

# Cultured to Fail? Representations of Gender-Entangled Urban Women in Two Short Stories by Valerie Tagwira

SAGE Open  
July-September 2014: 1–9  
© The Author(s) 2014  
DOI: 10.1177/2158244014543787  
sgo.sagepub.com  


Oliver Nyambi<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

There is a subtle yet discernible connection between the post-2000 political power struggle and the gender struggle in Zimbabwe. In both cases, a patriarchal power hierarchy shaped by tradition and history is perpetuated and justified as the mark of the nation's unique identity. In cultural, political, and economic spheres, the status of most urban Zimbabwean women is still reflected as inferior to that of most men. During this economic and political crisis period, the prevailing gender power-relations evolved into gendered appraisals of the impact of the crisis and this created the potential for rather universal and androcentric conclusions. The consequent eclipse of female-centric voices of the political and gender struggle tends to suppress women's perspectives, consequently inhibiting a gender-inclusive imagining of the nation. This article argues that discourses about gender struggle in Zimbabwe's post-2000 crisis have not sufficiently addressed the question of space; that is, the significance of the oppressed women's physical and social space in shaping their grievances and imaginings of exit routes. Similarly, the article argues that representations of this historic period in literary fiction have accentuated the wider political and economic struggles at the expense of other (especially gender) struggles, thereby rendering them inconsequential. Using two short stories by Valerie Tagwira ("Mainini Grace's Promise" and "The Journey"), the article explores the stories' focalization of gender-entangled women in an urban space to understand the literary evocation of the condition of women caught up in a crisis in urban settings.

## Keywords

feminism, gender, illocutionary force, Zimbabwean crisis

## Introduction

The Organization for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa's (n.d.) study on "Women and Vulnerable Groups Since Independence" in Zimbabwe classifies women as a vulnerable group, among the disabled, children, and the elderly. The study also revealed that despite their being the majority sex group, a mere 5% of Zimbabweans in formal employment are women. The Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) explains the vulnerability and oppression of women in Zimbabwe in terms of rights abuse caused by traditional practices. However, the wider economic and political problems of Zimbabwe's past decade may not be fully apprehended if they are divorced from the seemingly "small" struggles—what Grace Kwinjeh (2010) aptly labels as women's "struggle[s] within a struggle" (p. i). Cognizant of what Susan Arndt (2002, p. 81) refers to as "different variants of African feminist literature" in African literature, this article does not seek to re-ignite the debate about the merits or demerits as well as the efficacy or inefficacy of universalizing the feminist quest nor to enquire why some seemingly feminist African women writers such as Buchi Emecheta

refuse to be categorized as feminists. My conception of feminism in this article is informed by specific urban temporal realities in which Zimbabwean women's traditional gendered inequalities stimulate and condition their struggle for social transformation.

The crux of this article is the argument that the socioeconomic and political implosion of Zimbabwe's past decade is characterized by "micro" but essential "struggle[s] within a struggle" (Kwinjeh, 2010, p. i), which can better reflect (and reflect on) the "bigger" socioeconomic and political problems characterizing the period. I perceive literary representations of women's unique challenges in the face of the unprecedented crisis situation as constituting a significant, complex site of the "micro" feminist struggle in which women (because of their historical marginalization) suffer

<sup>1</sup>Great Zimbabwe University, Masvingo, Zimbabwe

### Corresponding Author:

Oliver Nyambi, Great Zimbabwe University, P. O. Box 1235, Masvingo, Zimbabwe.  
Email: nyambioliver@gmail.com



and fight gendered inequalities induced by a patriarchal, political, and cultural system that favors men and limits women to fewer of life's opportunities. I further contend that feminist narratives do not merely reveal women's vulnerabilities but (more importantly) invoke such vulnerabilities as the first step to the creation of transformative narratives—narratives which tacitly imagine curative and exit strategies for women through their aesthetic appeal to the readers' affective responses. In this way, feminist texts add to the growing circle of oppositional voices in Zimbabwe creating a counter-discourse to dominant forces controlling the public sphere. The portrayal of women as especially vulnerable to crises in urban settings puts under spotlight the immorality and injustice of traditions, codes, and conventions that have "cultured" women into gendered subalternity, consequently and indirectly hinting at the imperative (and mutual benefits) of social transformation toward a gender-inclusive society.

Much of what has been said and written about Zimbabwe's post-2000 political and economic crisis assumes a uniform effect of the crisis on all social groups. However, zooming in on the social effects of the crisis reveals the varying extent to which particular aspects of the crisis affected certain social groups. Male hegemony on the political plane is reproduced at the social level, and with it, the exclusionary tendencies resulting from androcentric<sup>1</sup> biases. However, as the International Labour Organization's (2003) guide *Poverty and Employment in Crisis Situations: The Gender Dimensions* reveals that women in gender imbalanced developing societies often become more than victims of any crisis situation, thus the imperative of a gender perspective to enquire into the social effects of crises:

Being a primary determinant of social organization, gender shapes the social environment within which crises occur. A crisis affects differently women and men, boys and girls, because society ascribes different roles and responsibilities to them. The gendered division of labour within households and in the economy makes most women less able to control economic resources and mitigate the effects of crises than most men. The higher incidence of poverty among women, their secondary status within the labour force, their predominance in the informal economy clearly make them economically vulnerable long before a crisis occurs. (p. 1)

