



NATIONALIST DEFENCE: JUST WHOSE AGENDA IS IT? A LOOK AT THE PLACEMENT OF WOMEN IN ZIMBABWE'S LIBERATION WAR NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

When analysing the role of gender in conflict the first myth that needs to be exploded is that of the absence of women from the battleground. As this paper examines the placement of women in issues of national defence an analysis of the tenets of nationhood, nationalism will be carried out through the discussion of Zimbabwe's liberation war novels. Textual analysis supported by secondary sources reveals the trend by the authors (especially the male ones) to trivialize the contributions of the women who 'dare' to go to war. What emerges in this research which is anchored in African Womanism, is that the issue of nationalist service is still fraught with gender overtones even though the past 20 or 50 years have seen a number of women getting positions of authority in politics – female Chairperson of the African Union, female Prime Minister in Liberia, female Vice President in Zimbabwe, female Vice Prime Minister in Zimbabwe only to mention a few. This little number shows that the battle for female representation in matters of the nation is not yet over. It is 'not yet uhuru' for women. Previous writings on the marginalisation of women simply scratched on the surface of the matter and did not dig up the real problem, the foundation of the problem, that of nationalism as a gendered discourse, for this is where all issues of marginalisation emerged.

Keywords: Nationalism, Gender, Sexism, Liberation, Colonization.

1. INTRODUCTION

What has emerged over the years in the available literature the world over is the fact that nations are gendered. The 'Nation' as it stands is divided into 'roles' or 'proper places' for men and women. Despite much research (Weiss (1985); Staunton (1991), etc) on the roles prescribed for women socially, economically and politically, it has been realized however that Nationalism as a gendered discourse has been glossed over. It is this that the paper seeks to highlight through the definitions of gender, nation, sexuality followed by an analysis of the representations of women in the war novels of Chinodya, Vera, Katiyo and Mutasa.

Most literature discusses women's citizenship rather than women and nationalism, as such there is need to position women's experiences in the larger context of nationalist discourse. Afshar and Eade (2004) contend that it is simplistic to assume that it is in the nature of men and women to be situated in the public and private arenas respectively and that it is in the essence of their beings that men became associated with wars, revolutions and rebellions while women became associated with peace.

According to Mayer (2000) nationalism in Africa developed in reaction to European imperialism and to imperialism's feminization and infantilization of both the colonies themselves and of the indigenous men. As a result and in reaction to this powerlessness against the colonizer, African men developed sharper consciousness of their national bodies and as the colonizer challenged their masculinity, the colonized men emphasized control over their own bodies and their women's bodies by controlling their (women's) sexuality.

As such the Nationalist project that was formulated by men as part of resistance to colonialism was masculinist in nature and reproduced male dominated political and social institutions. Hence the problem of the gendered nationalist wars, no matter how women tried to assert themselves.

1.1. Definition of Terms

Before analysing the war novels as to clarify how nationalism impacts on gender and sexuality, a definition of terms is imperative. Nationalism is defined by Anderson (1991) as:

The exercise of internal hegemony the exclusive empowerment of those who share a sense of belonging to the same 'imagined community'.

Bauer (1924) contends that the idea of nation is bound up with ego. As such from most studies it can be deduced that it is the male ego that is at the helm of nationalist discourses, hence men see themselves as the rightful custodians of the nation, with women being seen as the inferior, the weaker in need of protection and thus incapable of participation in national discourses or in nation building. Mayer (2000) goes on to assert that Nationalism is the long wage through which sexual control and repression (of women) is justified and masculine prowess is exercised and expressed. As such it can be seen that even in war novels where women actually take part in the national struggle, their efforts are not extolled as much as those of the men because male ego dictates that the man should be the protector, the custodian of the nation and not the woman.

Nation is defined by Renan (1990) as 'a soul, a spiritual principle'. Thus a nation is a group of people who are bound together by a common belief. 'A moral consciousness' which its members believe must be maintained at all times. In the case of this study, it is the belief that men are protectors of the nation and women as producers of the nation should be protected by men and not the other way round.

