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## REPRESENTATIONS OF THE STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL OF ZIMBABWEAN WOMEN IN SELECTED POST-2000 FICTIONAL NARRATIVES

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### ABSTRACT

*The aim of this article is to trace the representations of the struggle for survival of Zimbabwean women in the post-2000 era in arguing how women vacated spaces of victimhood, to transition into resilient agents and pilots of their own lives. The democratisation of the bread winning act through the economic crisis enabled women to ride on the wave of abject suffering, converting it into an opportunity to carve and inscribe their presence as subjects and agents in the economic sphere. This shows that with adequate support, women can contribute enormously to the Zimbabwean economy. To analyse and to critique the struggle for survival by Zimbabwean women, this article employed selected Zimbabwean women authors of the post-2000 period and their fictional writings. The selected fictional literary texts and the women authors that were used are: Virginia Phiri's *Highway Queen* (2010) and NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013).*

**KEY TERMS:** *women, representations, struggle for survival, resilience, agents*

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## INTRODUCTION

‘Struggle for survival’ is a phrase emanating from the theory of Social Darwinism. Out of Social Darwinism came the concept of “survival of the fittest”. In Darwinian terms the phrase “survival of the fittest” is best understood as “survival of the form that will leave the most copies of itself in successive generations” (von Sydow, 2014: 204, 205). In this article ‘struggle for survival’ means struggle against conditions which are unfavourable to women in the battle for life. Struggle for survival also extends to encompass the ability to survive dramatic changes in environmental conditions, including socio-economic and political changes. This article gives pre-eminence to women because men have mostly enjoyed pre-eminence and positive bias in Zimbabwean literature, both in writing and defining women, and because of patriarchal advantage (Chitando, 2012; Vambe, 2007). The post-2000 epoch has continued focusing global attention on male figures, the presidium and other male political actors whilst women remain on the periphery (Thomas, 2010). Whenever women are struggling for survival, it is mostly for and with their children. So the children and youths are not excluded from this study, but they are inscribed through the women/mothers’ struggle for survival.

The article is framed using the postcolonial theory, a mode of analysis where critics draw inspiration from a range of political and philosophical traditions and thinkers (Japtok, 2003; Ashcroft *et al.*, 2006). The strength of the theory lies in its hybrid character and from its eclectic mix of theories and positions (Abrahamsen, 2003; Gandhi, 1998). The postcolonial theory takes into account the specifics of experiences of the disadvantaged and does not assume uniformity of experience. It also critiques postcolonial systems which inherited the tools of the former coloniser to presently oppress citizens. The postcolonial theory’s project of recovering the subaltern subject by focusing its investigations on “histories from below” (Abrahamsen, 2003: 208) and everyday forms of resistance and struggle, appeals to this study in its endeavour to unpack women’s representations and their struggle for survival in the post-2000 era.

### CAN THE SUBALTERN SPEAK? (SPIVAK, 1998: 66)

From the selected fictional narratives, the subaltern can speak through writing back, and through being granted ownership of an uninterrupted narration voice to tell her story. The selected women authors are writing their own interpretation of the post-2000 era, and they have also granted power of voice to their female protagonists to narrate their own experiences. This is because the writers together with their protagonists are committed to salvaging and rehabilitating the representations of women both in literature and society. The other reason is to bring women from the margins to the centre, into “official and intellectual discourse” (<https://getmyessay.com/essay-on-can-the-subaltern-speak-summary/>), making them subjects and changing perception. From the author of *Highway Queen*’s own admission in an interview with the researcher of this article on 6 October 2017, her perception and empathy for sex workers was influenced by the time she unexpectedly spent with them.

It is significant that in the text *Highway Queen* (2010), the married protagonist Sophie, does not refer to herself, or the other women who are engaged in sex merchandising as prostitutes, but as “selling sex”, engaged in “sex work”, “work” or “sex selling scheme” (Phiri, 2010:89, 102, 114). It is the male figures of Dhuri, Danny, Peter, and the other sex workers who have internalised women abusive language, and regard Sophie as competition, who call Sophie a “whore, bitch, cow, stupid cow , old cow” (Phiri, 2010: 20, 63, 104, 135, 136). Dhuri calls Sophie a “whore” and a “bitch” in trying to wriggle out of the rape/sex-for-rice-and-fish transaction, Danny calls her a “cow” because he does not want to pay after taking sexual advantage of Sophie, and Peter calls her a “stupid cow” because she has no money for him to steal after he rapes her.

