

AND GOD SAW THAT IT WAS GOOD? POVERTY, DISABILITY AND DEPENDENCY DEMYSTIFIED: INTERROGATING THE SYSTEMATIC IMPOVERISHMENT, DISEMPOWERMENT AND PARALYSIS OF AFRICAN COMMUNITIES IN SELECTED FICTIONAL NARRATIVES ON EASTERN AND SOUTHERN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Using literary depictions of the African condition in the pre- and post-independence phases, the article examines what it views as the conundrum of the „triplets of poverty, disability and dependency“ associated with, and characterising most post-independence African communities and societies. These creative works are: Charles Mungoshi’s *Waiting for the Rain* (1975); Lauretta Ngcobo’s *And they didn’t Die* (1999); and Ngugi wa Thiongo’s *Petals of Blood* (1977), *Devil on the Cross* (1982), and *Mashingaidze Gomo’s A Fine Madness* (2010) respectively. The article argues that unlocking and unbundling the sociology of underdevelopment that underpins the negation of African human worth would be key to the preferred solutions towards reducing and eradicating disability, poverty and dependency in Africa today, contradictions notwithstanding.

Key words: Disability; poverty; dependency; underdevelopment; calamities; solutions

1. Introduction

Using selected representative black-authored literary depictions of lived African historical, religious and cultural experiences in the pre- and post-independence phases, the article follows three major thrusts in its examination of disability in post-independence Africa. By examining various entanglements influencing the social, cultural, economic and intellectual contours, livelihoods and perceptions of African human worth within and after the colonial dispensation, the article interrogates the intertwined historical and cultural realities undergirding disabilities in sub-Saharan Africa. It uses linguistic definitions and literature as key entry points towards understanding disability from a Shona perspective.

2. Disability conceptually and linguistically defined from an African-centred perspective

Among the Shona, after careful prolonged observation of phenomena, disability is conceptualised as kuremara or urema (inability), the person with disability is chirema. From a Shona perspective conceptions of kuremara/disability are embedded in beliefs, practices, attitudes and language as reflected in taboos that are encapsulated un/wittingly in folklore materials. Lakoff and Johnson’s (Metaphors we live by, (2003) principle of collocation shows relatedness of words. For example, hunger vis-à-vis anger; love vis-à-vis unconditional acceptance and commitment. Collocates of ‘_Urema’ or ‘_disability’ point towards being malformed, to malfunction, to be disfigured, disfigurement, to be dis-membered, to have a defect/deficiency, to have impairments, lacking enablement, to have handicaps that result in disadvantaging of incumbent/family/community, including frequent exclusion and lonesomeness and in/voluntary withdrawal. Like in most cultures,

disability among the Shona also points towards psychological and cultural limitations/handicaps that result in constraints when called upon to perform certain ‘normal’ activities and tasks in society. Similarly, then, collocates that go with being ‘disabled’ strengthen conceptualisation of urema in Shona culture. The root of these words is -rema implying burdensome/negativity/liability. It also connotes limitations, a sense of inability, and to some extent dependency. Collocates that go with urema/kuremara/chirema imply the burdensome nature of disability on the incumbents, family, community and society. Thomson (2002: 246) argues that ‘bodies that are disabled can also seem dangerous because they are perceived as out of control. Not only do they violate physical norms, but by looking and acting unpredictable they threaten to disrupt the ritualized behaviour upon which social relations turn ... The narrative resolution is almost always to contain that threat by killing or disempowering the disabled character. People therefore generally strive as much as they can to remain able-bodied, to conform, and compliant to be-ing so that they may not be construed as a burden, or be shunned, discriminated against and be marginalised and excluded from mainstream social activities. Language in Shona, as socially symbolic, depending on how it is used, can therefore also disable, exclude, dis-empower and marginalise.

Causes of disability can be internally or externally induced. Malnutrition is a known cause for some disabilities, including deficient functionality of body organs and mental faculties. Abuse of drugs and other traditional concoctions can also result in disability. Unavailability of certain medicines and clean drinking water, biological weapons like the 1945 Hiroshima bombs in Japan whose effects have not yet been wholly eradicated, detonated landmines as in the Zimbabwean 1970s guerrilla war, bombings as in the Arab Spring attacks on enemy and civilian camps, maiming by terror groups like the Nigerian Boko Haram, living in unhygienic environments, poor sanitation and environmentally unfriendly neighbourhoods also fan and nurture disability. This means that with conscious commitment to living peaceably as humankind, most forms of disability can be eliminated.

