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ETHNO-PATRIOTISM AND THE SHONA NOVEL: THE CASE OF MUTSWAIRO'S FESO

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ABSTRACT

The paper analyses Mutswairo's understanding and depiction of patriotic culture. The ideas the writer generates on patriotic culture are examined in the context of Africa's struggles for political and economic emancipation. The paper is therefore an investigation of the relevance of the ideas that the writer propagates on Africa's total political and economic liberation. The paper argues that the ideas that the writer generates on patriotic culture are important in articulating Africa's challenges in the contemporary dispensation. However, the research contends that his ethno-centric approach is retrogressive to national liberation.

INTRODUCTION

Mutswairo's *Feso* is an allegorical critique of the colonial establishment. The first novel to be written in Shona, *Feso* provides the Shona people especially the Zezuru, with grounding from which to assert an anti-colonial discourse. *Feso* advances an African patriotic culture and bolsters the resilience spirit of the Shona people. However, Mutswairo's patriotic culture lacks a national orientation and this weakens his contribution to the resistance movement. Mutswairo's patriotic culture is a response to colonial exploitation, oppression and dehumanisation in general. In order to explicitly expound on the colonial depravity, Mutswairo chiefly profiles the pre-colonial Shona life of a "golden age" and juxtaposes it with the colonial reality for comparative purposes. The general material and existential deprivation becomes the foundation of a patriotic culture and the launching pad of both a defensive and offensive discourse in order to reclaim and repossess the African heritage.

A CRITIQUE

Mutswairo describes the pre-colonial Shona economy as vibrant, self-sufficient and agrarian. He states that:

Kare kare munhika yeMazoe mairimwa zviyo zvizhinji kwazvo nehurudza dzevatema dzaivemo. Mairimwa zviyo zvaipedza makore mazhinji- zhinji zvichizere mumatura, zvisati zvapera p.1
Long ago, in the Mazoe area, African farmers used to produce abundant grain

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that could last for many years.

These opening statements serve to establish the view that the Shona people were in absolute control of their economic life. Their land yielded abundant harvests. The economy was diversified with cattle rearing as another branch of the economy that regulated the people's diet. Forests provided the people with firewood and building material. The life that Mutswairo depicts indicates that it was an era of plenty characterised by harmony, congruity, stability and communion. In the novel, the harmony, tranquillity, symmetry, balance and stability of the VaNyai people of Mazoe under chief Nyangombe is threatened by the VaHota people of chief Pfumojena.

The oppressive chief Pfumojena (Whitespear) is interpreted as a facsimile of colonialism while the Vanyai people are perceived as an icon of the Shona people. Viewed in this light, *Feso* becomes a statement against the colonial oppressive structures, a powerful and effective weapon that is wrapped in patriotic regalia. The statement itself being a reaction to the entrenchment of an alien and repressive ideology that counters the advancement of African aspirations. Mutswairo thus employs a patriotic culture to thwart imperialism. In the poem *Nehanda Nyakasikana* in *Feso*, Mutswairo chronicles the grievances of the African people against imperialists:

Pfuma yenyika nhasi yakatorwa Vakagovana paukama hwavo vepfumojena
Nhasi vari kudya mafuta ayo nyika
Isu tichidya nhoko dzezvironda(P.43)

The wealth of our nation has been expropriated and shared among the Pfumojenas Today they are enjoying the fruits of our country while we suffer and languish in poverty.

This colonial reality depicted in Mutswairo's *Feso* contrasts sharply with the pre-colonial golden age which was an epoch of stability and abundance. The poem conscientises the Shona people on the colonial violence that has been enhanced by various pieces of legislation like the 1930 Land Apportionment Act which legalised the expropriation of African land and the Land Husbandry Act of 1951 which forced African farmers to destock their cattle. Such pieces of legislation were part of the colonial strategy to recruit labour from the Africans into European farms and mines. Capitalism in Rhodesia started with labour shortages since the African labour could not naturally flow into the market. The imperialists had to engage extra market forces like forced labour and various laws that deprived Africans of their means of survival. Since the pre-colonial Shona economy that Mutswairo outlines above was mainly based on land and cattle, the alienation of the Africans from their land and cattle economically paralysed them and frustrated the equilibrium and poise that existed prior to colonial settlerism.

