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A ZIMBABWEAN POET WRITING IN ENGLISH: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF MUSAEMURA ZIMUNYA'S *THOUGHT-TRACKS*

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THIS ARTICLE ANALYSES the work of the Zimbabwean poet, Musaemura Bonas Zimunya, as represented in his anthology *Thought-tracks*.[1] This is a collection of 87 poems, grouped into seven parts (Home and the Mountains; The Prisoner; For the Bearers of the Burden; To the Fighters; 'Zimbabwe and the Ruins; Of Exile and Home; Others) and it represents 'the culmination of the poet's search for a vision and a voice'[2] to convey his sentiments about his home — particularly his childhood in the Nyanga highlands — and his experiences in colonial Rhodesia (now the independent state of Zimbabwe).

Many of the poems in Part 1, Home and the Mountains, recall the simple joys of the poet's early childhood, as in 'Children's rain song' (p. 3) where the poet describes little children playing in the rain and singing the age-old nursery song:

> Rain fall fall
> we will eat berries
> rain fall for all
> we will eat mealies
> we will eat cucumbers
> rain fall fall.

This song is completely in keeping with African tradition for, whereas in English nursery rhymes it is customary to tell the rain to go away and come again another day, in Shona society it is traditional to implore the rain to come so that people can grow mealies, rice, pumpkins and cucumbers. The Shona people were agriculturists in a drought-prone country where the coming of the rain was crucial.

This same pastoral background is present in the poem 'The herdboy' (p. 8), but here it is the discomfort and misery of certain aspects of life for ordinary rural people that is depicted. The description of the tired herdboy bringing 'a restive herd to the kraal', soaked through by the rain, barefoot, and protected only by 'a coned sack smelling of wet nights' getting splashed

[1] M. B. Zimunya, *Thought-tracks* (Harlow, Longman, 1982).

[2] Ibid., back cover.

with manure as he tries to separate the cow and her calf is a realistic portrayal of the 'good old life' of 'the good old days' that the poet remembers so vividly. In this poem the rain is not seen as an entirely beneficial event but as an agent of destruction:

> But soon, the parasol grass roof begins to leak
> as hysterical torrents of rain heave and groan.
> Somewhere the clay-daub grins and tumbles down
> and a bundle of mother and child huddle in the opposite
> dank end, 'Mwari woye, what grave sin did we not confess?'

It is interesting to note that the mother and child in this poem appeal both to the ancestors ('Ancestors, let not rain break her promise of life/ and swallow my only calf in the whirlpool of such rage') and to God (*Mwari*) ('Mwari woye, what grave sin did we not confess?'). Traditionally the Shona regard the hostile forces of nature as manifestations of the anger of the ancestral spirits (*vadzimu*), and confess any wrongdoing to them. The idea of confessing one's sins directly to God is a concept borrowed from Christianity. Zimunya's Christian beliefs may have influenced the wording of this poem.

Zimunya's artistry is apparent most strikingly in his descriptions of the landscape of his home. As may be gathered from the title of this first group of poems, mountains play a large part in his poetry. The mountain ranges of Nyanga are variously seen as a bulwark of protection against foreign encroachment, a symbol of power, a fortress of hope and a tower of blessing, as well as being beautiful in themselves. There is a sense that Zimunya sees the Nyanga mountains as another Pisgah (from whence Moses looked down on the Promised Land, see Deut. 34: 1–4) overlooking a land of splendour and hope which is promised to a suffering people.

In 'I like them' (p. 4) the poet describes the mountain ranges of his home in very different ways; the northern mountains are

> crouching like a monstrous lion—
> . . .
> and upon whose muzzle
> stands a huge rhino-horn of stone—
> always ready to pounce upon the western.

The eastern mountains are, however, described as 'leaning closely together like collapsing waves/threatening to drown the northern' and the western mountains as 'chevrolet', 'with wheels of boulders/and axles of earth/and windows of stone' — a surprising use of metaphor drawn from western technology rather than traditional Shona imagery.

Zimbabwe has many strange-looking rocks that amuse and fascinate the stranger and indigene alike. In many ways the northern mountains of

Zimunya's Nyanga are like the hills of my Nyota Hills in Mazowe that are called the Lion Mountains because of their leonine appearance; like me Zimunya identifies with the mountains of his home, as in the concluding stanza of 'I like them':

> Always when I give them a poet's glance,
> they are on a merry-go-round
> whose pivot is my soul.

