ARTICLE

DELICATE YEARS: CHILDREN AND IDENTITY IN ZIMBABWEAN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

The paper argues that children face challenges in growing up and fitting into their societies and that these challenges need to be addressed with care. These challenges, which are complicated by the effects of colonialism, war and economic crises in the context of Zimbabwe, are portrayed in the novels *Nervous Conditions* (Dangarembga 1989), *The Book of Not* (Dangarembga 2006), *The Uncertainty of Hope* (Tagwira 2006) and *Running with Mother* (Mlalazi 2012). In analysing the characters of the children portrayed in these four novels, the vulnerability of children, regardless of their age, is demonstrated. The child characters strive to help their parents and be useful citizens and yet at times this contrasts with their desire to be sheltered and treated as children. This contradiction is best exhibited in teenagers who try to fashion their own identity that is separate from the people around them but who still require guidance to do so.

Keywords: children; identity; conflict; teenagers

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INTRODUCTION

There are many definitions of children. Chitando (2008), in her study on children's literature, posits that the concept of being a child and also how children are perceived are culturally determined. There are also different definitions of literature. Okpewho (1992) defines literature as a creative text, whether it be a story, play or poem, that appeals to our imagination. When considering the different definitions of children and the concept of children's literature, various questions arise: Should a text be classified as literature *for* children or literature *by* children?; Should any literature with children as characters be classified as children's literature, and if so, should the appropriate name not then be literature *for* children (Meniru 1992)?; Should texts about children older than 12 not be called children and youth literature (Khorana 1998)?

The questions posed above are pertinent to this paper in supporting the argument that the needs of children, regardless of their age, must be addressed with care and that literature has a role to play in highlighting the needs of children that must be addressed. Texts written from the perspective of children themselves are particularly valuable as they foreground the experiences of children.

In Zimbabwe, individuals who are below the age of 18 are regarded as children; hence, according to this definition, adolescents are children. The current study was interested in the children portrayed in the selected texts. The children in these novels include babies, primary school children and teenagers in Zimbabwe, and as such they present a cross-section of the selected population.

In the sections that follow, the different categories of child characters portrayed in the selected texts are discussed and analysed to support the argument that the needs of these children, which are different, should be addressed. It is posited that literature has a role to play in highlighting and addressing these needs.

NURSING BABIES: ABSENCE OR AVAILABILITY OF BASIC CARE

Nature's reproduction cycle ensures that species produce young ones who grow into adults and continue the cycle. Human babies are born helpless and, until they have grown up, they are completely dependent on adults for survival. This makes them vulnerable to forces they have absolutely no control over. They can only express their discomfort through crying, which may be misinterpreted or may fail to draw the necessary attention in the form of assistance. This helplessness is portrayed in the character of Gift, a baby boy, in *Running with Mother* (Mlalazi 2012). He is the sole survivor when his nuclear family's hut burns down. He is at the bottom of the human pile because he was in a safe place underground. Gift's crying alerts his mother (wife of his father's brother who is a mother figure in Shona culture) and aunt (his father's sister) to the fact that there is a survivor, which gives them the strength to dig through the rubble regardless of the

stench of dead bodies. His discovery fills the women with hope, hope that is expressed in the prayer of Mamvura (the mother in the book):

> "*Mwariwangu*," mother said, inspecting the baby. "He seems not to be burnt. His clothes are wet but not burnt. Surely, if he was hurt, he would not stop crying, but he has."
>
> Mother removed her breast from her blouse and Gift immediately started suckling hungrily.
>
> "Whoever put the child inside that hole made the right decision," mother said, "Now it's our duty to see that this baby lives, Auntie, and also Rudo here."
>
> … with the baby still suckling, mother went down on her knees, and asked us to do the same. …
>
> "*Mwariwedu*," mother started praying. "We thank you *Mwariwedu* for keeping your little baby alive in the middle of a fire, and without your kindness this would never have happened. We thank you *Mwariwedu* for being our father when we are in need, and we ask that you show us the way to safety so that our children can live and grow up to be adults also. We also pray to you *Mwariwedu* to look after all the dead and raise your hand against those who have sinned against you today. We ask for protection in this dangerous time, *Mwariwedu*, in the name of the son and the Holy Spirit. Amen." (Mlalazi 2012, 28)

Mamvura thanks God for keeping the child alive. Her reference to God as "our father" draws attention to all humanity's vulnerability and the need for divine protection, just as a baby needs adult protection. In this regard all humans are God's children thereby validating the idea that the definition of children is context bound. Mamvura is very clear about what has gone wrong and about her vulnerability in the situation, so she appeals to a higher being for protection.