Gender serves as a cultural marker of biological sex (Vance 1984) and sexuality serves as the cultural marking of desire. Gender is also defined by Sedgwick (1990) as the 'dichotomized social production and reproduction of male and female identities and behaviours. Sexuality is a cultural construction which refers both to an individual's sexed desire and to an individual's sexed being

embracing ideas about pleasure and physiology, fantasy and anatomy. Like gender, sexuality is organised into systems of power 'which reward and encourage some individuals and activities while punishing and repressing others', (Rubin 1984).

1.2. Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored in Africana Womanism. Africana Womanism is a term coined in the late 1980s by Clenora Hudson-Weems, intended as an ideology applicable to all women of African descent. The tenets of the theory which this study bases on include its focus on the experiences, struggles and desires of Africana women. Dove (1998)'s assertion that "Africana Womanism brings to the fore the role of African mothers as leaders in the struggle to regain, reconstruct and create a cultural integrity that espouses ancient Maatic principles of reciprocity, balance, harmony, justice, truth, righteousness, order and so forth"(p535) is also found apt in the study together with the theory's focus on race and class empowerment rather than gender empowerment.

2. METHODOLOGY

Textual analysis of the war novels was done. The analysis of selected texts was then supported by secondary sources to support and authenticate arguments.

2.1. Womanhood, Gender and Nationalist Defence

From the war novels in which nationalism has been gendered, it would seem as if it would take long before women's efforts are really recognized by the male (ego) directed society. What the novels demonstrate and what is being interrogated is that men want to be at the helm of the liberation war and female cadres' exploits are 'muffled'. It is this, through the feminist stance of Africana womanism, that the research interrogates.

The coming of the whiteman dislodged the African man from his previous positions of power, the African man would in turn grab what was left by dislodging their female counterparts from their own positions of power. This demotion of African womanhood has produced an African woman who is weakened rendered in- effective and irrelevant as is seen in Katiyo (1976) *A son of the soil*. The events in Katiyo's novel demonstrate that it is through the way the colonial project was fashioned as masculinist, that African males in reaction, constructed a masculinist nationalist project that has overshadowed the participation of women in the struggle for liberation.

The colonial enterprise was a masculine project that sought to inferiorize and feminize the African man who in turn took it upon the African woman. As his consciousness grew, the African man began to view himself as protector of the nation (woman) and tasked himself with the need to fight and reassert his masculinity hence the nationalism that was born out of the need to fight colonialism also became a gendered discourse- hegemonic masculinity, as propounded by Connell and Anderson (1991) being the most dominant masculinity centred around physical toughness and strength, authority, heterosexuality and hard work is what governed the pre-colonial, colonial and nationalist project. The coming of the whiteman saw jobs that were previously reserved for women

being foisted on the black man in order to further inferiorize and subdue him. A case in point is ClopasTichafa in [Chinodya \(1989\)](#) who is tea boy for the white administrators.

In [Katiyo \(1976\)](#) we witness the patriarch, Sekuru, being respected and revered by everyone, chief Mtoko and chief Makosa were also respected. Then came colonialism and the whites like Hill, African chiefs (Chuma) and all the men lost their power and dignity. Hill and his men disarm the chief's warriors, select and carry away forty strong African men and twenty four oxen. This disarming of the warriors is equivalent to the removal of the African manhood. So the inferiorisation of the African man gave rise, in him, to a strong desire to re-assert himself, to return to the former status as the stronger, the protector – hence the rise of gendered nationalism. Masculinities of conquest were associated with violence and domination .What makes the imperial project masculine is that it was carried out by men. The Pioneer Column itself comprised of men only. White women came to Southern Rhodesia later on after conquest. As such in order to counter violence with violence and re-position himself on the pedestal he was before the advent of colonialism, the blackman had to be geared to fight. Thus in Katiyo's novel there is no room for women in the early resistance movement. We see heroes like Shonga being hailed and the few women who 'dare' to go against the norm and fight the colonial system and succeed materially like Rudo are condemned as Gomo says of Rudo:

Rudo is buying a house in Highfields, I do not know what for. A woman buying a house!She has become a man. ([Katiyo 1976](#))

Thus in the nationalist discourse any woman who dares to override the parameters set for her, like Vera's female soldiers will be lashed at by the males. In chronicling the rise of nationalism, Katiyo can be credited for showing both men and women (one woman in fact) taking part in conscientizing the people as Rudo is quoted in the Daily News, an incident that costs her, her job and leads her to prison, addressing a gathering and questioning:

Do we have to kill the white people in this country before we can be heard? ([Katiyo 1976](#))
The participation of Rudo, like that of the rural women in [Staunton \(1991\)](#) and [Weiss \(1985\)](#) is beneficial to the nation but like Hove and Chinodya , Katiyo does not allow it to bear fruit. Rudo's consciousness and patriotism is 'nipped in the bud' as she is imprisoned before she takes any other action that will free the country. Rudo's political consciousness like that of Marita in [Hove \(1988\)](#) is not allowed to grow. Hence it becomes clear that:

Nationalism is a discourse about a moral code which mobilizes men to become its sole protectors ([Mayer 2000](#)).

The other women in Katiyo with the potential to participate in the national discourse are not even allowed to rise above their limited consciousness – Joyce finds herself pregnant and cannot do much .The colonized men, even those recruited into the white police force, are made subservient (like women) to the whiteman. This is evidenced by the black police officers – John and George

who 'jump' and are very eager to please the likes of Wright. The whiteman has created the 'female' in the black man, hence the real African female 'ceases to exist'.

In [Chinodya \(1989\)](#) we see almost the same scenario as in Katiyo, only that in Chinodya there are more females and the scene has moved from the conscientization stage to the real battle field. The construction of masculine nationalism in order to react to and counter colonisation that was seen in Katiyo, continues in [Chinodya \(1989\)](#) and [Mutasa \(1985\)](#). These two take us into the forest, into the bush. Who do we see in the bush? Where is the other sex and how do the two sexes relate to the war and to each other? The paper will establish. *Harvest of Thorns* is fraught with nationalist overtones as Chinodya plunges the reader into the 'deep end' of the war. Young men and women are leaving school, their parents and friends for the nationalist cause. What transpires in the bush however, is not what many young women envisaged as the words of [McClintock \(1995\)](#)

The nation has been constructed as the hegemonic domain of both masculinity and heterosexuality and thus has been a major site for the institutionalisation of gender differences. (p35)

Thus in Chinodya even though the women go into the bush, we are not allowed to see them in actual combat but in the stereotyped female roles of domesticity as:

The camp wrenched to life with a bustle of activities – women fending children, clothes, nappies, blankets and fires. Shuttling to and fro with pieces of kitchenware or baggage in their hands. ([Chinodya 1989](#))

Ropa's task is to teach camp children even though she wishes she were a combatant so that she could hunt down the racist headmistress of her former school. She reveals that they, (the women and girls) are trained:

A little, just to know how to react to emergencies... not many girls are being sent out to fight these days. (p111)

Even those sent outside camp do not engage in actual combat as they are made to guard the arms depot and lament 'we wish we were out at the front' ([Chinodya 1989](#)). This confinement of women reduces the nationalist discourse to a domain of men and it is the nation's men who are made into heroes as [Staunton \(1991\)](#) contends that women were often not permitted to train with weapons and thus were unable to fight and protect the nation. Pregnant or menstruating women were put in different camps. This separation is also evident in Vera's *The Stone Virgins* where the female soldiers were expected to sleep in their whole attire including heavy boots.

Nationalism has also been defined as:

The language through which sexual control and repression (of women) is justified and masculine prowess is exercised and expressed. ([Mayer 2000](#))

And the occasional exploitation of the bodies of the chimbwidos (females who cooked for guerrillas) and female comrades by the likes of Baas Die, who sleeps with Marita, GidiIshumba with Chenzira, clearly shows the interconnectedness of nation, gender and sexuality. It is because

nationalism is a masculine project that the nation becomes feminised and figured in service to male needs. Thus Chinodya fails to show us women in actual combat and has helped 'prop-up' - this national ego that celebrates the inclusion of men and exclusion of women in nationalist discourse. The female comrades are not even given names.