The gender blindness of most current approaches to the study of the Zimbabwean crisis is the mark of a lacuna in enquiries about the phenomenon. The unidimensional approach to the crisis not only implicitly generalizes its impact on various social groups constituting Zimbabwean society but also limits our understanding of the deeper "micro" (gender) tensions that can illuminate some of the critical dimensions of the bigger, more visible societal problems that became suddenly magnified by the economic and political crisis. The universalization of the impact of the crisis overshadows other perspectives—reproducing the

broader political marginalization of alternative voices characterizing Zimbabwe's crisis decade. Political and cultural codes and conventions circumscribed by the dominant male gender group stifle female subjectivities and unfairly appraise the crisis primarily or exclusively from a male vantage point. In this context, I view the focal texts in this article as powerful evocations of the crisis, which potentially engender a subversive literary discourse concerning the crisis, and indeed serve as a source of (alternative) knowledge of other, side-lined and particularly gender dimensions of the historic period. However, the texts are not only conduits chaperoning readers to access information about the gender facets of the crisis; more importantly (and linked to the broader political struggle against exclusivist and masculinist imaginings of the nation), they also create a feminist counter-discourse—in the sense of what Bill Ashcroft et al. (2007; citing Richard Terdiman) call "symbolic resistance . . . the complex ways in which challenges to dominant or established discourse might be mounted from the periphery" (p. 50).

In Lara's conception of the "moral texture" of feminist narratives, women have come to realize the potentially immense impact of literary art on the public sphere and this realization has spurred them to consciously involve themselves to produce literary narratives (especially in the genres of fiction and life writing) that augment the broader women's struggle for full recognition and equality.<sup>2</sup> In the modest but firming post-2000 Zimbabwean feminist literary canon, the awareness of fiction's potential as "a cultural strategy for performing identity claims" (Lara, 1998, p. 92) has led to increased production of literary works (especially in the short story genre) that directly and indirectly engage with women's particular precariousness, caused by the post-2000 economic malaise. One of the most recognizable voices of this newest form of feminist writing in Zimbabwe is Valerie Tagwira's. My interest in Tagwira's works is informed by her demonstrable consistency and commitment to the idea of using creative literature to engage with serious socioeconomic issues concerning women in the post-2000 "crisis" decade. While doubts might be raised concerning the accuracy, relevance, and authenticity of voices commenting (directly or indirectly) on the post-2000 Zimbabwean situation from diasporan locations<sup>3</sup> far removed from the unraveling physical reality of everyday life in Zimbabwe, Valerie Tagwira's works (including her award-winning novel, *The Uncertainty of Hope*) offer an opportunity to encounter the complex intersection and interaction of the writer's social commitment and her creative imagination in times of crisis.

While many Zimbabwean female writers have grappled with the condition of women in urban and crisis settings (see short stories in *Women Writing Zimbabwe* edited by Irene Staunton, 2008; Virginia Phiri, 2010, in her novel *Highway Queen*; Petina Gappah, 2009, in her anthology of short stories *An Elegy for Easterly*; etc.), Tagwira is the natural choice for this study because she has (since her entrance into the

Zimbabwean literary scene) been the most consistent author vis-a-vis her feminist approach to narrativizing the experiences of women in post-millennium Zimbabwe. Furthermore, unlike Tagwira's award-winning novel *The Uncertainty of Hope* (2006) which deals with the gender dimensions to a particular dimension to the crisis (the infamous 2005 urban slum demolitions), her short stories chosen for this study engage with the lives of oppressed women caught up in various forms of maladies shaped by the crisis. As a genre, the short story is mostly favored by writers who (like Tagwira) consciously use creative fiction as a subtle apparatus to engage with social issues. As Edgar Allan Poe (cited in Charters, 1999, p. 1532) has hinted in his essay "The Importance of the Single Effect in a Prose Tale," the shortness of the short story allows the author to establish and sustain consistency of purpose. As the succeeding paragraphs introducing and detailing my theoretical framework will show, the feminist impact of Tagwira's short stories can be located in their affective appeal. This affective intensity experienced by readers of her short stories can be attributed to what Poe (cited in Charters, 1999, p. 1532) has called the "immense force derivable from totality," which results from an uninterrupted immersion in the short story's fictional life-world.

Tagwira has defended her "committed"-like style of writing—her conscious attempts to create fictional life-worlds in which real problems pertaining to women's particular vulnerability in the face of the post-2000 Zimbabwean crisis are identified, explained, and in some cases, subtly solved. Her conscious participation in the feminist struggle projects her not simply as a "committed" writer, but more importantly, as a feminist and protest author. In an interview with Ambrose Musiwa, Tagwira revealed how the Zimbabwean crisis has shaped the social focus and feminist thrust of her writing:

When I initially started thinking about writing, I had a desire to do something different, something creative, and because I'm something of a "mild feminist" at heart, I always knew that I would write something featuring strong female characters. Writing about contemporary Zimbabwe was a natural choice because I am very much attached to "home" and I travel back quite frequently. At each visit, it strikes me how the living standards are deteriorating, and at each visit, I never imagine that things can get any worse, but they do, and people still survive. I was particularly concerned about how women deal with the challenges that are thrust upon them. ("Interview, May 13, 2007" paragraph 5)

While Tagwira's works can indeed be read from many other theoretical and ideological approaches and frameworks, my present interest in the gynocentric<sup>4</sup> "protest" tendencies of representations of women caught up in entangling circumstances of crisis informs my reading of Tagwira's short story "Mainini Grace's Promise" from the aptly titled short story anthology *Women Writing Zimbabwe* as a femi-

nist protest narrative that is uniquely conditioned by the post-2000 crisis.