Some children are born disabled because of certain biological abnormalities induced at conception and other deficiencies in the mother that affect gradual development of the foetus. Causality of disability in African studies, as depicted in some traditional folklore and some literary texts, often point towards perceived solutions. Impliedly, whilst ‘natural’ causes of disability are acknowledged, in some instances the underlying causes of disability are as numerous as there are interest groups that appropriate the power to name, define, and describe, including activities, tasks, aspirations and undertakings that would aid/impece holistic human life and livelihoods to a higher standard. Slavery and colonialism, grounded in the principles of self-aggrandisement, orchestrated exclusionary approaches to accessing subsistence resources, remain arguably indefensible regarding conditions leading to multifarious disabilities among most marginalised communities. Human-induced disabilities orchestrated to paralyse certain sections of society so that others fall prey to manipulation, exploitation and dependency, with political willpower, can be easily eradicated. Candid examination of the broader African experiences show that colonial machinations, especially the policy of land apartheid, disempowered and disabled African communities, rendering them poor and dependent on foreign orchestrated monetary economies that forced many able-bodied males into wage-labour and further exploitation (Baxter, 2010; Ramose, 2005; Rodney, 1981; Palmer, 1977). The effects are still with us today. Therefore, poverty and deficient livelihoods that are rampant across post-independence Africa and Zimbabwe could be viewed as direct outcomes of avarice and exploitation by those purporting to be ‘civilising’, ‘Christianising’ and ‘ushering commercial

development' to those they claim as 'backward' and 'underdeveloped'.

Violently uprooted, wrenched from supportive indigenous home environments, and forcibly removed and brutally transplanted onto foreign and unfamiliar territories in the Americas and the newly-structured colonies, the African personality has consistently striven to function optimally in order to achieve what it had originally been destined to become by the Creator. Deliberately ignoring or downplaying these human-induced hazards would circumvent and curtail genuine efforts to restore semblances of normalcy to communities striving to exist against odds of deprivation and poverty that intricately nurture conditions that often lead to physical and mental disabilities, especially in economies that privilege those who own and control basic subsistence resources like land. Mangled and disfigured communities and families, mangled minds, disfigured psyches, and those that have literally lost their minds constituting whole African communities, have not yet received adequate critical enquiry in order to correct the wrongs of history wrought by slavery and colonialism. Whole mutilated communities and families passing on legacies of hurt, pain, crime, disease, hunger, malnutrition, injury, poverty, suspicion, self-hate, corruption and economic disempowerment characterise most former colonies.

Cut off from traditional sources of subsistence, natural secure environments and strategic institutions, families and communities continue to disintegrate, becoming systematically disabled economically, materially, psychologically, spiritually, mentally, intellectually, and in certain cases physically. Life becomes burdensome, cumbersome or heavy and very difficult — *kurema* in Shona — with whole communities paralysed or wholly disabled. This does not in any way suggest that disabilities never existed before the scourge of colonialism. Colonialism, its deeply-entrenched systems and its legacies, remains a catalyst to some of the prevalent conditions of disability and its symptoms in most post-independence African countries where livelihoods are severely compromised. Colonialism pushes its victims to –the place of oppression...an alternative code of 'truth', or sometimes, an expression of anger (Muponde, 2015: 94, citing Laurence, 1994: 156-157). Ramose (2005: 7) succinctly observes:

First of all, forcing Africa into the money economy meant that Africans had to start from point zero whereas her conquerors continued from plus one. As Africa is bound to and continues to borrow, so does the latter gain a progressive and interminable lead over her. This assumes special significance in the light of the fact that profit-making is the basis and the decisive factor for the continued existence of the prevailing money economy. For the sake of profit, human life may therefore be dispensed with.

Nevertheless, worth noting is that –[t]he present does not know itself from the past alone, but also how it acts to realise the potential of the future as well (Chennells, 2006 in Vambe and Chirere (2006: 25). Impliedly, whilst the vagaries of colonialism are indisputable, African societies cannot continue heaping all blame on the savagery of past legacies alone. Equally critical is unlocking potential in resources and human capital to nurture sustainable livelihoods for the marginalised majority whose existential conditions make them susceptible to disability.