The derogatory grammar reflects how the female figure is viewed both in literature and society; hence Phiri (2010) appropriates narration power to the woman so as to correct perception and understanding of the circumstances which have driven her to sex vending. The demand and entitlement to sex exhibited by Dhuri, Peter, Danny and Stan also reflect the violent sexual encounters which some women were subjected to during the 2002 and 2008 elections (ACTSA, 2010; ICRtoP, 2010; RAU, 2010). Rape in particular was used as a weapon against women opposition supporters, and Dhuri employs violent sex as part payment of the “rice-and-fish” transaction. Peter represents the jobless youths who were taken advantage of because of their unemployed status.

The youths were supplied with intoxicating substances and then unleashed on the women to sexually subdue them into voting for the preferred candidate (ACTSA, 2010; ICRtoP, 2010). This kind of state sponsored violence has a cascading effect which manifests in the male figures of Dhuri, Peter, Danny and Stan at a micro level when they employ sexual violence against Sophie. The rippling effects of institutionalised violence are felt from the public space to the private space as a tool of subjugation and control. However, Sophie rejects the negative labels as she shouts back at Dhuri that she is not a “bitch”, that Danny calling her a “cow” made her angry, and that she did not want to become a “whore” (Phiri, 2010: 20, 63 &73). To Sophie the distinction between a “sex worker” and a “whore” is that a sex worker conducts business and a “whore” gets drunk and the clients get away without paying (Phiri, 2010: 73). This is the distinction which Sophie makes after her encounter with Stan, who spiked

her cider. The incident with Stan and the distinction is what contributes to Sophie's decision to make her body an income generating project.

After agonising for about a month, I made a decision which was very hard to take. I came up with an idea to mop up Rands. I wasn't interested in local currency as its value was unpredictable. To achieve this I would sell my body... That was the only commodity that no one had control over except myself... (Phiri, 2010: 88).

Sophie is aware of the risks involved in sex work; as such trading her body is not a decision which she adopts lightly as she agonises over the issue for over a month. Deciding to transact one's body is tough, but some women have adopted the strategy due to poverty as exemplified by Sophie. In an interview the researcher conducted with the author of *Highway Queen* (2010) on 6 October 2017, Phiri highlighted that some women resort to prostitution as a last resort, or as an emergency stop gap measure, and as a result of being in a "zone of financial want and scarcity" (Chitando, 2012:32). For Sophie, this was a life changing crisis management strategy which resulted from her husband's retrenchment and subsequent financial strain. As soon as Sophie makes the decision to trade her body, her mind-set and language changes. Her female body ceases to be a site of suffering and abuse only, but becomes a business site, as she regards herself as "conducting business", the "commodity" being "selling sex" or "sex work"; to an unresisting target market of men; and she also secures herself "a room, two thin blankets and a pillow", the equivalent of an operating office and equipment to use in her business (Phiri, 2010: 88 - 89).

Sophie has a clear vision of independence and self-sufficiency, to be accomplished through achievable goals which include; to fully pay for the stand, build a small house to move in with her family, open a home industry of batik making and chicken rearing, besides tuition payment, food and medication for her mother-in-law (Phiri, 2010: 88 – 89). She clearly delineates between her body transacting business and her domestic activities and responsibilities. Sophie keeps her body merchandising a secret because of societal condemnation and hypocrisy. The employment of the female figure, Sophie, is a representation of women as the voice of the post-2000 crisis years and a symbol of human survival, which simultaneously showcases the female figure's capacity for agency. Phiri is also persuading the audience for a "re-reading" and "re-writing" of the "prostitute body" (Bell, 1994), a reconsideration of human survival versus morality (Mdlongwa, 2015: 28).

Sophie's narration of her own story focuses the audience on the humanity of the female figure, and to view the survival activity of commercial sex merchandising through the "prism of the incapacitating social and economic environment" of the post-2000 era (Muwati *et al.*, 2013: 127). The other voices are silenced and the spotlight is on the struggle for survival, shifting the audience from the narrow view of the female figure as an infidel, and representing women of the post-2000 crisis years as fighters who are determined to survive with their families at all costs. Through Sophie, the female figure is empowered to recast the body transacting activity by the extension of a continuous ownership of voice, which rescues the post-2000 Zimbabwean women from external condemnatory discourses.