### **Affect and the Feminist Re-Inscription of the Female Economic Migrant in "Mainini Grace's Promise"**

The short story "Mainini Grace's Promise" is important to the present enquiry into the role of feminist narratives in attempts at re-gendering the public sphere and re-inscribing the post-2000 Zimbabwean crisis because it engages with the topical issue of forced mobility from a gynocentric vantage point. The dovetailing tropes of women as "more than victims" of the crisis and of women as engaged in a "struggle within a struggle" (Kwinjeh i) can be located in narratives of displaced female economic exiles (for detailed social analysis of this phenomenon, see the books *Zimbabwe's New Diaspora: Displacement and the Cultural Politics of Survival* [2010]; *Zimbabwe's Exodus: Crisis, Migration, Survival* [2010]; and *Hope Deferred: Narratives of Zimbabwean Lives* [2010]). The economic hardships of post-2000 Zimbabwe made exile the immediate escape plan from problems caused by a dysfunctional economy, dwindling job opportunities, and incessant shortages of basic consumer goods. Economic exile became a dominant feature of Zimbabwe's demography—a means of survival where people could escape the confining and limiting economic space of home and be useful to those who stay behind. As Brian Raftopoulos (2009) points out,

Of vital importance were the remittances that such workers sent back to their families. In 2005/6 it was estimated that half of the families in the two major cities in Zimbabwe were in receipt of remittances from workers in the diaspora. (p. 223)

In the project report "Patterns and policies of migration in South Africa: Changing patterns and the need for a comprehensive approach," Fatima Khan (2010) diagnoses the economic collapse as the major push factor for most Zimbabweans crossing into South Africa:

However, many Zimbabweans are forced migrants but they are fleeing a particular economic situation in Zimbabwe and will in all likelihood not qualify for refugee status. In this case it is clear that the push factor was a stronger one; had it not been for the economic situation in Zimbabwe many of those migrating to South Africa would perhaps not have done so. (pp. 9-10)

Daniel Tevera and Lovemore Zinyama (2002) infer that the post-2000 economic crisis has transformed migration patterns in Zimbabwe. Tevera and Zinyama note that the crisis necessitated changes in household survival strategies, citing a growing number of women who supplement their families' incomes through informal cross-border trading as

one of the major changes in migration patterns in the country. Mainini Grace in Tagwira's short story "Mainini Grace's Promise" is portrayed as a victim of the failing economy, whose flight to Botswana is predicated on her wish to bolster the livelihoods of her extended family that is rendered especially vulnerable by the absence of a male breadwinner—Sarai's father—in a time of economic crisis. The economic migrants are synonymous with the breadwinners in times of crisis. They became the focal points for sustaining livelihoods in a country characterized by hyperinflation and steeply decreasing job opportunities. The affective dimension heightening the feminist protest of "Mainini Grace's Promise" is bound up with the evoked patriarchal forces informing Mainini Grace's vain "promise" to bail out Sarai from the crisis. This futile "promise" of the female economic exile, however, is portrayed as a tip of the deeper gender "iceberg" that the short story grapples with. In Nussbaum's (2001) useful concept of readers as potential "sympathetic participants" (p. 90), Tagwira's overarching feminist engagement with the particular, gendered plight of women who are thrust by circumstances into "male" roles can be readily isolated in her female characters' precarious and ambivalent subjectivities. Nussbaum's explanation of the reader's fascination with victimized characters in narratives gives wind to Tagwira's feminist "sail":

Since the sufferings and anxieties of the characters are among the central bonds between reader and work, our attention is drawn in particular to those characters that suffer and fear. Characters who are not facing any adversity simply do not hook us in as readers . . . this tragic sensibility leads the reader to investigate with a particularly keen combination of identification and sympathy lives in which circumstance has played an impeding role. (pp. 90-91)

The major characters in Tagwira's short story are all victimized women whose suffering clearly results from the absence of male family members or partners. As the plot unfolds, these women's problems intensify, illuminating the injustices of the forces causing their inability to survive in an affective style that implicitly ascribes blame to patriarchy and urges transformation. Sarai is depicted as practically orphaned and living with a constant awareness that life could be better; that her mother's AIDS affliction has made her a bitterer victim of the economic meltdown; that the cultural association of girls and women with the domestic space has removed her from school and confined her to home and the rigors of nursing her AIDS ravished mother; and more importantly, that her only surviving guardian, Mainini Grace, is a woman whose potential as a breadwinning injiva is compromised by her gender and the imperatives of cultural division of labor that inhibit women's preparation for life without male support. The author constructs the character of Sarai as the window through which the reader perceives the unjust, gendered predicaments faced by a girl-headed family. This

strategy allows us to be moved to an emotional apprehension, which becomes a moral judgment that involves recognizing blameworthiness of the patriarchal system, thus indicating the imperative of change in the prevailing cultural and gender system. As Sarai's struggle becomes more visible and more taxing, it also arouses condemnation, especially when one juxtaposes her woeful life as a caregiver for a dying mother with her landlady whose relatively intact and well-to-do family is clearly depicted as owing its stability (albeit in an economically straitened situation) to the presence of a father figure and breadwinner. The sense of Sarai's vulnerability weighs heavily on her as she struggles to control the envy caused by her close proximity to Mai Simba, who rents out the shack in which Sarai lives with her dying mother, as the following description reveals:

Sarai wondered if the landlord, Mai Simba's husband was back from one of his cross-border trips. He often arrived late at night. She pictured his children rushing out of the main house, falling over each other in their eagerness to welcome him back home. Jealousy surfaced. They had a father who was alive, when hers was not. (2006, p. 129)

While Mai Simba's husband, like Sarai's own guardian and aunt (Mainini Grace), is reliant on foreign work to sustain his family, the short story depicts the two as cultured by their respective gender and social class to fare differently in the struggle for economic survival, especially in an economic crisis situation. Mai Simba's husband is portrayed as tapping into a wealth of experience to successfully assume and adapt in his breadwinning role, whereas (unlike him) Mainini Grace is only forced by circumstances to play the role.

More than demonstrating what can and cannot be achieved by a woman in the prevailing patriarchal context and the economic dystopia, "Mainini Grace's Promise" imagines an alternative, just and equal social system in the very act of representing the preposterously androcentric one, in which women's potential to sustain life independently of men is hindered. The contrasting evocation of returning male and female injivas—of the landlord's fulfilled "promise" and Mainini Grace's abortive one—encourages a probing of the reasons for the landlord's success in contrast with Mainini Grace's failures. Apparently, the short story does this probing in its own subtle ways. The story's strategically designed plot and affective descriptions emotionally guide and shape us into sympathetic participants in its gynocentric analysis of the gender problem. Compared with the landlord's joyous return from South Africa, Mainini Grace's return from Botswana is calamitous and characterized by a somber, even acerbic confrontation with the hitherto (anxiously) hopeful Sarai. There is a covert social yet feminist commentary in this comparative depiction of the injivas. Over and above economic deprivation, Mainini Grace (unlike the landlord) is depicted as facing multiple gender challenges. In the eyes of the increasingly moved reader, the landlord is not the hero. In

fact, the landlord assumes the identity of a villain, a parasitic patriarch, and a gender opportunist whose successes are predicated on his exploitation of women without men. In the breadwinning “game,” the androcentric and skewed economic “playing field” is depicted as unfairly advantaging the landlord by fraudulently disadvantaging Mainini Grace. The landlord and tenant relationship morphs into a reflection of a deeper gender and class relationship, in which Mainini Grace is cultured to play second fiddle to the landlord. The shanty, then, becomes the seal of the landlord’s good fortune in belonging to the “correct” gender and inversely, of Mainini Grace’s misfortune in belonging to the “incorrect” one, which explains her living at his mercy.

Further evoking Nussbaum’s (2001) conceptualization of the author as a “judicious spectator” and the reader as a “sympathetic participant” (p. 90) to or in the author’s spectatorship can help us understand the transformative potential of “Mainini Grace’s Promise.” The author’s evaluative rendering of particular situations (which are directly or indirectly linked to real or actual situations) is viewed by Nussbaum as premised on his or her ability to create a form of representation that is considerably removed from the reality, yet subtly evocative of a guided judicious assessment:

I think, that the ability to imagine vividly, and then to assess judiciously, another person’s pain, to participate in it and then to ask about its significance, is a powerful way of learning what the human facts are and of acquiring a motivation to alter them.

To better understand the role of narrative-generated emotions in influencing a re-definition and re-circumscription of gender justice in the public sphere, it is imperative to revert to Martha Nussbaum’s (2001) theorization of the special effect of emotions created by such gendered injustices that are made manifest in “Mainini Grace’s Promise.” Nussbaum holds that, unlike empathetic feelings which involve “simply an imaginative reconstruction of another person’s experience” (p. 302) which can be pleasant or unpleasant, sympathy and compassion are usually evoked after exposure to someone’s sad fate—an “awareness of another person’s undeserved misfortune” (p. 301). Lennard Davis (1987) for his part directly engages with the social and empirical significance of emotions to the complex processes involved when a literary text evokes agonistic emotions in the reader:

Reading fiction demands isolation of ideas and affects; that is, it demands the ability to say of these pictures, feelings, and thoughts in our mind’s eye, “These are not part of my emotional or cognitive being. They are simply part of what is in the book.” [. . .] we are experiencing the elements of plot and character as part of our own lives, but we separate and isolate them and say, “That was Emma Bovary suffering, and I feel sorry for her plight.” (p. 20)

For Lara (1998), this capacity of imaginative literature to arouse emotions that can lead to action (the agonistic

dimension) is key to the feminist quest. Embedded in the matrix of the illocutionary force inhabiting such persuasive, emotion-stirring narratives is the trope of indictment—the subtle isolation and condemnation of gender-based inhibitors to women’s self-actualization presented through powerful, emotionally stirring narratives that solicit solidarity and transformation.