Whilst certain forms of disability could be outwardly apparent, most talents, competences and abilities lie unexplored in individuals. This explains the inclusive approach of respect for every

human life embedded in the underlying philosophy propagated in Shona philosophy of *munhu* (human beings/humanity) and *unhu*, or what the Shona view as being cultured into *be-ing*. *Be-ing* for the Shona is *-human* (human-ness); a humane, respectful and polite attitude towards others which constitutes the core meaning of *[unhu]*. *Unhu* or *be-ing* is envisioned to foster *-one-ness* and an indivisible wholeness (Ramose, 2005: 36-37) in a society where people should be generally socially responsible and socially accountable for the greater common good. To this end, every human life is sacred, hence the talk of the vulnerable, infirm, aged and disabled as *vanhu vaMwari*/ God's people. Among the Shona, then, it is therefore foolhardy for any well-thinking person to transgress God's principle of respect for every human being and safeguarding the sanctity of human life. Transgression(s) could solicit unwarranted wrath, making disability a scare. In this regard, the Shona say, *-Seka urema wafala*/[You can best deride the disabled when you are on your deathbed], also milking sympathy for the disabled when they similarly warn: *-Chawana hama hachisekwi* "[Never lampoon the misfortunes visited upon one's brethren because they would most likely also haunt you]. *-Urema*'/disability is therefore loathed.

3. Interface between Fictional Literary Depictions and Disability Studies: An Area of Critical Enquiry

The interface between literary arts and disability studies would constitute a rich unexplored and untapped mine towards understanding human conceptions and attitudes requiring critical enquiry. Vambe (in Muponde and Primorac, 2005: 100) observes:

Critical practice is not an innocent undertaking. It is the process whereby values that often find their way into people's lived experiences are generated, debated and naturalised as knowledge which defines people in terms of history, time and place/[space] ... In many ways it dramatises the struggle of values in the field of literature and life.

Examination and interrogation of writers' literary depictions of the full range of lived African experiences can provide uninhibited insights over the wide range of emotions, expectations, attitudes, demands, views, aspirations and trajectories about disability. This approach, however, does not intend to trivialise the call for strategies to mainstream disability into the curriculum and other interventions envisaged to alleviate and minimise the plight of many people living with disabilities in many of our respective communities. Rather, it is one approach that would urge communities in post-independence Africa not to be content with stopgap or fire-fighting measures, but to seek more holistic approaches pertaining to dealing with disabilities. More holistic approaches would urge society to be self-introspective and self-critical in order to be pro-active on how best disabilities can be managed in our post-independence communities.

The article focuses on Eastern and Southern Africa as depicted in selected black-authored literary works. The reason why attention has been drawn to fictional writings on Eastern and Southern Africa is because these respective regions have shared history of colonial domination under British rule from the late 19th Century whose apartheid land policies orchestrated massive land and livestock disposessions, and massive forced removals of the African populations from their traditional subsistence lands and homes. The effects are still with these regions today.

The discussion uses the Afrocentric paradigm as defined by Asante (1998; 2003; 2007) that implores

studies on phenomena to bring to the centre agency and values of the people concerned, especially their culture, history, spirituality, epistemology and worldview for more informed, holistic and balanced criticism. Representative black African-authored texts that will provide cursory illuminations into the triplets of disability, poverty and dependency, and the potential that can be unlocked, include Charles Mungoshi's *Waiting for the Rain* (1975); Lauretta Ngcobo's *And They Didn't Die* (1999); and Ngugi wa Thiongo's *Petals of Blood* (1977), *Devil on the Cross* (1982), and Mashingaidze Gomo's *A Fine Madness* (2010) respectively.

