipate a crisis among these poets who, when the dispensation they are fighting against disappears, may find their source of creativity drying up. There may be an element of faddism, especially among the dub poets, a wish to latch on to the contemporary and topical in the globalisation of culture.

Women in Poetry

This overview would not be complete if it ignored the growing importance of women writers in Zimbabwe's literature. Although women like Tsitsi Dangarembga, Yvonne Vera and Valerie Tagwira have received recognition and acclaim in fiction, their role in poetry has largely escaped critical attention. Change is noted especially in the part played by Kristina Rungano, Freedom Nyamubaya, Joyce Chigiyi, Ethel Kabwato and Zvisinei Sandi. The first two present different articulations of the crisis of womanhood in Zimbabwe and Africa. While Rungano writes about the commodification and fetishisation of the African woman ("She the property of men/Pass'd 'tween them from hand to hand/fragile piece of glassware") Nyamubaya presents from a Liberation perspective a complex figure of woman as fighter, lover, mother and citizen with continental and cosmopolitan consciousness. Nyamubaya brings freshness to poetry in the form of clarity, simplicity and the use of the oral tradition in which she presents the poet as story-teller and critical conscience of the nation. It is the unobtrusiveness of her style that is engaging, a quality that she shares with other fellow women poets.

New voices in women writing are emerging and it is important to note that although they continue to articulate the condition of women in a patriarchal society that has not been radically deconstructed they are beginning to engage with a developing Afropolitan identity. Note how Zvisinei Sandi's poetry attends to a broader range of themes than usually found in traditional feminist poetry. 'The Devil's Footprint' in its imagistic and symbolic intention examines African soldiery and the curse of war, gender, rape, victimhood, female power and contemporary African tyranny from a fresh perspective. She complicates the victim/femme fatale image of womanhood in the poem, 'The Face of Anguish'.

Why Not Love?

We want to question the perception that African poetry is largely about protest/resistance and is incapable of expressing delicate emotion. Musaemura Zimunya takes exception to this writing-out of love poetry and offers the mythic figure of Jikinya. Dambudzo Marechera, despite the image of rebel and anarchist, seeks anchorage in love in a world that maddeningly fragments and destabilises. Although there is brutality, avarice, callousness and casualness in relationships in Marechera's writings, there exists a poignant search for less transient and less casual relationships. There is a close connection between creativity and love. Marechera always looks back to other literary treatments of this theme in the literature of the West and this literary construction of emotion compromises the authenticity of feeling.

To write about love without necessarily engaging in Calibanistic discourse is the gift of women poets like Joyce Chigiyi and Freedom Nyamubaya. The uncomplicated invitation to sharing a moment of peace and space of intimacy as the beginning of a new relationship is captured by Chigiyi in 'Walking in the Rain': "I need someone then to stand right by me/would you feel used if that someone was you".

New male poets like Togara Muzanenhamo are able to render the tenderness of moments of intimacy and the poignancy of lost love. Muzanenhamo inscribes into a scene emotions in a manner that reminds us of the poetry of Thomas Hardy without the latter's pessimism. In poems like 'Helpless Goodbyes', 'Roads' and 'Tea and Sandwiches', his poetry describes landscapes of emotion. In some way this draws some similarities with the poetry of Musaemura Zimunya and John Eppel, though the last two focus on specific landscapes related to the politics of identity in Zimbabwe.

New Directions

The future of Zimbabwean poetry is shaped by a variety of forces and indicates many directions of development. The future continues to be shaped by its past and this explains the sustained influence of the poets of the 1970s and 1980s who also continue to re-define their own pasts. But there is growing evidence that the landscape of this poetry will see some significant re-shaping by the post-1990 poets. One such poet is the Dambudzo Marechera of Shona poetry and fiction, Ignatius Mabasa. Like

Marechera, he is comfortable working across genres and at times collapsing their boundaries. He also refuses easy categorisation. The riot of sensibility, the controlled exuberance, the parodic style, the acerbity and tenderness characterise the work of this writer set to revolutionise both fiction and poetry in Shona.