In “Mainini Grace’s Promise,” over and above the author’s declaration of her “mild feminist” disposition (“Interview,” par. 5), the short story’s feminist and protest texture is felt mostly in its vivid descriptions. Description lies at the heart of Tagwira’s strategy in her overarching feminist protest agenda. Citing Michael Riffaterre who argued that “its [that is: descriptions in literary works] primary function is not to make the reader see something . . . but to dictate an interpretation” (cited in Werner Wolf, 2007, p. 17). Wolf (2007, p. 17) comments on the role of description in the construction and interpretation of literary meaning:

For the nature of artefacts and texts as intentional constructs renders it highly probable that even the descriptive construction or representation of the “givens,” for instance of a narrative possible world, is not an “innocent” business but serves a purpose (like the narration of events) and that description has its place in it—and is hence implicated in the construction of meaning of the artefact or text as a whole as well as in guiding various responses of the recipients.

Tagwira’s apparently self-conscious inventiveness in her descriptions of a day in the life of a girl-headed family plays a major role in the emotion-stirring process—creating something akin to Lara’s (1998) notion of the “illocutionary force” (p. 2) “powerfully address[ing]” the powerful and oppressive “alter”—soliciting solidarity and subtly demanding change. The moving descriptions of Sarai’s physical condition and psychological state emotionally stimulate the reader to perceive, in this imaginative but possible fictional life-world, the outrageously unjustifiable cultural underpinnings of Sarai’s and Mainini Grace’s clearly gender-induced unpreparedness to deal with the new regime of familial responsibility in the absence of the male father figure. The evocation of Mainini Grace’s homecoming as her returning only to die, piling further responsibilities on the already overwhelmed Sarai, reveals the destructive consequences of traditional gender roles that inhibit women’s ability to survive crises without men. The “sunken eyes, the gaunt cheeks, and the emaciated form dwarfed by an oversized coat” (Tagwira, 2008, p. 130) are suggestive of Mainini Grace’s failure as an injiva. The empathy evoked by such a description guides the reader to perceive the injustices of male-directed gender roles and (possibly) to imagine an alternative gender and social system that would promote women’s autonomy and allow them roles that would prepare them to negotiate crises independently of men.

Beyond its portrayal of Mainini Grace and Sarai as special victims of the emergent combination of patriarchy and

economic crisis, the story's comparative evocation of Mainini Grace and Sarai's landlord as exposed to similar economic problems and similarly resorting to the "fashionable" foreign work (but nevertheless faring differently) exposes the underlying gender inequalities. This feminist aesthetic dimension of the short story is buttressed by Mainini Grace's flight to Botswana in a vain attempt to escape the "curse" of her femininity which has entrenched her dependency. While Mainini Grace's affliction at the end of the short story is not explicitly revealed, readers can infer that her AIDS symptoms are suggestive of her desperate attempts to use her femaleness to try and escape life-threatening poverty—her having resorted to prostitution while in Botswana.

### The Female Figure of Pathos as a Site of Sympathy and Solidarity in "The Journey"

"Mainini Grace's Promise" is not Tagwira's first and perhaps even finest feminist protest work to employ the female prostitute figure to contest injustices caused by phallogocentric dictates of culture and tradition. After "Mainini Grace's Promise," the female prostitute figure reappears in Tagwira's latest short story titled "The Journey"—one of the 2010 Caine Prize for African Writing anthology titled *A Life in Full and Other Stories*. The short story chronicles Shingai's personality transformation after her husband's unexpected death in a vehicle accident to contest traditional social and cultural norms and practices that expose women to crises whenever they lose or lack male support. The symbolic "journey" encapsulated in the title of the short story not only foreshadows Shingai's movement from an initial state of innocence to her eventual moral corruption but also the readership's guided "journey" toward awareness of patriarchy's parasitism. Awareness of patriarchy as debauching women is heightened by the recognition that during economic crises it often coerces them (as in the case of Shingai in "The Journey" and also Mainini Grace in "Mainini Grace's Promise") to offer up their bodies for male appropriation as prostitutes. The narrative emotionally guides the reader to an evaluative apprehension of the patriarchally skewed modern economic culture in the processes and circumstances underpinning Shingai's personality shift. Shingai's personality transformation is vividly and movingly rendered to persuade (and even to impel) the reader to re-think prevailing traditional social, and cultural systems as these forces affect women in situations of crisis. The prostitute in "The Journey" is a figure of pathos who is a direct result of the patriarchal system of gender roles and division of labor that favors men by assigning them familial roles that prepare them for crises while inversely incapacitating women by confining them to dependency and domestic spaces and roles. Unlike the prostitute figures in texts by previous generations of Zimbabwean

literature epitomized by Dambudzo Marechera (in his novella *House of Hunger*) whose material and psychological condition reflect on the broader pressures afflicting Africans in a colonial patriarchy, the prostitute figure in "The Journey" is a victim of a Janus-faced patriarchal system. The economic crisis is evoked in "The Journey" as intersecting with older patriarchal sociocultural regimes to reinforce women's vulnerability and desperation. The crisis situation demands from women without men such as Shingai, radical approaches to their gendered entanglement. As the woman is constantly pushed to the limits of what her gender has fixed as the ceiling of possible achievement, she reaches the end of her tether and begins to realize that in such extraordinary circumstances, her only exit option is to break out of the confining cultural "box" and the entrapments of male-circumscribed notions of "true" womanhood. As the plot unfolds—Shingai's intensifying desperation and gendered vulnerability increase awareness of gender and moral injustice.