The patriotic vision of Mutswairo manifests itself in projecting art that is foregrounded in his people's history. He puts the Zimbabwe liberation struggle in its correct historical perspective. The plight of the African people that Mutswairo alludes to, serves to justify the liberative violence perpetrated by Africans as Fanon (1968:148) writes:

...colonialism is not a thinking machine, nor a body endorsed with reasoning faculties. It is violent in its natural state and will only yield when confronted with greater violence.

The colonial injustices also serve to give African people a humanistic face to the struggle. That is why in the poem noted above Mutswairo asks:

Nehanda Nyakasikana! Kunozove rinhiko
Isu vanyai tichitambudzika?
Mweya unoera kunozove rinhiko
Isu VaNyai tichidzvinirwa?(p.43).

Nehanda Nyakasikana how long will it take
while we the VaNyai are suffering,
sacred spirit how long will it take
while we the VaNyai are under oppression }

In the poem Mutswairo appeals to Nehanda to deliver them from colonial oppression. Mutswairo acknowledges the role of the traditional religion in the political struggles of the Shona people. Mutswairo prays to Nehanda the legendary woman whose spirit inspired Africans to fight against the white settlers during the First Chimurenga of 1896/97.

It is part of the religious belief system of the Shona people of Zimbabwe that the spirit of their ancestors remains among the present society protecting them. When the Europeans arrived in Zimbabwe, the spirit of Mbuya Nehanda possessed a woman called Nehanda Nyakasikana and Mutswairo refers to her. Mbuya Nehanda is integral to the first struggles against colonisation in Africa and is known as one of the greatest African heroines in Zimbabwean history. She used her religious leadership and power to spearhead the first war of resistance in Zimbabwe.

She struck directly at the core of Shona beliefs, and in so doing, captured the minds of the people by effectively convincing them that Mwari blamed the whites for all their suffering and decreed that the whites should be driven from the land. Nehanda exhorted the Shona people to expel the British from the land, encouraging them to intensify the struggle and rallying them on.

Mutswairo cites Nehanda who is a beacon of resistance to imperialism and the impact is to animate a patriotic culture that rejuvenates the people's fighting spirit and encourages them to repulse imperialism in order to salvage the conditions of their lives. Nehanda who is a Shona legendary figure, reminds people of her complete and absolute defiance of an imperialist culture thus illuminating the resistance movement. *Feso*, therefore advances a patriotic culture which Zimbabwean nationalist leaders embraced during the liberation struggle. The nationalist leaders recited Mutswairo's poem at political rallies and so *Feso* occupied a major role in the Zimbabwean struggle for liberation.

In order to articulate a patriotic culture, Mutswairo also recreates the characters of great historical significance in the liberation struggle of Zimbabwe. Mapondera is portrayed as a great warrior leader and an advisor of Chief Nyangombe. He advises and encourages the people of Nyangombe to fight the oppressive Chief Pfumojena:

*Ini Mapondera ndinoti, kunyange kungauye zviuru nezviuru zvaVaNyai, asi,
ngatiregei kutya! Ngatitii tinozorwa navo mumakomo, mumipata, mumakanga,
mumasango, mumisha nomudzinzvimbo dzosedzavanenge vazara-vanotikwana
isu, vaNyangombe.*(p.74).

I, Mapondera, say that even if the vaNyai people come in their thousands, let us not chicken out. Let us be vigilant and declare that we will fight them in the mountains, mountain strips, forests and everywhere where they will be – they shall see us we of Chief Nyangombe.

This is a statement directed to the Shona people encouraging them to confront colonialists in order to reclaim and regain their economic and political space. To this extent, Mapondera is a true harbinger of a patriotic culture. The assertion comes from Mapondera who is known in historical circles for his fierce resistance to the European settler encroachment. The Mapondera Uprising of 1900-1903 which Mapondera headed was the last military assault on white rule until the 1960s. An allusion to the great military leader therefore elevates the patriotic culture and inspires the Shona

people to combat European settlers' oppressive system in the same way Mapondera's message impacted on Chief Nyangombe's subjects:

Vakazvipira kuti vanozorwira mambo wavo nenyika yavo(p.74)
They vowed to fight for their chief and their society.

It is also the identification with the historical legend of Mapondera which constitutes patriotic culture. A writer who positively recruits legends at a time when people are threatened with extinction becomes a patriot.