4. Critical Enquiry into Disabled African Communities in Charles Mungoshi's *Waiting for the Rain* and Lauretta Ngcobo's *And They Didn't Die*

Charles Mungoshi's *Waiting for the Rain* and Lauretta Ngcobo's *And They Didn't Die* set in rural colonial Rhodesia and rural apartheid South Africa respectively offered thought-provoking entry points into discourses of land alienation, emptiness, poverty and disability that have caused the life of stasis, deprivation and dependency characterising most colonial and post-independence African countries. The article hastens to note that the Southern African experiences that these writers depict are metonymic of the East and West African experiences as well. The scramble for Africa that authored the dismemberment of the African continent, and therefore the archetypal cause of the now rampant multi-pronged disabilities and maladies, a result of the architecture of the Berlin 1884-5 Conference (Armah, 2010), clearly shows that the fate of one region cannot be isolated from the fate of the rest of the African continent. Only particularities may differ. Yet, arguably, phenomenal similarities of rampant mutilation and laceration of African communities are evident in the categorisation of countries and nation-states as Anglophone, Francophone and Lusophone. Categorisations alter and deform original conceptions of identity, being, human worth and belongingness despite original shared African origins. Newly-formed conceptualisations of belongingness psychologically impact commitment to self-develop and mastery over livelihoods resources.

Set in the South Africa of the 1950s to 1980s, Ngcobo's *And They Didn't Die* recreates how rural women of Sigageni village set in the Sabelwani Valley fight the odds of land dispossession, forced removals and deprivation under the South African apartheid 1913 Land Act. Ngcobo explores the subsequent loss of subsistence as there is limited access to land, over-crowding, over-grazing and starvation, deprivation of wealth in the form of livestock, and mutilated families as husbands go into farms and towns as wage labourers. Sigageni women who fight and resist dispossession are labelled by white law enforcement agents as –senseless, unthinking creatures!! (p.1). The musing lone figure of Mr Pienaar, the dipping officer, at the deserted and emptied dip-tank on a cattle dipping day that opens the narrative is telling:

What more was he to report to the authorities at Ixopo ...childish pranks perhaps or some lunatic wandering free — anything but rebellion on the part of these unpredictable creatures... What do dipping tanks have to do with clinics, doctors and starving children; ...they accept nothing that is done for their own good, no appreciation, no understanding at all — how can anyone teach them to think!

It is deeply disturbing and ironic that, speaking from a position of privilege, the white official sees Sigageni women's resistance to further loss of wealth and disempowerment as female stupidity.

Culling their livestock (p.64-66), and traditional leaders replaced by more compliant men (p.67-69) shows systematic inducement of death of individuals and functional institutions and the lethal effects of apartheid. Denied access to wage labour, Siyalo, Jezile's husband and family provider, arrives at a decision –to steal milk from the white farmer in the valley so that his child, S'naye, might live! (p.136). Siyalo is arrested and jailed for stealing milk. The symbolism of how apartheid snuffs out life in the African lives, especially that of children who are the future, is worth noting.

Faced with starvation, a pragmatic MaBiyela advises her daughter-in-law Jezile: –There is no virtue in staying with us here to preserve our way of life and reputation and to lose children through starvation! (p.188). –You will have to find a way to live somehow. You have very young children. They must live through this and survive! (p.157). With starvation come diseases, illnesses and physical and mental deformities/disabilities. MaBiyela focuses on transcendental survival strategies in the face of the debilitating physical environment, externally-induced poverty and economic disempowerment that promulgate slow death and starved truncated lives. Self-pity and self-hatred accentuate self-annihilation. Ngcobo's vision dwells on how best the marginalised can survive deprivation and become triumphant. Whilst begging and employment to earn frugal wages are pragmatic stepping stones, these further mangle bodies and coerce minds into perpetual entrapment. These result in what Muponde (2015: 99) surmises as a –pestilence of silence! characterising most dominated lives and communities. As cure to the ‘pestilence of silence’, Kahari (2009: 17) argues citing Shona philosophy that –Mushonga wengozi kuripa./ The only remedy for crime is reparations!. It seems that Ngcobo shares a similar ideological view. The war of resistance that concludes her narrative and Jezile's children's participation in the armed struggle shows the trans-generational responsibility to salvage African communities from man-made deprivations undermining wholesome and sustainable livelihoods. The Sigageni scenario is commonplace in British occupied lands in Africa. For example the female white narrator in the novel *Out of Africa* set in colonial Kenya boasts:

I had six thousand acres of land, and had thus much spare land besides the coffee- plantation. Part of the farm was native forest, and about one thousand acres was squatters' land, what they called their shambas. The squatters are Natives, who with their families hold a few acres on a white man's farm, and in return have to work for him a certain number of days in the year (Blixen, 1985: 19).

