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Counter-discourse in Zimbabwean Literature

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Citation

Mangena, T. (2015, February 11). *Counter-discourse in Zimbabwean Literature*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/31875>

Version: Corrected Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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Title: Counter-discourse in Zimbabwean literature

Issue Date: 2015-02-11

Conclusion

'Writing back', 'counter-discourse', 'oppositional literature', 'con-texts': these are some of the terms that have been used to identify a body of postcolonial works that take a classic English text as a departure point, [...] such texts are not 'simply 'writing back' to an English canonical text, but to the whole of the discursive field within which such a text operated and continues to operate in post-colonial worlds. (Thieme, 2001: p.1)

My intention in this study was to highlight the nature of Zimbabwean counter-discursive narratives specifically focusing on selected texts written in English. What I have demonstrated is that in Zimbabwean literature counter-discourse is not limited to subversion of 'the authority of the canon of English literature' but goes beyond to include engagement with local dominant discourses. Writing-back is expanded to include writers who, as suggested by Mwangi, depart from writing-back to the colonial centre and focus on 'local forms of oppression that are seen parallel to classical colonialism' (2009: p. 1). Initially I showed the various acts of writing-back which include cultural nationalism, feminist discourses and self-writings. Then I went on to narrow my focus to feminist rewriting of nationalist narratives, texts rewriting both Gukurahundi and the Third Chimurenga. Counter-discursive texts discussed in this study offer 'new' dimensions to specific narratives of the nation, and in the process create versions of those specific narratives.

As Adichie argues, for every story told, there are different versions and 'insisting on one version of the story' is to ignore the diverse versions of the story (2009). The various personal stories that Adichie tells demonstrate 'the danger of a single story', as she argued in a speech with that same title (2009). Adichie's conclusion is that 'single stories create stereotypes, and stereotypes are bad; not because they are not true, but because they are incomplete, they make one story the only story' (ibid.). In my study, I looked at various stories and how writers challenge the single-story versions by offering counter-discourses. Counter-discourse challenges exclusion and the one-dimensional nature of dominant cultural productions. Ranger traces the single-story theme in Zimbabwean context with specific reference to

Rhodesia in the 1950s and 60s and in Matabeleland in the 1980s and 90s [...] when people had been denied a history. [...] too much

history as well as too little [...] too much history if a single, narrow historical narrative gained a monopoly and was endlessly repeated. In Rhodesia in the 1950s and in Matabeleland in the 1990s, it had been necessary to remedy a deficiency. Now it had become necessary to complicate over-simplifications; to offer a plural history. (2005: 219)

Ranger's understanding of Zimbabwean history is crucial but also limited. He refers to the narrowness of colonial interpretation of history and postcolonial (government) narrations of Matabeleland violence and the 'patriotic' narrative of the 'Third Chimurenga'. Diversity of different stories works only to a certain degree. There are stories that are not just limited, but are manipulative interpretations of facts. This point is clarified in my discussion of state lies on the Third Chimurenga. But as demonstrated by Blackburn (2005), the truth/false dichotomy is complicated. However Blackburn asserts that, "We must not believe that all opinion is ideology that reason is only power, that there is no truth to prevail (2005: p. xiii). Counter-discursive texts particularly show that there is what we can point at as the truth. We can actually use these texts to confirm history. As shown by Blackburn "We believe propositions, and when an issue arises, it is some proposition and its truth and falsity upon which our attention turns. If the issue is an historical one, then our attention will be turned to the historical period and the sources that help to establish what occurred (2005: p. 9). Endorsing claims to authority and knowledge may seem difficult; saying this is similar to saying that it is difficult to arrive at truth. 'Language, culture, power, gender, class, economic status, ideology and desire' are according to Blackburn, the 'dark forces' that influence narratives (2005: p. xvi). In this study the dark forces go beyond the above listed to include ethnicity, race and political affiliation. Ethnic identity proved influential in Gukurahundi narratives, race was a significant aspect in colonial and anti-colonial narratives, and literary dialogue on land invasions of the Third Chimurenga had political affiliation implications. The versions that we have are biased (the dominant and the subversions), since bias is a key aspect of every narrative. But it is possible all the same to elevate some versions above others; compared to dominant discourses, subversions/alternatives possess some kind of superiority. This kind of conclusion questions the relativist mantra that 'there are only different views, each true 'for' those who hold them' (Blackburn, 2005: p. xvi).