But Zimunya's descriptions are not confined to mountains; in 'The herdboy' the coming of daylight is described as arriving 'like a shower of balm upon a bird without a nest/and a nestling whistling in the glistening pastures'. In 'My home' (p. 13) the poet's delight in the sun and the river is skilfully changed into a feeling of mixed amusement and disgust at the behaviour of the city girls:

> And now I can see
> the silver glare and glisten
> of the full sliding sun
> in a huge serpent
> like a river clear of muddy flood
> flowing and leaping swift and free
> gurgling and giggling
> like those rude young girls from the city
> gurgling and giggling
> swayed by mini-morals
> clothing the old chaste tradition
> with everlasting defilement.

The loss of traditional values hinted at in this poem is more poignantly described in 'No songs' (p. 10) in which the poet paints a dark picture of despair, 'No songs of cicadas—/Only a sighing silence', lamenting his people's loss of their cultural identity:

> We have no ancestors
> no shrine to pester with our prayers
> . . .
> so we live on
> without rain, without harvest.

This loss may be due to the force of Western civilization, but this is not clearly stated in the poem itself. It is as if only at the point of death that the people can regain a sense of their own heritage:

> the day we shall know the way back
> to the caves of the ancestors,
> the lion tongue of death will be licking
> the last gush of blood from our souls.

The use of the phrase 'the lion tongue of death' is most appropriate in this context, for the *mhondoro* spirit (a reincarnation of an ancestor) often takes the form of a lion.

In 'The naked woman' (p. 15) the emphasis of the poem changes to a more overtly political theme. The tall woman standing on the mountain 'flickering white of fire suffused with sombre sneers' is a symbol of the proud White government of Rhodesia. As the White man's technology and political and economic power made a mockery of the history and civilization of the African people, so this nightmare figure 'winnowed our history in her balance'. In addition, this 'wind-blown witch' exults in the desecration of the holy places:

> Now she was dancing, now she was laughing
> now she was naked and now she was truly bedecked with
> the gold seized from the shrines and the temples
> of the land

Furthermore, the power of the 'White witch' is portrayed as extending beyond the borders of Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) to Soweto (a reference to the South African policy of apartheid), to Paris (a reference to the French policy of assimilation) and to Birmingham (a reference to the slavery practised in Alabama — a southern state in the United States of America).

Of all the poems examined so far this poem illustrates Zimunya's poetic genius at its best. The metaphor of the witch in describing the White governments is effective in that their policies and laws were treacherous, hidden, calculating and clandestine like the workings of a witch at night.

In a more light-hearted manner 'Kisimiso (A version of Christmas)' (p. 18) and 'Ifulaimachina (Flying-machine)' (p. 22) examine the White man's religion and technology, respectively. Much of what Christmas stands for — reverence for the birth of Christ, the message of peace, goodwill to mankind — is forgotten in the commercialization of Christmas, in feasting and in drunkenness. 'Kisimiso' describes one such celebration of Christmas in a rural homestead:

> Kisimiso means feasting
> . . .
> and, of course, large pots of fizzing frothy beer.
> Nothing about the book themes of good will and peace

In 'Ifulaimachina' an old man is awe-stricken with the White man's technological feat and wonderingly remarks

> These men of the White skin,
> even puffing into the face of God,

I swear through Chaminuka,
they will finish us all off.

To this man the White man is almost some kind of god who, with his flying machine, can challenge even the Almighty. The same amazement at the activities of the Whites is present in 'Ask Grandpa' (p. 26). The culture-clash between White and Black is hinted at in this poem, and, sadly, the description of buses as 'moving coffins' and cities as 'jungles' are all too accurate.

In this first section Zimunya writes with a passion and a candour, capturing the spirit of his people and of his home area. The poems are exhilarating in their freshness and poignant in their depiction of poverty and of oppression. More mention could, however, have been made of the spirits of the ancestors as they form the reference points for the cultural identity of their people.