Ngcobo's narrative foregrounds inequities, injustices and deprivations that do not only stultify human growth, but lucidly paints a background to most nauseating and debilitating conditions that partly account for some of the malfunctions and disabilities in African communities. Ironically, the extent of the psychological trauma has sadly not been investigated despite UN cries and concerted efforts to ‘restore’ human rights and peace advocacy in politically unstable and economically paralysed post-independence African communities.

Like Ngcobo's narrative, Charles Mungoshi's *Waiting for the Rain* is similarly set in the 1970s Rhodesian rural barren and death-smelling Manyene Tribal Trust Lands——scorched nothing-between-here-and-the-horizon white lands! (p. 39). Racked with a sense of un-belongingness, Lucifer the chief protagonist regrets the racial circumstances of his birth: –Not until you look towards the east and see the tall sun-bleached rocks of Manyene Hills casting foreboding shadows over the land beyond like sentinels over some fairy-tale land of the dead, are you really at home! (p.40). *Waiting for the Rain* explores the catastrophic implications of land deprivation, especially on the

already displaced dysfunctional family. Buttressing Lucifer's apprehension about death-plagued home, his family sees him as one who is disabled and an outsider — -That boy [who] has become something that is not the colour of this soil (p. 152). His uncle Kuruku had forewarned on the eve of his departure overseas:

You see this boy here —Lucifer? When he comes back —if he ever does come back —he won't want to live here. Why? No breathing space in this desert. He will shake the dust of this place off his feet, escape to some other country, or go and squeeze himself in the towns where they have got a hole — (p.64-65).

Is it any wonder then, that Zimbabwe's most vibrant export commodity has been its human capital, internally and externally? This further cripples and bleeds the same communities and the country's economy respectively. It does not come as a surprise that Lucifer takes to art and flees to England on a scholarship, further buttressing psychological impairment that colonial land designs etch on the psyche and geophysical landscape. The Old Man muses dejectedly:

[T]he land is the Earth's, there is enough for everyone... we couldn't understand this desire of theirs to call everything mine mine mine... what else could we do but fight them... for those of us who saw those battles our granaries and homes are still burning (p.116).

Emptiness of the land, its barrenness, and Manyene inhabitants' economic disempowerment, the impassioned desire to flee home and exit as represented through Lucifer, is metonymic of colonially occupied lands, whose population demography remains stet after attainment of political independence. The greater African population domiciles in lands like the death-traps and emptiness-ridden lands of Manyene, part of -the ecological devastation (Chennells, 2006: 27) that is metonymic of blighted existence. To live with self in such a catastrophic environment that builds towards more severe catastrophes, including disabilities and famished lives of dependency, remains unimaginable and unmanageable. Migrations and flight, self-hatred that robs selves of dignity, leading to a sense of self-rejection, failure to identify with and belong, ensue.

Concerning Lucifer's attitude and plight, Zhuwarara (2000: 53) observes that the -only passion he feels is revulsion about his roots... a black who emasculates himself by zealously struggling to acquire the culture of his conquerors. It is a form of submission which denies one an individual or collective identity. The dystopia that ensues is a common human phenomenon. Yet, begging attention are practicable remedies that could be adopted in order to right the perceivable inequities and vacuums such disjunctive attitudes create and foster. That colonialism underpins the inescapable dystopia in Lucifer is undeniable. This phenomenon demands more critical attention to partly address some disabilities/malfunctions that are rampant in most post-independence African communities today.

Like Lucifer, the Old Man in *Waiting for the Rain* laments the impoverishment imposed by colonialism's destocking policies. The policies economically robbed Africans of a tangible investment and economic resource, effectively removing an essential source of sustenance: -He goes around the pen... another part goes a little deeper into the circumstances surrounding each animal: the animal — personal history... Here again he stands and thinks of his once one hundred head of cattle — when grass was still the Earth's grass — now reduced to ten. Old Mandisa's unknown numbers now down to six. (p. 5). No wonder in the same narrative, flight by Lucifer, just as it

literally is, becomes an escape valve. Nevertheless, flight, is merely a stop-gap measure. Communities and countries cannot close shop. This is the context in which mainstreaming of disability in limping post-independence African communities should be viewed. There are no short-cuts or ready-made quick fix remedies.