In tracing the history of counter-discursive narratives in Zimbabwean literature in English in chapter 1 of this study, I referred to some of the issues raised by Ranger. At the beginning of that tradition in Zimbabwean literature in English, we have representations of black resistance to colonialism. This kind of literary resistance is two-fold. It consists of cultural nationalist writings and war literature. Texts discussed under ‘cultural nationalism’ undermined colonial racist ideology and fulfilled the traditional postcolonial function of writing-back to the imperial centre. In the context of Thieme’s idea of pre-texts and con-texts, texts by black writers are representative of con-texts, and as such interact with the pre-texts of English canonical literature. Zimbabwean writers involved in the Cultural Revolution belong to the first generation and are the first black elites. These include Mutswairo, Sithole and Ndhlala. Cultural nationalism was a useful response to the peripheralisation of African cultures and history, but the de-centring project had its own problems, largely due to the complicated relationship between modernity and colonialism on one hand, and between tradition and nativism on the other hand. For colonised blacks, modernity is intricately tied to colonialism; hence embracing modernity translates into passive assimilation. On the other hand ‘being traditional’ might refer to a nativist return to an imagined past. This might imply that nativism is not a positive human quality. Using Stanford’s ideas (2006), I demonstrated that a hybridised position of adaptation and resistance is favourable as a response to colonialism.

I have demonstrated that Thieme’s con-texts/pre-texts distinction can be broadened and is complicated in the context of Zimbabwean war literature. In the decade before independence Rhodesian discourse ‘glorified those fighting against guerrillas’ in the liberation struggle (Primorac, 2006: 141). Such ‘pre-texts’ are destabilized by nationalist novelists who understandably glorified the war and glossed over its complexities. Writers such as Chinodya (in *Harvest of Thorns*) and Kanengoni (in *Echoing Silences*) challenge such narrow war-historiography. Revisions of war literature are found inadequate by feminist critics. Subsequently female (and some male) writers challenged the exclusion of women by writing women into war history.

As shown in the epigraph, Thieme’s ‘contexts’ is limited to postcolonial texts. But in Zimbabwean counter-discursive narratives this is extended to include texts in dialogue with local dominant discourses. In war literature, Thieme’s con-text/pre-text boundary is particularly contested. What would normally pass as a con-text is translated into a pre-text when its discourse is challenged. I will demonstrate this point here.

- ✓ Rhodesian discourse on war (pre-texts) is challenged by Black Nationalist writers who glorify the war (con-texts)
- ✓ Nationalist texts that glorify the war (these are con-texts at the level above) are translated into pre-texts when they are challenged by writers who represent war space as complex (at this level such war revisions are con-texts)
- ✓ War revisions are translated into pre-texts when female writers identify inadequacies about women exclusion, and revise the 'revised' war historiography.

This demonstrates that there are no fixed boundaries between con-texts and pre-texts as confirmed in Zimbabwean counter-discursive narratives. Such boundaries overlap and are always contested (Thieme, 2001). Over and above broadening Thieme's pre-text/con-text distinction, a study of the trends of counter-discursive war narratives confirmed Terdiman's position that counter-discourse is not sovereign and not exhaustive of reality (1989: 18). Defined here is what is popularly termed intertextuality. Allen has described intertextuality as follows:

Texts [...] are viewed [...] as lacking in any kind of independent meaning. They are what theorists call intertextual. The act of reading [...] plunges us into a network of textual relations. To interpret a text, to discover its meaning, or meanings, is to trace those relations. Reading thus becomes a process of moving between texts. Meaning becomes something which exists between a text and all other texts to which it refers. (2011: p. 1)

Most texts discussed in this study are in constant dialogue with other texts, especially through contestation.

Like most male writers of the late 1990s who revise unqualified glorification of the liberation war, Vera and Nyamubaya respond to an official recalling of the contribution of black women in the Zimbabwean liberation struggle. Vera and Nyamubaya particularly challenge the glorified role black women are said to have played during the liberation struggle and demonstrate that women's contribution to the liberation struggle was rather complex. I expanded on this position in chapter 2 where I demonstrated how Hove, Vera and Nyamubaya challenge the exclusion of women in war literature. They write black women into Zimbabwean liberation history in two significant ways: through a revitalisation of the roles of women in the liberation struggle, and