The mood changes in the second group of poems, The Prisoner. In these poems the poet's tone is of pity, of desperation and of despair. The smile, the uninhibited laughter, the seemingly unstinted obedience of his people are mere masks, a skin-deep façade hiding a bone-deep wound inflicted by the oppressors on the bruised but unconquerable spirit of the people. But, in common with the 'Negritude' poems by Black French writers,[3] Zimunya never overtly incites his readers to take up arms against the oppressor.

In the first poem 'Monstrous' (p. 31) the mood is one of anger and bitterness in which the poet at first calls the White man 'a bird' and then later

a roaring giant mosquito,
cotton-Black, rickety motion of flight
. . .
blind as a Cyclops shot in the eye,
weaving centuries to a savage point and
sucking vampire draughts of innocent blood,

leaving disease and death and
skeletons writhing in this land.

The image of a giant mosquito, sucking the blood of its victim through oppression and exploitation and inferring that it is infecting them with malaria, is most effective. The reference to 'a Cyclops shot in the eye' recalls an incident in Homer's *Odyssey* in which the hero, Odysseus, encounters the Cyclopes, a race of one-eyed giants, and blinds one of

[3] R. Shapiro, *Negritude Black Poetry from Africa and the Caribbean* (New York, October House, 1970).

them, Polyphemus. The poet's reference to Greek mythology in this context shows a dependence on foreign ideas as well as a lack of an equivalent personage in African mythology.

In 'The slave' (p. 32) the poet laments that he has become a slave to his desire for material possessions produced by Western culture, 'this St Mark suit/The Tempest stereo/the Suzuki guitar/this camera', which he is unable to acquire. In desperation he cries out:

> Lord, I wish too much
> want too much
> . . .
> and gain too little
> to escape this haunting slavery.

The three poems 'White Padre' (p. 39), 'The vultures' (p. 40) and 'Black Padre' (p. 41) may be grouped together as portraying the same theme: corruption. The White Padre (chaplain, priest or minister) is corrupted by alcohol and smoking:

> You
> whose smile is stained with rust of smoke
> whose voice is a rotting breath of alcohol
> (wardens probably washed your conscience off
> with slow, detergent tots of gin
> in the midst of anti-Black humour)

He is vehemently attacked as one who 'knew not us' when he was supposed to be 'Christ's imitator'. The poet damningly asks him 'now where is your salvation?' The Black Padre is, in contrast, corrupted by the idea of power — power gained from imitating the White man — and who demeans and oppresses his fellow Blacks:

> He is intoxicated this man,
> White Padre's right hand man
> hands in pockets
> preaching sermons
> smelling too much of a wineful ego
> before voiceless Black children:

The two poems are criticisms of a certain kind of clergyman but, of course, a wholesale attack on the clergy as a whole would be unfair. There were many true and sincere Christians who died for the liberation of the people. The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace was one Christian organization opposed to the White Government. But there were others who wanted a separation of politics and religion — one wonders how the

oppressed and ignorant could receive the truth without freedom of body or of mind.

In 'The vultures' it is the prison guards who are the vultures, corrupted by the prison system, attacking the White prison superintendent. The poem ends by saying:

> We lack the virtue of vultures
> They tear live animals
> and eat them.

There is a longing for peace and for justice explicit in these poems as well as an appeal for political freedom, but no positive action towards obtaining that freedom is proposed.

A longing for freedom is also expressed in 'Chimpanzee' (p. 16) in which a compassionate description of the 'burning impatience/and killing frustration' of a chimpanzee caged behind 'the meshed electric bars' stands for the emotions of the poet's people. Soon, however, the 'irritable silence' of the people was broken by sounds of gunfire.

Zimunya's pre-occupation with foreign or Biblical characters (such as Caesar and Samson in 'Humiliated' (p. 46), Pilate in 'White Padre' (p. 39) and H. Wilson (Harold Wilson, the British Prime Minister at the time of the Unilateral Declaration of Independence) in 'Black Padre' (p. 41) reveal his Christian background and Western education. It would have been more appropriate, however, if he had included more references to people and events in Shona mythology and history.

In 'To a detainee' (p. 52) the poet expresses an understanding of the African's place in his own land — opposed to the oppressors who think the country is theirs:

> 'Dogs, trucks and guns belong to them
> but the soil, spirit in the earth
> is ours.'