However, while Mutswairo writes within the orbit of a patriotic culture, his conceptualisation of patriotic culture contrasts with that of Ngugi in *A Grain of Wheat*. While Mutswairo's depiction of patriotic culture is limited to the Zezuru, Ngugi's portrayal of a patriotic culture cuts across the various ethnic groups of Kenya. Referring to Feso, the character, Mutswairo writes that:

Mwoyo wake waive womuzezuru chaiwo, nokuti hapana muzezuru {kana aripo ndiye ega} asingade musha wake. Upenyu hwakasununguka husinayi majoto, norukudzo ruri pakati pamadzimai nevarume vemazezuru, noruwando rwezviyo zvirimwa munyika yedu – izvi ndizvo zvinhu zvinofadza mwoyo yevazezuru nokuda kugara pamusha pana madzibaba avo. Ndizvo zvinofadza vaZezuru. Ndiwo mwoyo wakanga una Feso(p.29).

He had a genuine Zezuru heart, because there is no Zezuru person {If he is there he is the only one} who does not like his home. An independent life, free from conflicts, and the respect between Zezuru men and women, and the abundance of grain cultivated in our society -and living together with their fathers. This is what the Zezuru people celebrate. This is what pleases the Zezuru people. This was the heart that Feso possessed.

Mutswairo expresses his pride and loyalty to his ethnic identity even in the context of colonialism when the whole country was under the British jurisdiction. He defines the people of Zimbabwe not as a nation but as a distinct ethnic group. This trend is also evident in his poem *Makomo Nyota* in *Madetembedzo Akare Namatsva*

Anoyevedza sei makomo eNyota
Akashongedza nyika yamambo Chiweshe
(How beautiful the Nyota mountains are
that beautify chief Chiweshe's territory).

Mutswairo does not exalt the Nyanga Mountains whose beauty appeals to the whole nation. The mountains which are glorified by his own people under Chief Chiweshe are the subject of his sentiments. Mutswairo does not derive pride from the imposed nation structure but still identifies with Mazoe, his ethnic homeland.

Mutswairo's patriotic culture does not have a national orientation. In *A Grain Of Wheat*, Kihika calls for all the people of Kenya to take the cross and to him any Kenyan who takes the cross is a Christ. Ngugi's understanding of a patriotic culture therefore inspires every Kenyan. Mutswairo seem to be writing for the Zezuru people and this undermines the impact of his patriotic culture. Marimba Ani (1980:1) notes that:

Until we learn that it serves our objectives to emphasise the similarities, the ties, the unifying principles, the common threads and themes that bind and identify us all as African; we will continue to be politically and ideologically confused.

Even where Mutswairo engages some symbols that seem to have a national appeal, his work still suffers the limitations of sidelining the history of other ethnic groups found in Zimbabwe. This is seen when he employs Shona legendary figures like Nehanda and Mapondera as models for emulation by the whole nation. His poem *Nehanda Nyakasikana* in *Feso*, appeals to Nehanda the leader of the First Chimurenga in central and northern Mashonaland to save the people of Zimbabwe. Prior to her execution Nehanda is famed for saying “My bones shall rise again” and this may be the reason why Mutswairo writes:

Nehanda, mukawo kani, muka! Tiyamure! (p.14).
Nehanda please rise, rise up! help us

The above is seen as a prediction of the Second Chimurenga. The weakness of Mutswairo’s approach is to use the legend from the Shona group to embody the aspirations of the whole multi-ethnic nation where other ethnic groups have their own legends and religious figures. Such an ethno-patriotic culture is less likely to arouse the entire population that value its ethnic identities. Because of its ethno-centric alignment, Mutswairo’s patriotic culture is likely to have a limited impact not only on the war but also on national consciousness. Nehanda was the spirit medium leading the first Chimurenga War especially in Central and Northern Mashonaland while Mukwati played a leading role in Matabeleland. The people in Matabeleland have their own spirit mediums and legends that inspire them. Furthermore, Mutswairo uses derogatory terms when referring to the Ndebele people. He refers to them as *Madzviti*:

Feso anokanganwa kuti takaparadza sei hondo yamambo Vhumbamusakasa---
Zvakare anokanganwa kuti takaparadza sei hondo yaZhangedwa, nhungamiri
yemadzviti ayo akanga auya kuzoba mombe dzedu pedyo nekakomo(p74).
Feso forgets how we defeated chief Vhumbamusakasas army---again he
how we defeated Zhangedwas army the leader of the Ndebele people who
had come to steal our cattle near Harare kopje.