The value which Sophie places upon her body is not only monetary but points to the idea that her family is worth her life, hence the sacrifice. Demanding payment for services rendered is a new philosophy for her which shows her growth of consciousness in the amount and type of opposition which she faces in the debilitating socio-economic and political environment. It is also a metaphoric demand for the recognition of her human rights, those of other sex workers and Other women in general. It is a pointer to the fact that women might be engaged in different occupations, but the bottom line is that they are invaluable humanity with human rights which have to be observed by those whom they interact with, and that they deserve to be fairly remunerated.

The smart business partnerships which Sophie forges with Tickie and Zex are a demonstration of her creativity, business acumen and resourcefulness. Sophie constructs and taps into informal networks of support in pursuit of business in the struggle for survival (Muwati *et al.*, 2013). Sophie epitomises women's struggle for survival in a dominantly patriarchal society. Her ingenuity out-manoeuvres the phallogocentric system to carve survival space for herself and her family. This is a representation of the post-2000 era woman as an ingenuous business woman, who also recognises her worth in spite of the body depreciating and battering socio-economic conditions.

It is also significant that Sophie is concerned and focused on the family, the welfare of other sex workers, her former neighbours and her Hope Fountain squatter camp community, especially after the destruction of the camp by the authorities (Phiri 2010: 78,79, 88, 101, 143, 146, 147, 185- 186). Sophie is basically an HIV/AIDS activist in the community and she takes every chance to educate anyone who cares to listen. Sophie's activism breaks "the conspiracy of silence" (Chitando, 2012: 57) concerning the HIV/AIDS scourge and women's sexuality, as well as subverting and destabilising the gendering of disease, and "dominant patriarchally shaped conceptions of sex workers and sex work", particularly in the context of a harsh national socio-economic crisis (Nyambi, 2015: 9). The image of the woman as a danger and propagator of HIV/AIDS in society is deflated, while representing the post-2000 woman as an activist in the communal and national agendas.

What becomes prominent is not the "body-trading" (Chitando, 2012: 32), but the love for her family, her compassion for humanity, the ability to regroup and re-strategise after her husband was retrenched, and after the life threatening insensitive act by the authorities to raze down the camp in the midst of such a crushing economic crisis. Sophie is thus marshalled as a representation of the broadness of the post-2000 Zimbabwean woman's agenda which transcends concern with personal empowerment (Hudson-Weems 2004, 2007), to embrace the

community and nation, representing the post-2000 Zimbabwean woman as a “symbol of the largeness of the human spirit in the search of a more fulfilling existence” (Muwati *et al.*, 2013: 124).

Sophie resists submersion by poverty and the merciless socio-economic climate. Like a true postcolonial subject, she adopts new identities and adapts to different situations in the struggle for survival. She sheds off the limiting identity of ‘house-wife’ whenever the breadwinning enterprise demands, and engages in what she must for the survival of her family. She encounters chauvinistic “violent sexual predators” (Chitando, 2012: 50) and intolerant masculinities in the male figures of Dhuri, Samson, Stan and Peter, who represent the phallogocentric system and the male figure’s pride in “possessing an active penis, which has to be dramatised” (Mbembe, 2001: 110) over the “other” (Said, 1977: 7, 11), but she soldiers on for the sake of her family.

The novel ends with Sophie tending to the victims of displacement and dispossession by the authorities, a scene which echoes the 2005 Operation Murambatsvina/Restore Order (Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum, 2005). This is a representation of the post-2000 Zimbabwean woman as an embodiment of crucial decision making and a figure of struggle and hope against a damaging crisis. The “bitch”, “whore” and “cow” labels are obliterated, to be replaced by the compassionate activist and pillar of the community, a “sheroine” (Phiri, 2017, interview).

## A DISEASED NATION

There is an HIV/AIDS refrain in *Highway Queen* (Virginia Phiri, 2010) which continuously reminds the audience not only of the dangers faced by sex workers, but by all who indulge in irresponsible intimacy. The HIV and AIDS strain is echoed in the other selected narrative, *We Need New Names* (NoViolet Bulawayo, 2013). The sex workers are more prone to getting HIV and AIDS not because they are immoral but because they come into contact with irresponsible masculinities that use the power of money and the female figure’s desperation to demand unprotected sex. The prevalence and high incidence of HIV/AIDS related deaths in the narratives is not about immorality, but a national tragedy of a failed state. The point is that women are dying of HIV/AIDS, cancer, in child birth and from other diseases because of the broken health delivery system. Women also struggle to access resources and their concerns are mostly at the bottom of the priority hierarchy (2016; 2010).

