

I thought it would make an interesting juxtaposition of ‘African Library’ entries to follow the previous piece, on Akare’s account of Kenyan slum life in the seventies, with this discussion of a very recent novel engaging with (particularly) the survival struggles of two women friends who both live in the ‘Jo’burg Lines’ area of Mbare township in Harare. Judging by Tagwira’s account, the Zimbabwean township circumstances bear many resemblances to the earlier Kenyan conditions evoked in Akare’s text, but the tone and tenor of her description are very different to the Kenyan author’s. Mainly this is so because of the strong focus on female experience, insights and coping strategies in Tagwira’s writing and because, in contrast with Eddy the loner as focaliser in Akare’s text, Tagwira’s account centralises the strong and profoundly loyal friendship between Onai Moyo and Katy Nguni (near neighbours and fellow market traders).

The two women’s circumstances differ in significant ways simply because Katy has a gem of a husband – utterly faithful, hard-working and with real pride in and a sense of responsibility towards his wife and their law student daughter – whereas Onai’s is the proverbial bastard. Gari believes that he has fulfilled his responsibility towards his wife, their two teenage daughters and young son by doing nothing but allowing them to share the poorly furnished township house which he inherited from his father. He has a good job as a ‘section manager’ in a large multinational firm, but spends all his income on booze and other women. So brutally selfish is he that he does not use condoms and has never signed on for his firm’s medical aid scheme. Onai struggles to maintain her trade as a vegetable and fruit vendor at her market stall; despite the illegality, Katy’s husband John (a long-distance truck driver between Zimbabwe and South Africa) buys foreign currency in the neighbouring country, which he and Katy trade in as the second, secret and highly risky (but much more lucrative) side of their business life in Zimbabwe. Their most important customer is in fact a crooked but very suave Assistant Police Commissioner, Mr Nzou.

Tagwira uses multiple first-person narration in this (her first) novel, but even when the account veers away from Onai it circles back to her at a later stage and eventually one sees that it is really mainly her story – a deeply poignant one, as the title indicates. This technique of shifting focalisers in the narrative allows the author to build up a convincingly densely textured account of contemporary Zimbabwean life, providing perspectives from many angles on what living there is like nowadays for its citizens. The novel opens with Onai being woken up in the early hours to discover that burglars have picked on their house to steal their main ‘theft-worthy’ possession, their treasured old black-and-white television set. Her husband still being out on his nightly wanderings, she can only gather her children in her bedroom where they cower together while the theft is being perpetrated. When Gari returns, later, he has clearly been fornicating as well as drinking. She informs him reproachfully of the theft that happened when he was not there to protect his family, but Gari (as is his inebriated, abusive habit) accuses Onai of having ‘set up’ the robbery with her (non-existent) “boyfriends”. When she looks back at him, unspeaking but calmly unafraid (assuming that he is too drunk to be dangerous), he attacks her and leaves her bleeding copiously from a head wound, on the floor, while he collapses into a drunken sleep on the bed. Ruva, her elder daughter, runs to Katy’s house for help; despite grumbling at the task, Katy’s husband John coaxes his old car on precious petrol along the potholed, dangerous road to the hospital, where Onai stays for a few days. Asked by the doctor, she gives the standard “I walked into a door” answer of the abused wife, for “the cocoon of pretence she had woven around herself had become her armour” (4). For all her misery, she is resigned and trapped in the marriage for her children’s sake. Even Katy’s husband reminds her as they return

from the hospital, that there is no chance Onai could earn enough to obtain a house to which she and her children could go, for; “This is Zimbabwe. A poor woman will always be a poor woman. *Hazvichinje!*” (18).

In glaring contrast with Onai and Gari’s relationship, Tagwira depicts the growing love and deepening commitment between Katy’s only child, her student daughter Faith, and a wealthy young businessman, brother to a former fellow student of Faith’s. The two things that bother Faith about the glamorous bachelor Tom Sibanda is that he has no real understanding of the struggles of the poor, because he has always lived in wealth and ease (without being a callous man), and that he owns a farm whose former (white) owner was murdered. The novel deals with the circumstances preceding, during and following the now notorious Operation Murambatsvina (‘operation clear out the rubbish’), the police campaign ordered by the Zimbabwean government to close the informal markets of the city and to demolish all illegal township backyard shacks and home extensions. Tom, who has ‘connections’, warns Faith of what is coming, but the young woman is incredulous: “Half of Mbare’s population lives in shacks. Where would they all go? And if the markets are closed, these people would starve!” she exclaims (22). While the wealthy and the politically powerful easily flout the laws, restrictions and regulations of contemporary Zimbabwe (Tagwira shows), the poor cannot survive except by taking dangerous risks and incurring severe reprisals. As Faith’s father says; “the line between what’s legal and what is not, has never been as blurred as it is now” (27). Faith herself notes that “their lives had become one big obsession with obtaining food” (27).