We have already mentioned the role played by performance poetry in energizing what would have remained a tepid canon. There is much promise in re-deploying and re-defining traditional Shona and Ndebele aesthetics as this would lead to greater accessibility of the poetry by the common people. Elitist aesthetics exclude and marginalise.

A number of marginalised groups have been excluded from literary creativity in this country. Without wishing to beat the drum of racism and ethnicity we want to point out that this exclusion has diminished the poetic imagination. Writers are beginning to emerge from various sites of exclusion. The community of Africans of foreign descent who have been underpinning the Zimbabwean success story in agriculture have also been the worst victims of Zimbabwean chaotic farm invasions and xenophobia. Chris Magadza raises the point about Zimbabwe's under-reported crimes against humanity in 'Quiet Diplomacy'. The late Philip Zhuwawo belongs to this group and his poetry offers interesting ways of presenting and interrogating Zimbabwean identity. More will be expected from language groups whose histories and cultures have been excluded from a conception of Zimbabwean-ness.

Conclusion

We want to conclude by mentioning the importance and perils of artistic patronage and programmatic writing. History shows how official colonial patronage of literature through the Rhodesia Literature Bureau proved to be a pernicious influence by stifling creativity and encouraging an askari aesthetics focusing on anthropological aspects of the lives of the colonised. History may be repeating itself with the emergence arts that may be used for state propaganda. State instruments are already in place in Zimbabwe to control creativity. We want to acknowledge here the role played by other sources of patronage in nurturing talent: British Council with their Crossing Borders writing project, HIVOS, SIDA, Pamberi Trust, the local book publishers' association and their sponsorship of the ZIBF book prizes, and the Zimbabwe Writers Union. We also want to suggest that good writing may often thrive in the lack of patronage.

Kizito Z. Muchemwa, Zimbabwe Open University Musaemura
B. Zimunya, University of Zimbabwe

References

- Thomas Bvuma, *Every Stone That Turns*, Mambo Press, n.d.
Samuel Chimsoro, *Smoke and Flames*, Mambo Press, 1978
Julius Chingono, *Flag of Rags*, Quartz Press, Johannesburg, 1996
John Eppel, *Songs My Country Taught Me*, Weaver Press, Harare, 2005
Chenjerai Hove, *Up in Arms*, Zimbabwe Publishing House, Harare, 1982
— *Red Hills of Home*, Mambo Press, Gweru, 1985
— *Rainbows in the Dust*, Baobab Books, Harare, 1998
— *Blind Moon*, Weaver Press, Harare, 2003
Xavier Kadhani, *Quarantine Rhythms*, Mambo Press, 1976
Xavier Kadhani and Musaemura Zimunya (eds), *And Now the Poets Speak*, Mambo Press, Gweru, 1981
Chris Magadza, *Father and other poems*, Poetry International Web:
<www.zimbabwepoetryinternational.org>, 2006
Tafataona Mahoso, *Footprints about the Bantustan*, Nehanda Publishers, Harare, 1989
Dambudzo Marechera, *Cemetery of the Mind*, Baobab Books, Harare, 1992
Kizito Z. Muchemwa (ed.), *Zimbabwean Poetry in English*, Mambo Press, Gwelo, 1978
Charles Mungoshi, *The Milkman Doesn't Deliver Only Milk* (2nd revised edition), Baobab Books, Harare, 1998
Togara Muzanenhamo, *Spirit Brides*, Carcanet Press, Manchester, 2006
Emmanuel Ngara, *Songs from the Temple*, Mambo Press, Gweru, 1992
Freedom Nyamubaya, *On the Road Again*, Zimbabwe Publishing House, Harare, 1986

- Dusk of Dawn, College Press, Harare, 1996
- A. Pongweni, Songs that Won the Liberation War, College Press, Harare, 1982
- Kristina Rungano, A Storm is Brewing, Zimbabwe Publishing House, Harare, 1984
- Colin and O-Lan Style, The Mambo Book of Zimbabwean Verse in English, Mambo Press, Gweru, 1986
- Musaemura Zimunya, Country Dawns and City Lights, Longman, Harare, 1985
- Kingfisher Jikinya and other poems, Longman, Harare, 1982
- Thought Tracks and other poems, Longman, Essex, 1982
- A Perfect Poise and other poems, College Press, Harare, 1993