A case in point is a disease which was discovered in 2014, Female Genital Schistosomiasis, a form of bilharzia which affects female genitals. According to research the disease is associated with cancer in women, increased risk of acquiring HIV/AIDS, infertility and ectopic pregnancies. Zimbabwe is incapacitated to deal with the disease due to lack of knowledge and lack of resources. Whilst the whole of Southern Africa has started their awareness campaigns and are already helping women, nothing has been done in Zimbabwe where over forty percent of rural women are infected (Sunday News, 24 September 2017). Doctor Mushangwe who is quoted in the article says the following: “Since 2014 we are still waiting for the Ministry of Health and Child Care to avail funds so that we will be able to educate health practitioners on how to diagnose the disease and treat it”.

Four years later, medical personnel still do not know about the disease and how to identify it in those who are affected, and the affected is the marginalised female figure. There is no prospect of this situation changing in the foreseeable future as the state is bankrupt and the citizens continue to endure the crippling economic conditions. Sophie is diagnosed as HIV positive and makes a pragmatic decision in soldiering on with sex vending and fending for her family. Through Sophie, the story of the woman becomes the story of Zimbabwe and that of the suffering citizens. The most important highlight is that Sophie is pragmatic and an agent in her own situation. Her story is an indictment of the regime which has mismanaged the nation. The female figure is thus deployed as a “metaphor of a nation in crisis” (Muwati *et al.*, 2013: 129).

## DARLING’S “MY AMERICA” (BULAWAYO 2013:15, 251)

Migration is another survival and resistance strategy by the post-2000 era women. In the concept of “survival of the fittest” some species survive and flourish by moving away and finding blank or tolerant territories in which to propagate (von Sydow, 2014: 205). This is the route which Fostalina and Darling adopted in *We Need New Names* (2013). The teenage narrator falls in the category of the illegal/undocumented migrants who have to struggle for survival with whatever comes their way. Although Fostalina is a documented migrant worker, a nurse, Darling observes that “Aunt Fostalina doesn’t have the energy since she is so busy with her two jobs, one at the hospital and one at the nursing home” (Bulawayo 2013: 188-189), indicating that Fostalina still has to work extra hard for the sustenance of her family in America and the family back in Zimbabwe.

Fostalina is among the wave of nurses, teachers and social workers who went to the diaspora in the late 1990s and the beginning of the millennium, (Pasura, 2008). Darling joined the Zimbabwean migrant wave as a student. When the teenage Darling is “not cleaning toilets or bagging groceries” she is “sorting out bottles and cans” (Bulawayo, 2013: 251) or “dusting” Eliot’s triple-storey house (Bulawayo, 2013: 262). Darling’s rose tinted glasses about America are now clear and she understands the reason she is there as she summarised: “Every two weeks we got our pay checks and sent monies back home by Western Union and Money Gram. We bought food and clothes for the families left behind; we paid school fees for the little ones...” (Bulawayo, 2013: 244).

Migration, not a phenomenon peculiar to Zimbabwe alone, has proved to be a necessity which ensures the survival of those who leave and those who stay (Crush & Tevera, 2010). The struggle for survival in the Diaspora is more difficult by virtue of it being foreign space. Regardless, the women set their faces against the wall and do what is required for survival. This is more pronounced when compared to crumbling masculinities as witnessed in the male figures of Tshaka Zulu and Kojo, who disintegrate as they reach their breaking points in foreign space (Bulawayo, 269 – 273, 258, & 280).

The same masculine disintegration is witnessed in *Highway Queen* (2010) when Steve degenerates into alcoholism after his retrenchment (Phiri, 2010: 32). Mlambo (2013: iv) cited in Chitando (2016: 118) observes that “the women characters as presented in fiction are better able to cope with dystopian and crisis times than their male counterparts”. Because of crumbling masculinities both in Zimbabwe and the Diaspora, some women have become the principal and sole breadwinners, as in the case of Sophie and Fostalina. This indicates that whilst the post-2000 era has been characterised by a damaging crisis in other aspects, it has also opened up the economic space for women to become “economic players” (Pasura, 2008:94). This represents the post-2000 woman both in the Diaspora and in Zimbabwe as adaptable and resilient.