The prostitute figure in "The Journey" is a symbolic site for the re-inscription of prior, androcentric appraisals of the Zimbabwean crisis in fiction. The structure of the short story plays an important role in its vivid evocation of the symbolic "journey" of the making of the female prostitute—that is, the circumstances surrounding the transformation of a once respectably married woman and loyal wife into a commercial sex worker. The short story's division into three symbolic phases of Shingai's life not only marks the stages of Shingai's economic degeneration and role transformation, but more importantly, intensifies the affective evocation of the female prostitute as a victim of patriarchal gender constructions. While studies (Horrell & Krishnan, 2006; Kwinjeh, 2010; Raftopoulos, 2009) have highlighted the involvement of women in economic activities in pre-colonial and colonial Zimbabwe, it is critical to note how the deeply patriarchal nature of Zimbabwean cultures has shaped and sustained gender identities and roles that undermine women's capacity to head and provide for the family in the absence of a breadwinner. Thus, while in history Zimbabwean women did find economic spaces other than prostitution, Shingai in "The Journey" (like Sophie in Virginia Phiri's novel *Highway Queen*) affectively and iconoclastically remind us that there are certain stubborn patriarchally charted female identities that push women without men to high levels of desperation. In "The Journey," the biographical phases depicting Shingai's material condition before and after the death of her husband are intricately connected and symbolically suggestive of the gender dimensions to Shingai's entrapment and the desperation informing her personality transformation. The more time passes for Shingai after the death of her husband, the more she becomes vulnerable, desperate, and "immoral." However, weaving through the three phases of Shingai's life is the increasing sense of her innocence (which ironically intensifies as her public role dooms her to the charge of moral corruption) such that when the short story ends, she is neither the immoral nor the instinctive street prostitute of,

say, Brian Chikwava's short story "Seventh Street Alchemy" (in the short story anthology *Writing Still*), but a determined woman who in her gendered inability to utilize "conventional" modes of economic self-sustenance and lack of skills to provide for her family consciously embraces prostitution as her last line of battle against the economic crisis.

A close reading of the first phase of "The Journey" (the beginning—in the metaphor of the symbolic "journey" of the short story's title) situates Shingai's struggle in a broader contextual and cultural framework where the inconveniences of patriarchally circumscribed gender roles and identities thrive. Characterization and setting play a critical role in the portrayal of the gender-selective and limiting economic space available to women. However, unlike in "Mainini Grace's Promise," the female protagonist in "The Journey" has her gender marginalization amplified by the vicissitudes of an urban setting whose very urbanity constantly demands from its inhabitants certain levels of economic security that Shingai (due to constraints of orthodox, traditionally gendered division of labor and class-induced vulnerabilities) cannot achieve. No sooner does the urban woman discover that this urban space is economically masculinized than she realizes that her capacity to disentangle herself from this gender and economic web lies in extricating herself from persistent patriarchal conventions and norms. In this context of gender skewed urban space that Shingai's social role transformation invites readerly indignation and indictment of the causes of her desperation. "The Journey," therefore, acquires its feminist charge from its modeling of plot around a female figure of pathos whose living under siege is symptomatic of the unfair exclusion of women from the evidently male-dominated urban economic sphere. The prostitute figure emerges as a gendered construction—a creation of old traditional gender roles which confine women like Shingai to the domestic space, only to release them unprepared for the breadwinning task in inadvertent circumstances that separate them from their husbands. Martha Nussbaum (2001) has theorized on the socially transformative potential of such compassionate emotions as the reader feels for Shingai, to bring the person experiencing the emotions to a certain level of closeness with the suffering person—a point he or she begins to share the suffering by identifying with the character experiencing such painful circumstances:

In order for compassion to be present, the person must consider the suffering of another as a significant part of his or her own scheme of goals and ends. She [or he] must take that person's ill as affecting her own flourishing. In effect, she [or he] must make herself [or himself] vulnerable in the person of another. (p. 319)

In this "eudaimonistic judgment" (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 319), the "benevolence" of the reader experiencing emotions allowing him or her to partake in Shingai's suffering not only intensifies her or his apprehension of the unjust cause of the victim's suffering, but more importantly, agonis-

tically stirs him or her to seek alternative gender relationships, roles, and dispensations, for a fairer outcome.

Nussbaum (2001) intimates that compassion involves (or leads to) blame, which results from a cognitive judgment that the suffering experienced by the victim is neither justified nor deserved. In "The Journey," the reader psychologically enters Shingai's fictional life-world of gendered victimhood where she or he temporarily experiences the pain of occupying a geographical and cultural space that selectively empowers men and disempowers women when it comes to earning a living by conventional means. Immersion in the life-world of Shingai's urban poverty to experience its gender dimensions intensifies the pain felt by the affected reader and forces him or her to accord blame to the gender-selective systems of culture, tradition, and economy. The reader's emotional entering into what Nussbaum (p. 319) would call Shingai's "circle of concern," where the injustices of such women's marginalization can be intensely felt, is facilitated by the emotion-rousing metaphor of "selling one's body," which pervades much of the second and last phases of Shingai's life affected by her steadily worsening financial situation. In "The Journey," the "body selling" metaphor describing commercial sex practice not only suggests women's desperate awareness of the financial value of the female body and their conscious disregard of the customary defiling and immoral connotations attached to prostitution, but more importantly articulates Shingai's gendered vulnerability and desperation as a direct consequence of class-induced pressures, with a subversive flair that exposes the preposterously female-entrapping nature of patriarchy. Read in this light, the metaphor of "body selling" that weaves "The Journey" does not only carry undertones of immorality that is habitually ascribed to female prostitutes but also implies the temporary forfeiture of the prostitute's body as she "sells" it to her male clients. Within this matrix of the body-selling metaphor, Tagwira's portrayal of unjust effects of traditional gender roles and hierarchies through the character of Shingai assumes a feminist indicting flair.