The tone is triumphant and exultant and the sentiment echoes the teaching of Chaminuka and Nehanda[4] — that material possessions may belong to the oppressors but the land and its soul belong to the people.

In Part III, For the Bearers of the Burden, the poet attempts to portray ordinary people in various stations in life who are carrying various burdens, many of whom are debased by their oppressors. 'Old Granny' (p. 59) is a

[4] Chaminuka was a prophet and one of the leading spirit mediums in central Mashonaland in the nineteenth century. Nehanda was a spirit medium and prophetess who lived in the Mazowe area of Zimbabwe in the late nineteenth century. She was instrumental in encouraging the Shona uprising against the White settlers, now known as the First Chimurenga, and her memory was a source of inspiration in the liberation struggle.

depiction of an old woman who epitomizes the results of poverty, of suffering, and the negligence of others. She is a symbol of the results of dehumanizing forces in society.

The exploitation of the people by the giant multinational corporations is half-humourously revealed in 'My cars' (p. 60), in which an elderly car-washer pretends to own the cars he cleans for the staff of Anglo American Corporation.

This section also reveals the poet's feelings of anger, protest and desperation, particularly in poems such as 'Mr Bezuidenhout's dogs' (p. 65), in which the dogs are compared to Rhodesia Front Members of Parliament:

> Mr Bezuidenhout's dogs have hyena blood
> and they howl and bark at everything Black,
> including shadows, just like RF backbenchers
> during the nth reading of the Land Apportionment
> Act (1933) or the Situpa Bill.

and in 'Christmas card: 1976 (from Rhodesia)' (p. 71), in which the poet angrily depicts the servile status of the Black people. In 'At your feet' (p.73) the people say:

> we the poor
> . . .
> the fear-smitten
> unfreed slaves,
>
> we die at your feet.

There is a prayer for freedom in 'Let it be' (p. 68)

> Lord, I know you were there
> . . .
> and let it be freedom now.
> Let it be — freedom
> Amen

but otherwise no strong incitement to the people to redress their grievances by force of arms. Perhaps fear of reprisal prevented Zimunya from being any more explicit.

Part IV of the anthology is subtitled To the Fighters. It begins with a poem entitled 'A way of life' (p. 77) which gives an account of a bird of prey taking little helpless chicks:

> Little black furry bodies
> all the size of a chirp
> cheep cheep cheep
> around a cluck-clucking hen

and 'leaving a Hiroshima mood/over the African village'. The alliteration and onomatopoeic expressions in the poem express very clearly the appealing nature of the chicks, and the description of 'the thundering shadow' which kills them and leaves a 'Hiroshima mood' is most effective. It is easy to see that the poet is describing more than a bird of prey in this poem — the inference to the Rhodesian airforce is unmistakable. In addition to recalling the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima in 1945 this poem also reminds the critic of the bombing of the Chimoio Camp in which hundreds lost their lives.[5]

The next poem, 'Viva Freedom' (p. 78), commemorates the independence of Mozambique and the joy the Frelimo radio broadcast brought to the poet, even though he understood only the words 'viva Moçambique' and 'viva Frelimo'. The emotive quality of the word 'viva' is important as it was a slogan for ZANU(PF) soldiers as well as for Frelimo troops in Mozambique.

In 'Of bemusement' (p. 79) the wounded 'leader' (guerrilla?) is described as

> laughing amid all the pain
> he scorns all
> as he totters—
>
> totters...totters...totters—

His desperate, almost heroic resolve to keep on moving despite his injuries is cheered by the crowd but at the same time it is compared to the buzzing of a trapped fly nearing its death:

> the fly flutters and spins
> on the head stuck deep in the gum
> and we watch the dexterity of one sure of death

Despite the touch of ironic humour in the poet's choice of metaphor it is still a most compassionate poem — but also a frightening one as it touches on the concept that individual people are as unimportant and helpless as flies:

> life is like that
> zzzz
> profaning heritage with inhumanity
> zzzzz
> bolting the cave