Mutasa (1985) moves in the same vein, or is even worse as there is a 'visible' absence of female guerrillas, only the chimbwidos and village women are mentioned. Like Chinodya, Mutasa continues in the upholding of the hegemonic masculinities that celebrate the prominence and superiority of men at the expense of womanhood a branch of black feminism which informs the research and which celebrates the working together of both sexes. To Mutasa, it is as if there were no women at all except those that were raped (Muchaneta and her mother) and the Chimbwidos who have no names except Gamuchirai. The namelessness of the chimbwidos could mean their obscurity in the consciousness of Mutasa. The above is akin to the argument that society is structured in such a way as to benefit men, to the political, social and economic detriment of the women. In Mutasa the women are obscured, which proves that they are not intended to be part of the nationalist struggle. Women are used as guiding forces behind the scenes and are not given the opportunity to be at the fore as echoed by Yuval-Davis and Anthias (1989) assertion that women's:

Centrality is also based on their symbolic status, connected to their reproductive roles as representatives of purity (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989).

After dwelling on novels written by men, one can be pardoned for welcoming a war novel written by a woman depicting females in combat. How far, though does Vera (2002) go in highlighting the contributions of women to the disturbances in Matebeleland in the early 1980s? In Vera's novel women take to the bush, to engage in actual combat. Vera, in line with the norm that women are not to engage in actual combat, however, sees it fit to really specify that they are female soldiers. This strengthens the argument that women are never meant, as is also seen in Hove (1988) *Bones*, in the construction of the nation, to exhibit untoward behaviour, that is, to take it upon themselves to be protectors of the nation – the nation being themselves – the mothers, the reproducers of the nation.

The title of the novel itself '*The stone Virgins*' shows that these women by daring to venture into the male domain, have been robbed of the emotion (softness, gentleness, timidity) that is associated with women hence they have become 'stone' – without proper female feelings. This is further emphasised by the fact that they are said to be virgins – they have not experienced the joys of motherhood which would have kept them in the home where they belong, not in the bush.

As has already been established, masculinities and femininities are gender constructions of the nation and as in many ideologies *The Stone virgins*, one nation (the male), one gender and one sexuality is always favoured by the social, political and cultural institutions which it helps to construct and form. This is the scenario in Vera's where we witness these twin constructions at logger heads in the struggle for liberation. Vera should be hailed for acknowledging the participation of women in this struggle, for participation in the actual 'gun-slinging' as we see from

the female soldiers instead of merely focusing on the overemphasized female roles of cooking, carrying food, washing and providing sex that has been the norm in most works.

In as much as Vera highlights female participation, however this is somewhat diluted by the fact that Vera seems to have realized, in the midst of her writing that manliness has been the idea on which the nation is built and the arena where a passive femininity is constructed (Vera 2002) so much so that she has to spoil the novelty of these courageous women by first labelling them “Stone virgins” then carelessly thrusting male qualities such as ‘whistling’ and tossing bottle tops. They are now even in a world of their own as it is said:

The women who return from the bush arrive with a superior claim of their own. They define the world differently. They are fighters simply who pulled down every barrier and entered the bush, yes, like men. (pg 49)

Yes, Vera has dared to liberate the women through these female soldiers even though it is after the actual liberation war but the rules of the game still being so much so that she is forced to make some concessions and foist male attributes onto these female soldiers in order to emphasize the gendered roles ascribed by national discourses. By entering the bush Vera’s women have broken the moral code of the nation which has constructed women as equivalents to home and motherhood. It is this breakage that Vera celebrates in her novel, the fact that both men and women should take part equally in national defence. The arrival of Vera’s recalcitrant women has upset the status quo as it has resulted, like all events designed to de-construct meta-narratives, in the de-centering of male supremacy as seen when they get to Thandabantu store and:

The men who always frequent Thandabantu store have moved without reluctance or amazement at their displacement, moved to the marula tree (pg 52).

These men who have not gone to war are cowed down in the face of these women who have known the forest in rain and sun, this corresponds with Ann Fusto- Sterlin’s contention that men are made not born and that we construct masculinity through social discourse.

3. CONCLUSION

Conclusively it has emerged in Vera (2002) that nationalism is indeed gendered as evidenced by limited and troubled participation of women in the struggle for liberation of their province. The other three war novels (Katiyo 1976; Mutasa 1985; Chinodya 1989), have even failed to exhibit women in the meaningful task of actual combat. This attests to the fact that although African (Zimbabwean) women were increasingly drawn into national liberation struggles, the gender politics that was at play did not allow them autonomy in their exploits, hence nationalism became a gendered discourse.

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