The reader is not allowed to read the prostitute figure simply as a symbolically immoral, patriarchally "invented" site of men's pleasure, but more importantly and subtly, as the unjustifiably abused and deliberately created "accessory" for male appropriation, abuse, and moral transgression. The subtle indictment of patriarchy can also be discerned in the profile of Shingai's male clientele, which is reflected in the person and ethics of the corrupt policeman who arrests Shingai for loitering. The policeman (who demands sexual favors from Shingai for him to release her) strikes the reader as a typical male opportunist who is unjustifiably propelled to a powerful social and economic position than Shingai by patriarchy. Adding to this implication of the uncouth, manipulative, and parasitic dimensions of patriarchy is the short story's affective rendering of the act of "selling" the female body as women's only (desperate) means of negotiating male-induced vulnerability to crisis situations. The final

phase of Shingai's symbolic transition marks the climax of her vulnerability and desperation, whose gender dimensions indicate the consummation of patriarchy's iniquitous plan to debase and commodify her for men's use. As in "Mainini Grace's Promise," the name of the female victim of patriarchy in "The Journey," Shingai (be strong) assumes a symbolic effect which (in this case) not only reflects the measure of her gender odds and the suffering she experiences, but implicitly indicates the injustice of the social and cultural traditions guiding gender roles. Her female body becomes the only "preparation"/tool that she can rely on to survive the crisis without her husband's support. Her gendered vulnerability now demands from her a strategic estrangement from the confining cult of domesticity: the need to demythologize gender-based mystification of what constitutes "normal" modes of breadwinning.

The above section is neither for patriarchal, political nor for economic purposes. It is rather a gender balancing act enabling a holistic appraisal of historic phenomena. More than diagnosing and critiquing gender challenges inhibiting women's progress, the feminist literary works can be read as "assert[ing] a utopian viewpoint that describes how gender plurality allows all individuals to flourish and how a more complex and multicultural public sphere is better suited to the embodiment of democratic ideals" (Lara, 1998, p. 8). This call for society to appreciate gender justice as mutually beneficial accounts for the cognitively agonistic appeal of the three short stories discussed under this section. A recourse to Nussbaum's theorization on compassion's demand for shared suffering between the victim and the person experiencing the emotion situates the impact of feminist literary works in their affective appeal—conveyed by means of "illocutionary force" (Lara, 1998, p. 7): Their capacity to immerse the reader in the life-world of women's gender-induced vulnerability, which forces a change of mindset to move readers toward aspirations for social equality and inclusivity. In this vein, the gender injustices that one emotionally experiences in the life-world of "The Journey" present a strong case for the discontinuance of misogynist androcentric social and cultural traditions that transcend the confines of the fictional life-world. Outside its fictional life-world (and in the very process of vividly portraying the injustices of gender inequalities), "The Journey" implicitly maps imagined but possible routes toward the reduction of gender-induced vulnerabilities, envisaging the mutual (social) benefits of a more equal gender dispensation.

## Conclusion

The feminist quest for social transformation, gender inclusivity, and equal civic opportunities in literary works discussed in this article has been shown to be largely bound up with the texts' affective dimension, which in turn stems from their experiential nature. Heightening the agonistic

and transformative dimensions of the literary works is their use of the female victim character—the primary motif that permeates these narratives, ushering in emotional awareness of the extreme and unjust vulnerability of the victimized female characters. The setting of the short stories in a historically familiar "crisis" time-space allows the reader to relate depicted life-worlds to actual situations in which women suffering from gender inequalities have their woes intensified during times of crisis. As Lennard Davis (1987) contends, the influence of the literary text in enlisting the reader's agonistic reaction requires (or bring about) the reader's total engrossment in the life-world of the narrative:

In order to remain in this state, they [readers] must block outside stimuli, becoming virtually autistic—and what is it that they are doing? They are visualising, analysing, experiencing a fantasy not their own but which, in this autistic state, they believe in some provisional way to be true—true enough to draw conclusions, form moral opinions, and even shape their own lives to fit. (p. 2)

Empathetic emotion stimulation is the hallmark of Tagwira's feminist ideological intentions. In their stimulation of moral indignation about gender inequalities and arousal of empathetic feelings for the female victims, the stories subtly re-gender the public sphere, affect mindsets and create room for a possible paradigm shift in cultural, economic, and political conduct. The feminist counter-discursive effect of these literary works is embedded in their affecting representation of gender alterity that emotionally impels readers to comprehend the justifiability of change in the prevailing gender dispensation.