emphasising women-specific struggles that are often ignored in nationalist writing of the liberation struggle. Nyamubaya and Vera fulfil their mandate by problematizing the war front/rear distinction respectively in 'That Special Place' and 'It is Hard to Live Alone'. They force readers to collapse the boundaries between the battlefield and its rears and understand that women made a meaningful contribution to the making of the nation either on the battlefield or at the rears. For Nyamubaya male freedom fighters at the battlefield were not always heroes of the liberation struggle. Some were rapists and sell-outs. With women as soldiers, the traditional composite nature of the battlefield is challenged. Vera celebrates women's meaningful contribution to the liberation struggle in domesticity. Women may not be at the battlefield but they make a meaningful contribution even when they participate from their homes. A foregrounding of the 'other' struggles of women remained a way of forcing readers to adopt a comprehensive approach to questions of oppression and justice and understand that the liberation war cannot be just about resistance to colonial dominance. I demonstrated this point by taking a look at scenes from different stories that highlight the other struggles that women are involved in, against the background of the larger 'liberation struggle'.

Feminist discourses are complicated when male writers participate. I complicated my discussion on feminist war literature by including Hove's voice and demonstrated how in *Ancestors* he narrates the history of female ancestors, a dimension to an understanding of reality which officially does not exist. As argued by Spivak, 'speaking for' is one of the two senses of representation and is in itself quite problematic (1988: p. 70). Hove speaks from without and is shut out from knowledge of the uniquely female experience. Speaking from without is one of the complexities associated with speaking for. This is what hooks termed 'politics of location' (1990: p. 145). If Hove speaks on behalf of female ancestry, it entails that those spoken for will remain mute and cannot become speaking subjects; and that signals continued enforcement of women's voicelessness.

Over and above revising war narratives, women writers have a unique counter-discursive tradition. Primarily, Zimbabwean women writers write against patriarchal dominance and masculinised nationalist history that gloss over the existence and identities of women. Many Zimbabwean women writers are involved in the battle over misrepresentation of women in history and in literature. However, as I demonstrated in chapter 2, some women writers are more visible and consistent than others. I also noted that women writers participate in the post-independence critique of the ugly moments of the

Zimbabwean postcolony, by offering alternative voices to the official and dominant version of history choreographed by the dominant ZANU PF political party and the ruling government. This kind of history is the official narrative and is mainly characterized by ‘inclusions and exclusions’. Examples of female voices, which challenge the dominant ZANU PF history, include Vera, Tagwira and Gappah. Vera’s *The Stone Virgins* (2002) broke the imposed silence on Gukurahundi. Tagwira and Gappah also participate in the rewriting of the official ‘lies’ on the 1999-2009 crises in *An Uncertainty of Hope* (2006) and *An Elegy for Easterly* (2009) respectively.

In *The Burden of Memory: The Muse of Forgiveness* Soyinka urges a re-reading of African post-independent history beyond colonial politics. He appeals to the entire African continent to understand that, inasmuch as the continent has memories of historic wrongs inflicted on her by others, there are also wrongs that have been inflicted on Africans by fellow brothers and sisters that are not different from the external ones. Soyinka’s position is clearly disputed by some African leaders. For instance, Robert Mugabe said the following when his nation was deep in a multidimensional-crisis: ‘memories do pile up, but the most remote ones, especially those which saw us suffer and the times when we were under bondage, under colonial rule, those can never fade away, they remain forever’ (2005: p. 6). Echoed in Mugabe’s words is an understanding of Zimbabwean history that emphasises colonial injustice whilst ignoring historic memories of local human rights violations. Some Zimbabwean writers subvert this kind of limited historiography, offering alternative accounts. In chapter 3 I demonstrated the interventions in Gukurahundi narratives. Writers selected in chapter 3 concentrate on Gukurahundi as a local historic wrong, committed by the government soldiers that people should always remember. The texts discussed in chapter 4 are evidence as to how Zimbabwean and non-Zimbabwean writers alike continue to voice Gukurahundi silenced by the government. They re-write Gukurahundi from different standpoints. The debate on Gukurahundi continues but remains ethnicised. Writers and critics alike either sympathise or speak on behalf of the Gukurahundi victims and show ‘enlightened compassion’ (Spivak, 1988: p. 140) or are apologists of the perpetrators.