Outside fictional narratives, the reason women are better able to cope with “dystopian and crisis” in Zimbabwe and the Diaspora is because upon being married, their addresses change, their last names change, sometimes they are required to learn a new language depending with the region; including adopting and adapting to a new environment, people, customs and diet. The life of the Zimbabwean woman is characterised by struggle and this has equipped her to be able to cope with almost any challenge. Darling, Fostalina, and all the nameless women who are in the Diaspora, and those who commute between Zimbabwe and the Diaspora, are a representation of the hard working post-2000 period women who went beyond borders and the oceans in the struggle for survival. These are the women who have helped to sustain Zimbabwe’s ailing economy and their families (McGregor, 2006; Pasura, 2008).

Teaching and nursing were regarded as women’s work in Zimbabwe from colonial times because those were the working spaces which were grudgingly designated for women as second class citizens (Schmidt 1996). This worked to the women’s advantage in the post-2000 era. After re-orientation, the women were readily absorbed in mainstream professional spaces in the Diaspora (McGregor, 2006), and they were well remunerated. This is another reason why women survive better in the diaspora than men, who found out that their high sounding Zimbabwean qualifications and designations did not count for much in the diaspora (McGregor: 2006: 17; Pasura, 2008: 94). The breadwinning enterprise and patriarchal dominance which allowed the male figure to be the one centre of power in the home is subverted and thus forced to re-negotiate gender relations and roles. Thus the Zimbabwe economic crisis of the post-2000 era has eroded the male figure’s breadwinner role at home and the Diaspora, affording the female figure financial empowerment and more voice.

However, the sacrificial economic contributions of the post-2000 period by women are not reflected in national policy (Southern African Trust, 2009). As women are on the margins, so are their economic contributions. The post-2000 era women, both in Zimbabwe and the Diaspora, are some of the main financial contributors in the struggle to rescue Zimbabwe from total economic collapse. Through Sophie in *Highway Queen* (2010), Fostalina and the teenage Darling in *We Need New Names* (2013), and all the Other women’s struggle for survival in the post-2000 era, the women’s representation is that of family and community centredness with a vision to impact the nation. The post-2000 Zimbabwean women have proved through their hard work that if they are harnessed as a human resource into the mainstream economy, or financially empowered as business people, Zimbabwe’s economic recovery would be accelerated.

### WHAT’S IN A NAME? (PONGWENI, 1983)

The titles of the selected fictional narratives reflect the post-2000 women authors as engaged in the struggle for survival in knowledge spaces and in defining women. *Highway Queen* as a name supports an agenda which deconstructs stereotypical readings of women, diminishing the “victim-blaming syndrome” (Muwati *et al.*, 2013:121), which often exonerates the architects of flawed policies which burden and impoverish citizens. Sophie operates as a sex vendor on the highway and the “queen” in the title challenges the negative labelling and definition of women without interrogating the root causes.

*We Need New Names* speaks of the aspirations of the post-2000 women for change: change from stultifying portrayals of women by dominant sectors; change from feminised poverty; change from perpetual displacement and dispossession; change from all forms of gender based violence; change from the gendering of disease, change from being regional and international pariahs, change from being the oppressed to the free; and relief from the harsh and damaging crisis. There is a lot in a name: it is identification, it carries history and culture, it is pride, and it is heritage (Magosvongwe *et al.*, 2016). That is what the titles of the narratives are envisioning; positive identification for women, a legacy to be proud of and a future free of the harsh socio-economic and unstable political climate.

## CONCLUSION

The article has traced the representations of women in their struggle for survival in the post-2000 period. The representations of women in the selected fictional narratives have shown women to be agents in the struggle for survival, resilient against antagonistic socio-economic and political conditions, creative, resourceful, nurturing, supportive, giving hope and as the centre of life; a symbol of struggle, positively aggressive in the pursuit of their vision and survival, and that they are persistent. The article has also argued that women rode the wave of abject poverty, turning it into an opportunity to vacate spaces of perpetual victimhood and limiting designations of housewifery, into becoming bread winners for their families and economic contributors to the nation. The convergence of the women authors and their female protagonists is an instance of women uniting around a common goal of resisting and subverting structures of dominance as postcolonial subjects. Thus, although the crisis period was damaging, it afforded the women a chance to democratise the bread winning act and economic space, thereby gaining financial empowerment and a voice to subvert the male biased one-centre-of power-principle in most families. The post-2000 struggle for survival has proved that with adequate support and equal opportunities, women can contribute greatly to resuscitating the economy and nation building.

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