[5] Chimoio was the headquarters of the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) — a military wing of ZANU(PF). It was, in fact, a huge complex some seventy-five kilometres from the city of Mutare across the border into Mozambique. The Camp was destroyed by the Rhodesian Air Force at dawn on 23 November 1977 with a bombing raid and landing of troops; the attack lasted for three days; see D. Martin and P. Johnson, *The Struggle for Zimbabwe: The Chimurenga War* (Salisbury, Zimbabwe Publishing House; London, Faber, 1981), 288.

when the skies are heavy
(where will you hide?)
zzzz...zzz...zz

In 'Big tree' (p. 82) an effective metaphor is used in describing the Rhodesia Front regime as a 'giant ironwood tree' which is hewn down from north, south, east and west. This tree, however, falls on an ant (a symbol of the Black freedom fighter?) but 'it lives and he [the tree] decays'.

Despite his undoubted support of the liberation struggle the poet is able to stand aside and mock its supporters (including himself). In 'After the Massacre' (p. 83) he recounts an argument in an English pub, where

We castrated the regime,
we prophesied doom for the puppets
we praised the work of the peasants,
managed to smash the capitalists,
and with a gulp the size and noise of a cataract
we cried, '*A luta continua.*'

There is also a more serious element in this poem, for, when the different tribal groups represented in the pub contest the right to be the future leaders

. . . in a most accomplished stroke of genius
every tribe and clan was given the Anglo-Saxon equivalent—
Welsh, English, Scottish, Irish—
and our pyrrhic nature was complete.

It is as if the arguers need to identify themselves with British tribal groupings before they see themselves as being fit to rule their own country.

The uselessness of such 'pub-politics' is mentioned at the end of the poem:

The following morning
we considered the post mortem positive:
. . .
. . . what we did not talk about
comes bleeding through the heat like a deep gangrene.

The somewhat cynical tone of this poem gives way to a joyful, exultant and almost reverent tone in 'Fighter' (p. 87), in which the freedom fighter is praised in almost religious terms:

I was blind and deaf
I was dumb, and I was palsied.

But now I can see,
I hear, and I mutter too.

and

Those who walked in a century of darkness
begin to see the flickering aurora.

The fighter has brought a new hope and a new pride to the people, enabling them to say

I am the new man
And you are the new woman.
We are heirs of the Rock.

The idea of the people being 'heirs of the Rock' is further explored in the two following companion poems, 'The Mountain' (p. 88) and 'Climbers' (p. 89). In these poems the concept of building a new society is equated with climbing a very dangerous mountain in order to 'find the rock/to finish the house of Mambo' ('The Mountain). In 'Climbers' the poet prays that his people will be able to create a better society:

One hand to another
one rock to another,
one rock over the other
one wall inside another
outside another until
the city towers above the trees
and we all look up at the dram
taller than pot-bellies, higher than collars,
whisks, uniforms, and accents,
higher still than sky-scrapers

To remind us, down-trodden and ignorant,
remind us, you who have the wisdom,
to climb even higher than Mambo
and put an enduring roof upon this House.

As may be expected from the title of Part V, Zimbabwe and the ruins, the poems in this part deal extensively with the image of rocks and stones and the great city that was built out of them. The first poem in this part, 'The Valley of Mawewe (Endless calls)' (p. 93) celebrates the beauty of the land before the coming of 'the gold digger with blood in his Saxon eyes' and before Rhodes 'made home in the Rock/with a blast of the dynamite where the natives made their Shrine'.

In 'Zimbabwe' (p. 99) the poet reverences the silence of stone:

I want to worship Stone
because it is silence

I want to worship rock
so, hallowed be its silence

and laments the transience of human life:

the many hands that put all this silence together,
the forgotten festivals at the end of the effort:

All speak silence now—silence.

And in 'The stone speaks' (p. 102) he depicts its permanence:

Old.
Older than Moses and Jesus;
older than Greece and Rome;
than the river and the ruins;
than Mwenemutapa and Rhodes;
than Chaminuka
older than all.

Whereas in 'Zimbabwe Bird' (p. 104) it is the power as well as the enduring nature of stone that is depicted:

Give us a thousand,
another thousand,
and a million years
and seal the wisdom of our forefathers
inside stone—

. . .

Ah! Still a man chooses to harass the Bird
until history delivers the fire of the dragon,
and so what else is there left to do
but to embrace the fury with his whole heart?