In my analysis of the texts that re-write ‘state lies’ on the Third Chimurenga in chapter 4, I began by expanding on the meaning of the Third Chimurenga to encompass all aspects of Zimbabwean history that have come to be associated with what is popularized as ‘the Zimbabwean crisis’. A re-appropriation of this term widened the scope of historical interpretation. The

broadened meaning enables a focus on the often-ignored struggle of the majority of Zimbabweans to survive the crisis; there I disrupted the usual association of the word Chimurenga with fighting against the colonial enemy. Where Robert Mugabe says ‘Well, our people are happy, they are very happy’ in 2005 (2005: 7), Zimbabwean writers demonstrate that the majority of Zimbabweans were living in poverty, and it is impossible that they could have been happy. For a discussion of such subversions of the official government rhetoric on the Third Chimurenga crisis, I selected short stories by Chinodya, Chinyani, Hoba, and Tagwira’s novel. These texts are consistent in light of the failed ambition of the state during the Third Chimurenga. The focus is on the rural farm invasions and their connections with urban crisis. The social and political realities re-created in the discussed stories can be verified in revisionist historical narratives. I repeat here the toilet image in Tagwira’s *The Uncertainty of Hope*. A public toilet at Mbare bus terminus is a ‘small, filthy room, reeking of excrement’ yet ‘a discoloured notice declared that the toilets were cleaned regularly’ (p. 287). I used Tagwira’s toilet image to highlight the distortions prevalent in the state discourse on the Third Chimurenga. As much as the government re-arranges the story of the Third Chimurenga and alters some of its realities, ‘the filthy toilet reeking of excrement’ is the image that conveys reality best. The inscribed notice that the toilet is cleaned regularly remains an obvious lie. I used Tagwira’s toilet analogy to interpret how ‘patriotic history’ represents ‘obvious official lies’, (Mbembe, 2001: p. 129) which are ‘demonstrably untrue’ (Primorac, 2007: p. 436).

Though ‘the relationship between history and fiction was problematic from the beginning because it gave rise to the dilemma concerning the relative roles of imagination and historical fact’ (Hamnett, 2006: p. 32). In all the narratives discussed in this thesis, one thing stands out: the writers are aware of the fluidity between history and fiction and each of the works discussed is a unique interpretation and reflection of significant aspects of Zimbabwean history (the history of the liberation struggle, of Gukurahundi and of the Third Chimurenga). Some of the key strategies employed by writers included a weaving of ‘popular memory’, a reference to real historical figures (Kilgore uses Robert Mugabe in his novel *We Are Now All Zimbabweans*) and ‘concrete reference to places, events and times’ (Hamnett, 2006: p. 32). The texts I studied in specific contexts of contemporary politics ‘represented the mirror in which the age saw itself’ (Hamnett, 2006: p. 34), since the kind of literature discussed here is in dialogue with history through contestation. It remains ‘a kind of testimony, an example of a kind of “witness literature” or testimonio’ (White,

2005: p. 148). To demonstrate that there is an overlap of history and literature studied for my thesis, a significant number of historical sources were consulted. Visible historians who shaped my discussion include Ranger, Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Muzondidya and Lyons. Ranger's ideas on historiography, Ndlovu-Gatsheni's theory on Zimbabwean nationalism, and Lyons' discussion of women participation in the liberation struggle were particularly useful to my interpretation of texts representing similar issues.

Anyone who criticizes the ZANU PF government is tagged an 'enemy of the state', and is understood as an opposition political party member and is thought of as unpatriotic. In repressive governments and all undemocratic spaces, voices of dissent (writers included) are at risk of personal 'losses'. In both Rhodesia and Zimbabwe, writers were exiled, and some works banned.⁸⁹ In the Third Chimurenga period, the ZANU PF government put in place policies to make sure that any public criticism of the government was met with increased brutality. This was instituted through the controversial Public Order and Security Act and the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act. Censorship and victimization of dissident voices signifies lack of toleration of divergence. Dominant discourses are absolutist in that they fail to respect/ do not tolerate divergence. Silencing voices of discontent is a strategy that dominant groups use to ensure political autonomy. Yet oppositional 'politicians' (writers and critics included) are important in 'building democratic potentials [...] destabilizing powerfully established structures [...] be they racist, colonial, patriarchy' or the imposition of the postcolonial state (Kaarsholm, 2005: p. 4). Without voices of dissent, it may not be possible to 'transform legislation [...] and confront the politics of injustice' (Lara, 1998: p. 148). A proliferation of dissenting voices (creative writers included) in the Zimbabwean public sphere is testimony that discontent will always be expressed, even in undemocratic spaces.

⁸⁹ The Rhodesian government banned *On Trial for My Country* (1966). The Zimbabwean government banned Marechera's *Black Sunlight* (1980) because most characters in the novel were read as 'prototypes of dissidents' (Veit-Wild, 1992: p. 220), the very 'dissidents' that the government wanted to clean up in Gukurahundi. Mhlanga's *Workshop Negative* was banned when it was about to be performed in Harare at the First International Book Fair in 1983 (Veit-Wild, 1992: p. 307).