Tagwira uses a technique of providing the reader with ‘witness voices’ by weaving certain ‘summarising’ remarks into the characters’ very natural and convincingly presented conversations. A small sequence of such comments includes the following remarks: “[Onai] was only thirty-six years old, but she felt like a tired old woman” (44); she says wryly (with reference to the Zimbabwean inflation rate): “I must be among the poorest millionaires in the world” (56). At another point we are told that Faith (who adores her mother’s bosom friend, Onai) “thought of all the many Zimbabwean women flouting socially and lawfully accepted norms to fend for their children. . . . all the women who yearned for some kind of freedom” (82). Elsewhere, even the well-off Tom (Faith’s boyfriend, who obtained his farm in an entirely above-board way, it transpires) declares: “In Zimbabwe, it’s not only death and taxes which are certainties. You can add queues and riot police to the list!” (99). Ruva, Onai’s daughter, asks despairingly: “Are we always going to be queuing for food and never getting enough?” (113).

Pending the supposed slum clearance, when everyone has been warned of the coming police and riot police clampdown on the types of illegality by means of which the Zimbabwean urban poor survive, we are told that “the air was saturated with fear, anger and anxiety” (141). To Onai, the closing of the market leaves her (like so many others) without means to obtain a livelihood. We hear about her kind war veteran neighbour, who commits suicide when his heroic liberation war record cannot protect him from the punitive actions of the township raid; of little children accidentally killed when a township shack is bulldozed; of people losing their meagre but treasured possessions and of families with very young children having to huddle, homeless, in the winter air on a nearby open field. All this shock and deprivation is soberly described; such absence of sensationalism in the account of a social disaster and an administratively sanctioned injustice has an all the more chilling effect because of Tagwira’s authorial restraint. Even the hastily assembled emergency shelters on the field, we learn, are subsequently demolished as constituting a “health hazard”! (155). As John, Katy’s husband, says: “The suffering will overwhelm whatever benefits are supposed to come out of this” (168). Tagwira cites a radio broadcast:

The exercise to demolish markets as a means of flushing out criminals, and getting

rid of trading places which had become a health hazard, was still continuing. As the reporter intoned, this would pave way for more orderly, more hygienic trading in crime-free zones. (222)

The middle section of the text depicts mainly the further harrowing development in Onai's life of her discovery that Gari is having a fullblown affair with the township's most notorious siren, Gloria; widely suspected to have AIDS. She cannot even manage to speak to him about this, so seldom is he home and when he is, so drunken is his state! Onai for the first time begins to wish to escape all this squalid suffering by killing herself; of course the awareness that she could not so abandon her children, holds her back. With trade in the market now impossible, the family is on the brink of starvation when Onai's younger, less ambitious and more vulnerable daughter Rita (who is fifteen) approaches her with the plan to go hawking at the bus queues in town with her small brother Fari serving as police lookout. So desperate is their situation that Onai, despite her other daughter Ruva's horrified objections, allows it; in the meantime Onai, too, does illegal hawking in the city, at the filling station queues, under constant threat of arrest. The two vending children get arrested before long (Rita having had to suffer fondling by a male adult in the process) and Onai immediately stops the children's 'job'; just then the next blow falls when Gari brings Gloria home and introduces her to the family as his next wife. Onai feels as if "she [is] in chains and her life [is] falling apart" (217). Utterly distraught, the mild Onai attacks the complacent, preening Gloria, only to be grievously assaulted in her turn by a nearly maniacally incensed Gari. This incident, at least and at last, extracts Onai from Gari's home and she is taken to shelter at Katy's home while the children are persuaded to stay home.

Later the same night, Gari's health collapses completely; he is hospitalised (despite everything!) with Onai and Katy's help; Gloria having fled. Gari dies soon after without regaining consciousness, but any thought that this death will bring Onai relief is soon quashed. At the funeral, where the extended family is present, Gari's sister accuses Onai of having caused her brother's death. I must mention at this point that the further twists of the knife in this later part of the narrative do not ever make one feel that they are piled on too thick; they are, unfortunately (one is made to feel) all too likely occurrences for a woman in Onai's position. Briefly: after the lengthy funeral, Gari's brother stays on in the house with his family on the grounds that it now belongs to him as the next heir; on the very occasion that he announces this, he orders Onai and her children out of the house, because she conveys her reluctance to share 'her' home with him and thus (in his view) has dared to defy his authority. There is nothing they can do except take their clothes and go to Katy's place for the time being. Ruva, it is decided, will remain with Katy in order to write her O-levels; Onai and the other two children will go to the country to appeal to Gari's sister. Here, they are given a rude and cruelly unwelcoming reception; Onai's mother's place is now the only available refuge. Onai takes her children there and after some days she returns, alone, to Harare, to Katy's place. She finds that