Continuing the idea of the Bird as a symbol of defiance and revolt, the next poem, 'Rooster' (p. 105), celebrates the courage of the cockerel who crows at dawn even though his shelter and family have been destroyed. The rooster is seen as being 'as true as the Zimbabwe Bird'.

In Part VI, subtitled Exile and Home, the poems reflect somewhat different, but still related, concerns. The poet's claustrophobia and loss of identity in London are clearly conveyed in 'London '76' (p. 110) and his depression in the cold and grey weather of England in the first part of 'Autumn: in England' (p. 111). However, the poet's personal misery is soon swallowed up in rage as he remembers the outrages being committed in his homeland; this rage, in turn, gives way to a vision of the new society:

And the sleeping will awake
the blind shall feel the movement of the sun on the lids
the dead shall celebrate at the place of birth
the dumb will jump and caper and jubilate
and the grandsons of the cave man
will hide their tails in naked shame.

In contrast, the three concluding poems in this group are more about personal concerns than national issues. In 'Going home' (p. 120) and 'Nostalgia' (p. 121) the poet portrays his homesickness while in exile and longs for his home. At the end of 'Nostalgia' he comforts himself with advice to look beyond this world for his home:

gaze at the fate that lies beyond the sun,
beyond the smell of time and feeling, because
that is home.

The poems grouped together in Part VII, 'Others', continue this more personal and philosophical tone, dealing largely with the poet's search for meaning in his own life, as in 'Being' (p. 125), lamenting his spiritual darkness, as in 'Look at this globe' (p. 126), and, somewhat comically, mocking his physical appearance, in 'Misunderstanding' (p. 127). The final poem in the anthology, 'On the wind' (p. 130), relates an almost transcendental experience of the poet in which he realizes his kinship with the elements: 'Ah, suddenly I was friend with the air/I was friend with the wind'. It is during this experience that the poet understands the purpose of his poetic craft, to

write it down
put it in everlasting words and lines
and tell it to you.

In conclusion, one may say that Zimunya's poems are generally well written and carefully thought out. They do, by and large, represent the 'culmination of the poet's search for a vision and a voice'.[5] When reading the poems one cannot avoid experiencing the author's joys and sorrows, hopes and frustrations and his aspirations for his country and its people.

Many of Zimunya's poems are passionate political protests but nowhere does he write to incite his people to take up arms against the colonial power (unless 'The fighter' can be so considered). As many of these poems were written in England where the poet need not have feared intimidation for his views, it is reasonable to assume that he chose to explore the spiritual rather than the merely militaristic aspect of the struggle,

[5] Zimunya, *Thought-tracks*, back cover.

to expose the greed and avarice of the White settler government and to portray the political social and economic exploitation of his people.

Zimunya's verse is often imbued with a sense of sadness, but at the same time his love of, and hope for, his motherland are never quite obliterated by his feelings of anger or despair. He identifies himself very closely with the natural features of his country (particularly the mountains) and with the spiritual forces existing in it. His poems dealing with his Nyanga childhood are especially appealing.

Unfortunately, however, Zimunya's very craftsmanship alienates him from the ordinary Zimbabwean. His use of free verse is very different from Shona poetry which is written 'in lines of equal duration and spaced . . . at equal intervals of time'[6] which gives the rhythm of the drum beat. His language is rather too Anglo-centred, and perhaps too allusive for the ordinary Zimbabwean to appreciate. For instance, the apt 'conceit' of contrasting an incandescent lightbulb with one's own dark soul ('Look at this globe') is comparable with the ideas contained in the poetry of the English metaphysical poets in the late seventeenth century but is perhaps a little difficult for the average Zimbabwean to understand.

His intricate use of images drawn from European culture is to the detriment of the culture of his own people — virtually ignoring the legendary heroes and heroines that feature so greatly in Shona literature.

Nevertheless, Zimunya's works demonstrate both strength and sensitivity and have shown him to be a writer of great talent and insight, able to combine both thought and feeling in the achievement of his desired literary goal. There is no doubt that he is one of Zimbabwe's greatest poets writing in English.

[6] A. C. Hodza and G. Fortune, *Shona Praise Poetry* (Oxford, Oxford Univ. Press, 1979), 87.