5. Ngugi's Devil on the Cross and the Debilitating Corruption, Disease and Disability in Post-Independence Kenya

Devil on the Cross points at some of the major causes of disability in post-independence Africa — exploitation of the majority by the bourgeoisie and business tycoons working in cahoots with multinational corporations to economically constrict the already economically haemorrhaging individuals, families and communities. The businessmen and tycoons celebrating their talents, strategies, visions and gains in post-independence Kenya at the expense of the poor majority whilst at an international hotel tells of a beleaguered political independence. Ngugi foregrounds the business tycoons orchestrating how best they can extract more wealth from the dying communities. The latter casts the already impoverished majority into an economic intensive care unit, preyed upon by their cannibalistic leaders who masquerade as their economic saviours.

Ironically, the masquerading economic saviours purport to be hatching empowerment programmes for the marginalised majority in the so-called withering third world economies. To this end, disability, poverty and dependency are a poor man's human-induced condition that should be confronted and stemmed. At a business tycoons' conference at a multinational hotel — that the narrator terms a meeting in 'a cave' because of its exclusive and surreptitious nature — Gitutu wa Gitaanguru suggests strategies already taking root in some African post-independence growing economies. Renouncing any approach that has any inkling to salvage the poor, he proudly announces what he envisages as the best way to both make money from peasants and workers, as well as to rule perpetually with impunity:

Wa Kihuuma ... wants to rouse the workers and peasants to take up arms against us. The man wants the workers to become so angry that scales will fall from their eyes, and they will rise up against us with swords and clubs and guns. Doesn't Gatheeci wa Kihaahu realize that our people are sick to death of taking up arms? I know what it is: the man wants to introduce Chinese style communism into this country. Mr Chairman, my development plans make a thousand times more sense: sell soil in tiny dishes, and trap air so we can sell it in tins or through meters! The workers and peasants would then breathe to order — our order! **Grabbing all the soil in the land and all the air about us is the surest way of making workers and peasants obey us forever**, because should they make even the smallest noise, we could only need to turn off the air to bring them to their knees ... (p. 120).

Satirically, the writer explores and exposes how African tycoon elites holding the remaining frugal resources in their charge are both instrumental and culpable for continued poverty and disability of their impoverished communities, countries and nations. The current squatter status of the majority, including their inability to access land to build houses and grow food for sustenance is depicted as deliberately orchestrated for political and economic control. Gitutu's boast is a carryover of the colonial design orchestrated to perpetually handicap the native as shown in Blixen's narrative of her African experience cited elsewhere in the paper — The squatters are Natives, who with their families hold a few acres on a white man's farm (Blixen, 1985: 19). Barclay (2010: 150) makes similar

observations concerning containing the ‘kaffir’ on the Zimbabwean farm-frontier.

Zimbabwe’s 2005 Operation Murambatsvina/Restore Order (Vambe, 2008) and the Harare 2016 January-February high density suburb demolitions of poor housing co-operative members’ houses speak to the machinations that Ngugi’s fictional narrative satirically lampoons. The Zimbabwean situation has been exacerbated by unscrupulous land barons who illegally parcel out residential stands in peri-urban areas with the aid of conniving city ‘fathers’, only to turn around and condemn the poor who have no recourse to courts of law. Their dwellings, built on frugal resources, are demolished with impunity for breaking the law.

Ironically, Zimbabwean public media recently reported that Harare’s obscenely-paid city ‘fathers’ have started experimenting with prepaid water metres in the high density suburbs. The move threatens to be catastrophic to millions of unemployed poor and disabled town-dwellers. The developments in Harare buttress the human-induced deficiencies that the extract from Devil on the Cross depict about post-independence Kenyan political and business elites’ machinations to perpetuate poverty, deficiencies and dependency among the already disenfranchised poor. In this regard, Ngugi subtly advances that poverty and disability in most post-independence African states are manufactured by depraved bigots who are motivated by self-aggrandisement, and insatiable desire for power, control and status. Inadvertently, the solutions to the same deficiencies are embedded in reversing the same antics that spell disaster for victims of exploitation and manipulation. That ordinary citizens’ debilitating conditions are exacerbated by malpractices and corruption mooted in the corridors of power is worth noting. The above fictional snippets should therefore not be taken lightly.