Mbare was much the same as it had been when she left. Small heaps of broken furniture, and bricks and mortar remained a constant symbol of the destruction of people's lives. Increasingly, rubble and dirt seemed a permanent fixture, as the household rubbish collections had become few and far between, and the council seemed to have no sense of responsibility. (282)

So much for 'operation clear out the rubbish'! On her way out, Onai had noticed an iconic scene of a "gaunt woman sitting next to a dying fire, together with a toddler and a small child of school-going age ... with her shoulders hunched forward, head drooping from a slender neck" (251), recognising that some people are still worse off than herself even though she was "almost overwhelmed with fear" and conscious of the apparently "unrelenting cycle of suffering" in her life (269). As she had

(perforce) left her younger children with her mother, she had “forced herself to summon hope, because without it there was no point in even trying” (280) – a subtle allusion to the novel’s title.

Upon her return, the first possible glimmering sign of a possible turn in her prospects arrives when Faith (knowing Onai’s dressmaking skills) asks her *mainini* to make the dress that she (Faith) will be wearing to the luxurious engagement party that Tom is organising for Faith and himself and their families. There are other twists to the narrative that stem from Onai’s attempts to get a council house where she could stay with her children, but I will not go into overwhelming detail in this account of the novel. One particularly poignant detail occurs in a small scene where Onai, believing that she might at last be getting a house of ‘her own’, allows herself the unheard-of luxury of buying and eating an ice-cream from a street vendor. “Being in a position to earn money once again [upon getting a licence to trade] gave her ... a sense of renewed optimism”; she even tells herself that being in a queue provided the opportunity “to pick up the latest information about anything” and “the greatest number of laughs” (317).

I omit also the details of the turn in the narrative caused by the arrest, first, of Faith’s husband John and subsequently of the crooked police officer Nzou, but now Onai, with all her own troubles, stands by Katy in her despair when John, whose release the women achieve by blackmailing officer Nzou, flees to South Africa to escape re-imprisonment. As Faith, now a Law graduate (and about to become engaged to Tom) in indignation asks him: ““But can’t you see that it’s the system, Tom? It’s the system that is turning good people into so-called criminals. My father is a good man”” (326). They all know the dangers of border-crossing and how “the men tended not to come back for their wives and children. A few had even drowned in the Limpopo while border-jumping. Others had fallen prey to crocodiles. [Onai] thought of John and felt sorry for her friend. What would happen to them?” (330). But Onai has to “[try] to offer strength [to Katy], while simultaneously trying to draw strength from her friend” (328) – which perfectly summarises the deep friendship of these two afflicted women. To these two, “humour and resilience were their only weapons in a situation that would have otherwise crushed them” (332).

There are important and serious discussions throughout the text about women’s position in society (e.g. 336), but a vivid passage such as the following letter to Onai from Rita (her younger daughter, still living in the country at this stage with Onai’s mother and an aunt, Wanai, as well as her young brother) eloquently conveys the main points.

Amai [as she respectfully addresses Onai, her mother:]

I stopped going to school last week. ... The boys have been chasing me. Last week a boy touched my breasts. I want to stay home and help Ambuya [as she addresses her grandmother] and *mainini* Wambai in the fields. When are you coming to get us? (337)

A serious moment with a lighter conclusion occurs when, after Faith has reproached Tom (to whom she is about to become engaged) with thinking of the poor as ““a sort of indistinguishable mass, much like the socialists did when they talked of the ‘masses’ ”” and he counters by insisting that Faith and his sister Emily (good friends and activist allies) ““are as alike as two peas in a pod”” in wanting ““to change the world for the better”” while he, Tom, is expected to make money so that they ““can live in comfort”” (349) while they pursue their activism. Of course Tagwira touches lightly here on one of the oldest dilemmas of the middle-class activist, in a world where even activism requires funding. But Faith and Tom bring Onai wonderful news: via another subplot I could not go into here, a recently widowed, wealthy friend of Tom’s wants a suitable woman to take over his deceased wife’s bridal shop, and they have persuaded him that Onai is the ideal candidate. Though at first Onai cannot

believe this, since “hers was a life of guaranteed misfortune” (352), the novel ends with a glimpse of Onai, installed in the home that ‘goes with’ the job and reunited with all her children.

Not all the t’s are crossed or i’s dotted at the end of the novel, but it is a muted if unmistakably happy ending for Onai; perhaps just a little too pat, but forgivably so – and a relief after so much grief and suffering. Justice has come to the bent police officer, and John will be let off lightly for testifying against him. Nevertheless, the overwhelming, lingering and realistic impression left by this work is of lives lived under extreme difficulty, but faced with immense courage, dignity and the vital support of caring friendship among women. It is, indeed, a highly accomplished first novel and a valuable addition to the African literary archive, however painful to read its many harrowing moments may be.