However, more than demonstrating their potential to create space for the contestation of existing phallogocentric appraisals of the impact of the Zimbabwean crisis, Tagwira's short stories show the emancipatory potential of feminist narratives buttressed by the texts' intertextuality—that is, their close relationship with the historical post-2000 narrative of Zimbabwe's economic and social realities. Tagwira invokes a familiar historical moment to engender an aesthetically deeper representation of women's unique, multi-tiered struggle—in a way that demonstrates Bakhtin's conception of the chronotopic (time-space) significance of narratives. For Bakhtin (1987) during the reading process, the reader is obliged to negotiate both the "actual chronotope of [his or her] world" and the "reflected and created chronotopes of the world represented in the work" (p. 253). The time factor in Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope heightens awareness of the importance not only of time but also of space, to the transformative and interpellating potential of feminist narratives in their quest to foreground social transformation through exploding traditional codes of silence and masculinist control of sites of knowledge and perspectives on the post-2000 Zimbabwean crisis.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article: The article is part of a funded PhD study sponsored by the Graduate School of Arts and Social Sciences at Stellenbosch University, South Africa as part of the University's Hope Project.

### Notes

1. Male-centered.
2. However, a point to note is that the reading culture in Zimbabwe was affected by the economic pressures of the past decade. In a country where citizens (despite their latest ranking as the most literate society in Africa) still struggle for basics, books have become a luxury and therefore (at present) have a more limited social impact. Chenjerai Hove (2002), one of Zimbabwe's best known writers, alludes to this when he asks in his article "Zimbabwe: A Writer's Personal Reflections": "Zimbabwe is enduring an economic crisis. People find it hard to buy essentials. What right have I to encourage people to buy books when they are starving?" (p. 85).
3. Tagwira writes from England.
4. Female-centered.

### References

- Arndt, S. (2002). *The dynamics of African feminism: Defining and classifying African feminist literatures*. Asmara, Eritrea: Africa World Press.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Tiffin Helen, and Griffiths Gareth (2007). *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. London: Routledge.
- Bakhtin, M. (1987). *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Charters, A. (Ed.). (1999). *The story and its writer: An introduction to short fiction* (5th ed.). Boston, MA: Bedford.
- Davis, L. J. (1987). *Resisting novels: Ideology and fiction*. London, England: Methuen.
- Gappah, P. (2009). *An elegy for easterly*. London, England: Faber and Faber.
- Horrell S. & P. Krishnan. (2007). Poverty and productivity in female-headed households in Zimbabwe. *Journal of Development Studies*, 43(8), 1351-1380.
- Hove, C. (2002). *Palaver Finish*. Harare, Zimbabwe: Weaver.
- International Labour Organization. (2003). *Poverty and employment in crisis situations: The gender dimensions*. Geneva, Switzerland: Author.
- Interview: Tagwira Valerie by Ambrose Musiyiwa. (2007). Retrieved from <http://www.weaverpresszimbabwe.com/index.php/authors/interviews/227-interview-valerie-tagwira-by-ambrose-musiyiwa>
- Khan, F. (2010). *Patterns and policies of migration in South Africa: Changing patterns and the need for a comprehensive approach* (University of Cape Town Refugee Rights Project). Retrieved from <http://www.refugeerights.uct.ac.za/research/papers/>
- Kwinjeh, G. (2010). *Thirty years after political independence: Creating political space for Zimbabwean women*. Brussels, Belgium: Europe External Policy Advisors (EEPA).
- Lara, M. P. (1998). *Moral textures: Feminist narratives in the public sphere*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Nussbaum, M. (2001). *Upheavals of thought: The intelligence of emotions*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Tagwira, Valerie. (2006). *The Uncertainty of Hope*. Harare: Weaver.
- Tagwira, V. (2008). Mainini Grace's Promise. In Irene Staunton (Ed.), *Women Writing Zimbabwe* (pp. 123-132). Harare, Zimbabwe: Weaver.
- The Organization for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa. (n.d.). *Women and vulnerable groups since independence and the way forward*. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: Author. Retrieved from [http://www.ossrea.net/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=347](http://www.ossrea.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=347)
- Phiri, V. (2010). *Highway queen*. Harare, Zimbabwe: Corals.
- Raftopoulos, B. (2009). The crisis in Zimbabwe, 1998-2008. In B. Raftopoulos & A. Mlambo (Eds.), *Becoming Zimbabwe: A history from the pre-colonial period to 2008* (pp. 201-231). Harare, Zimbabwe: Weaver Press.
- Staunton, I. (Ed.). (2008). *Women writing Zimbabwe*. Harare, Zimbabwe: Weaver Press.
- Wolf, W. (2007). Description as a transmedial mode of representation: General features and possibilities of realisation in painting, fiction and music. In W. Wolf & W. Bernhart (Eds.), *Description in literature and other media* (pp. 1-90). New York, NY: Editions Rodopi.
- Zinyama, L. & Tevera D. (2002). Zimbabweans who move: Perspectives on International Migration in Zimbabwe. SAMP Migration Policy Series No. 25, Cape Town.

### Author Biography

**Oliver Nyambi**, PhD (Stellenbosch University), was a Duke Africa Initiative scholar in North Carolina, United States, and a PhD fellow in the Graduate School of Arts and Social Sciences at Stellenbosch University in South Africa. He lectures in the English Department at the Great Zimbabwe University in Zimbabwe.