6. Multinational Land Grabs, Civil War and Genocide: Ngugi’s *Petals of Blood* and Dangarembga’s *The Book of Not*

In *Petals of Blood* Ngugi wa Thiongo recreates the loss of land by ordinary rural dwellers in post-independence Kenya through the fencing off of small pieces of farmland that are mortgaged for bank loans. The cunning capitalist system points towards multinational land grabs that leave communities disabled at the loss of their sole source of subsistence and sustenance. Wanja sells a family plot in this way. Yet, land is a central theme underpinning the Mau Mau uprising that ushers in Kenya’s political independence. As a result of losing land, Wanja is materially and economically disempowered, ending up a prostitute, thereby exposing herself to further vagaries and insecurities associated with her new ‘trade’. It is inconceivable to imagine why the ordinary dispossessed Kenyans should be reduced to squatters in an independent country that they fought to liberate from colonial bondage. Ironically, there is no recourse to their elected MPs as they work in cahoots with the multinational companies and business people to dispossess the electorate upon whom they depend for political office.

Losing land —the nexus of dignity and sustenance — to the Kenyan elite, marks a new departure from the land and its traditions, including the traditions originally associated with the indigenous brew Thang’eta that was traditionally used at communal events that ensured social cohesion and unity. Effectively, land deprivation entails living deficient lives in a disabled community. The effects of land and material disempowerment manifest in the form of physical disabilities that are pointers towards inherent and more deep-seated problems that should be dealt with in order to contain the

symptomatic effects. Disability in this regard is more complex than meets the eye. The ripple effects of losing land, apart from compounding hunger, environmental and food insecurity — whose direct effects are disease and disability — inadvertently yoke back the ordinary Kenyan villagers to capitalistic forces whose venomous backlash appears worse than the ‘dislodged’ colonial administration.

Further, the condition of war itself, by its very nature, disfigures communities, relationships, land and the physical bodies of the war victims, including psycho-spiritual and post-war trauma, aspects that should be embraced in discourses on disability. Abdullah in Ngugi wa Thiongo’s *Petals of Blood* returns from the Mau Mau war for Kenyan independence physically disabled. This constituency of war disabled victims like Ngugi’s Abdullah appears ignored or completely sidelined in post-independence reconstruction programmes. Contrary to liberation war promises, post-war trauma has been left for families and victims to deal with on their own. Alexander Kanengoni explores this aspect passionately in the war novel *Echoing Silences* that traces how a liberation war fighter plunges to his death haunted by horrors of war crimes. This psycho-spiritual dimension of disability is often downplayed or sidelined. How it can be contained probably lays in cultural politics. To this end, writers like Chinodya, though often criticised for looking at post-war emancipation as an event rather than a process, using the chief protagonist in his novel, concludes that most cadres who sacrificed their lives in the armed liberation struggle ‘harvested thorns’.

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Using Chinodya’s concerns in the novel *Harvest of Thorns* and Ngugi’s *Petals of Blood* respectively, like many others of their ilk, embracing pro-African theoretical moorings alone without adopting practicable measures that rehabilitate war victims postpones problems that mainstreaming disability in the educational curriculum alone cannot adequately address. Liberation war victims are often left for respective individual’s families to privately rehabilitate. Yet, unquantifiable losses would have been already incurred. Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Netsai*, a grenade detonation amputee during Zimbabwe’s 1970s armed liberation struggle that is depicted in *The Book of Not*, like Ngugi’s *Petals of Blood*’s Abdullah, receives no resources for self-advancement.

Further as depicted in the atrocities of the liberation struggle (Dangarembga, 2006: 173), whole communities and villages plunged into further poverty at the destruction of homes and abduction of bread-winners by the colonial regime soldiers. After the war, these victims of war violence similarly receive no compensation to rehabilitate and resuscitate their livelihoods. Poverty and disability, then, become naturalised conditions and acceptable forms of existence for post-independence African poor, issues that should be directly addressed. Further, rehabilitating war amputees or giving them artificial limbs and wheel chairs without demining and detonating grenades mined alongside borders and other war zones would not in any way minimise casualties that could end up victims of disability.