Mutswairo’s use of derogatory discourse is likely to further polarise the Shona and the Ndebele at a time when these two main ethnic groups are expected to form a common front against the European imperialists.

Marimba Ani(1980:1) argues that the emphasis on the differences between African territories serves imperialists objectives:

Our oppressors have emphasised the loss of language, dress, living patterns and other tangible and surface aspects of culture, just as they do in discussions of African culture on the continent. They emphasise differences in language, and customs –even physique–from one society to another. They do this with good reason. It is an emphasis that serves their objectives.

Mutswairo does not realise that by applying emphasis on the Shona-Ndebele antagonisms, he is actually serving British colonial interests. The misrepresentation and distortion of Ndebele-Shona relations serve to justify the British colonisation of Zimbabwe. David Beach (1986:14) rightly observes that Ndebele raids were used by the British and Rhodes to excuse Rhodes conquest in 1893 and the subsequent entrenchment of white rule.

Missionaries also spread myths of Ndebele savagery to gain support for the establishment of mission stations. Missionaries painted a picture of young Ndebele men wanting only to kill and old men with no memories except of the slaughter they had performed. There was stress on the horrors of Ndebele raiding and a message that the Shona people ought to be grateful to the colonial government for saving them from extinction.

Eurocentric historians spread the message that the Ndebele raided every part of the country every year until 1890. According to Beach(Ibid:150)the Ndebele did raid the Shona and other people in certain places at certain times but far less widely and often than has been supposed and also not out of sheer bloodthirsty. Beach(Ibid:16) concludes therefore that:

Ever since the Ndebele people arrived in the Shona country in the late 1830s they have been subjected to a process of legend-making that amounts to the creation of a mythology.

Mutswairo's subscription to the European view of Ndebele history dilutes his patriotic culture. His work is less likely to inspire the Ndebele people that he attacks. His perception of the Ndebele through anthropological and colonial eyeglasses serves the European aspirations and not African interests. Marimba Ani(Ibid:2) argues that Africans must learn to look at much deeper levels than the level which is emphasised by Europeans:

If we look deep enough, we will find that our deepest beliefs are shared beliefs, and that deep within we are one people.

Zimbabwean writers writing during the colonial era therefore should have helped to deconstruct the myth created by the colonisers on the Shona-Ndebele relations and to forge unity among all ethnic groups in Zimbabwe.

CONCLUSION

The study has argued that Mutswairo engages patriotic culture in Feso in order for the work to illuminate the African spirit of resilience so that it can impact positively on the liberation struggle in his country. His patriotic culture is predicated on the colonial misrule and exploitation of African resources, both human and material. Mutswairo see it as his duty to identify with the struggles of his society and to advance the good of his community. He also sees it as his obligation to condemn and combat forces that he views as economically, culturally, socially and politically contradictory. This study labels this writer whose artistic prerogative is the advancement of the aspirations of the African people, a patriotic writer.

Recognising the centrality of culture and history in liberation, Mutswairo invigorates the culture of his society. As demonstrated, the writer corrects the colonial misconception that Africans do not have a religion beyond mere fetishism. Mutswairo acknowledges the role of Shona Mhondoro, particularly Nehanda in the liberation struggle. His poem in *Feso*, Nehanda Nyakasikana became very popular with nationalist leaders who recited it at meetings with the masses. This study has also pointed out that Mutswairo's patriotic culture is problematic in that it is directed to the Shona people particularly the Zezuru. The study has, therefore, labeled Mutswairo's patriotic culture an ethno-patriotic culture since it does not exhibit a national orientation. The role of Mutswairo's patriotic culture in the struggle of the Zimbabwean people against British imperialism is accordingly limited to the Shona people. Such an approach benefits the imperialist divide and rule tactics and waters down the impact of his patriotic culture on the Zimbabwean Chimurenga war of liberation.

Moreover, in *Feso* Mutswairo perpetuates tribalism invented by the imperialists. He misconstrues the Shona-Ndebele relations by painting a picture of the Ndebele people as cruel savages and referring to them using some derogatory terms. Musiyiwa (1998:56) rightly observes that in *Mapondera: Soldier Of Zimbabwe and Chaminuka: Prophet Of Zimbabwe*, Mutswairo stereotypes the Ndebele as warlike and bloodthirsty people who are always raiding the peaceful Shona for grain, cattle and women. This approach weakens the national spirit of resistance to foreign domination through foregrounding pre-colonial ethnic tensions.

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