Rehabilitation should therefore include practicable programmes that should be followed through, including homes and shelter for people living with disabilities to spare them the life of sleeping under bridges, living in the streets with their children/ families, and begging at traffic intersections to buy a loaf of bread for the day. Their children who are their guides miss school and play like other children of their ages. Further, the only thing they would learn from both parents and society is to live off charity and other people’s goodwill beyond which they become other beggars and criminals,

and in some cases, victims of rape, sodomy and early child marriages. Stripped of all dignity, they become easy prey for drug barons and other social misfits who manipulate them for frugal leftovers for daily sustenance. Ironically, in the absence of tangible social safety-networks that traditionally used to sustain and defend the vulnerable in our communities, their status as victims of the cycle of poverty, is the measure by which our societies' progress, civilisation and development are measured. Key to this section of the article are Wanjia's words of invocation to the villagers of Illmorog to march to the government offices in Nairobi and demand their source of sustenance—land—back:

It is our turn to make things happen. There was a time when things happened the way we in Illmorog wanted them to happen. We had power over the movement of our limbs. We made up our own words and sang them and we danced to them. But there came a time when this power was taken from us.... We must surround the city and demand back our share (Ngugi, 1977: 115–116).

In post-colonial Africa, human rights advocacy and discourses to empower people with disabilities, that exclude practicable measures to return the basic resource for life-sustenance, is nothing but a cosmetic charade. This, ironically, is one of the paradoxes of democracy as injected from other cultural centres other than Africa that have resulted in ever-swelling formal unemployment, corruption, hunger, disease, disability, dependency and deaths. Unemployment — an illness compounding the debilitating condition of people living with disabilities — as a structural necessity within the prevailing democratic dispensation, simply lubricates the system of the death of the many for the survival of the few (Ramose, 2005: 8). The excerpt from *Devil on the cross* that gets a cursory glance earlier in the discussion elaborates on this aspect. Barclays (2010: 153), cites one of Mugabe's famous speeches:

Land comes first before all else...This is the one asset that only defines the Zimbabwean personality and demarcates sovereignty, ... an asset that has a direct bearing on the fortunes of the poor and prospects for their immediate empowerment and sustainable development.

Conclusion: A Fine Madness (2010)

A Fine Madness's depictions of civil war in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), show that the predator killer who kills the males and maims women and children, only does so to gain access to the region's rich resources (Gomo, 2010: 114). At this juncture — without necessarily making disability a racial but an inviolable historical subject — strategies to curb poverty that fans disabilities should focus on stopping the plunder of subsistence resources. Plunder fans paralysis of communities and physical disfigurement of the African land and its people (Rodney, 1981; Armah, 2010). The article posits the same question that Gomo (2010: 113) raises:

Should armies of African people that rose from voluntary guerrilla armies of their people that fought white armies commissioned by a supremacist white community to enforce dispossession of African people by white people ... should those armies be demonized for supporting and enforcing repossession of stolen lands to re-empower dispossessed Africans?

Mindful of intra-racial divisions and betrayal among communities fighting for land restitution and reparations for colonial disfigurement, dismembering, impoverishment and disempowerment of Africa, Gomo (2010: 137) further observes that it was the case of the —betrayal of Moses by a brother Jew he was fighting to liberate from Egyptian slavery being re-enacted in different space and time

settings. It was a case of those being liberated running to the thrones of their apartheid masters to reverse liberation and to consolidate their bondage.

Like the struggles to overthrow the yokes of slavery and political bondage, is the resistance and conscious fight against disability in Africa likely to become. The multi-faceted nature of disabilities, including the subtle internally and externally-induced causes, makes curbing apparent forms of disability mounted against curbing disability, a real and present threat demanding concerted efforts from every member of the family of humankind. Who knows on whose, and which door, disability next knocks? Today, the 21st century popularised Arab spring is devastating and mangling Asians and Europeans, including their families, communities, countries and nations. This is why *A Fine Madness*, using DRC as the focal point, is bold on demanding to end civil war, foreign invasions, and plundering African resources.

Therefore, how African communities respond to the foregoing images of colonial and post-independence land lacerations and mutilations, family and community disintegration, lays the foundation for eradication of poverty, disability and dependency. To conclude on the best approaches towards eradicating disability, poverty and dependency, the article borrows Ngugi wa Thiongo's exhortation about African renaissance:

For renaissance is not about literature alone; it is exploration of the frontiers in the whole realm of economy, politics, science, arts, the extension of dreams and imagination [and implementation thereof].

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