The book is set in the 1980s, a time when most people had converted to Christianity, and being a member of a Christian denomination was almost the norm. She sees the hand of providence in Gift's survival as, having lost her own baby, she has the milk to feed him. Knowing that they (Gift, Rudo, the mother and the aunt) are the only survivors of the Jamela family, Mamvura sees it as her duty to ensure the only remaining members of the family survive. In Shona relationships, a brother's wife is a mother figure in the family, especially when they all stay in the same household. Though the aunt is an adult, Mamvura has authority over her and gives her guidance as a mother. That is why in the novel she is referred to as a mother, both in a biological sense (to Rudo) and in a social sense (to Gift and aunt). However, it must be remembered that Shona relationships are not cast in stone and that authority can be shared depending on the situation, hence the saying *Ushe madzoro* (Kings take turns to rule). In the absence of the men, the aunt takes the role of the father figure. Mamvura's prayer expresses confidence that God belongs to them, sees all and is in control. She, therefore, thanks Him for keeping them alive, asks for guidance through the crisis and asks God to deal with the perpetrators of the evil. Having surrendered her concerns to God, she is then free to concentrate on what she can actually do as an individual in the crisis. Mamvura seems to believe that

vengeance belongs to God. Her surrender helps her to be free of anger and bitterness and hence her decision-making is not inhibited. She remains calm and calculates their moves. It is Mamvura who ensures that they eat to regain strength and she quickly packs the clothes, food and water they need. She deliberately chooses the direction of their escape, ensuring they move away from villages so that they do not come into contact with the soldiers. She avoids the Botswana border because she knows many people will try to cross it and that the soldiers will follow. They find shelter, food and water in the Phezulu mountain and Mamvura runs the cave like her kitchen.

Gift is calmed and comforted by the presence of adults and is fed milk by the mother. Similarly, Mamvura is calmed by the assurance that God the father is watching over her and will guide them to safety. War makes everyone as vulnerable as babies and "their eyes can only watch God"— a phrase used by Hurston in her novel on the African-American experience titled *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Hurston [1937] 1998).

In contrast to the care that Mamvura takes of Gift, Sheilla's baby in the book *The Uncertainty of Hope* (Tagwira 2006) is unfortunate. Born out of wedlock to an unemployed HIV-positive mother, the baby's basic needs are not met. It sucks on a shrivelled breast, and because it does not receive nourishment, it cries incessantly. Ruva, a teenager, who was having a conversation with Sheilla, noted:

> She glanced at Sheila's baby suckling vigorously from her floppy, desiccated breast. The baby was hungry and dissatisfied. Now and then she stopped suckling, and giving a frustrated whimper, grabbed the withered breast tightly with her tiny hands as if to squeeze some more milk out of it. (Tagwira 2006, 144–145)

Sheilla and her baby live in a shack and they are vulnerable because they are exposed to the elements. Their situation becomes worse when all the shacks are demolished during the Murambatsvina operation, causing Sheilla to have to move to the open ground. There is no hope for either the mother or the baby. Ruva is worried that they may have tuberculosis and she is afraid of catching it. Sheilla is unable to access anti-retroviral drugs and only awaits her death. Unfortunately, her child is on the same path as there is no one to rescue her. One feels the baby's desperation when one reads the passage quoted above. Weak from malnutrition and incessant crying, the baby can only whimper. The baby's physical actions are futile as the tiny hands cannot squeeze out any milk because they are weak and also because there is nothing to squeeze.

The pathetic situation mirrors the lives of the poor in Mbare during the Murambatsvina operation when their sources of livelihood are razed to the ground. They have nowhere to turn to. Onai (Sheilla's landlord) is particularly affected as she no longer has a market stall or a lodger to pay rent to boost her income. For Onai, the "national breasts" have ceased sustaining her and she expresses her frustration and frenzy when her shack is destroyed, which makes the demolition man claim that she is mad.

YOUNG MAN AND PAUCITY OF ROLE MODELS

Fari, in *The Uncertainty of Hope* (Tagwira 2006), is a ten-year-old boy who is representative of urban children who enjoy their lives regardless of poverty—his school uniform is heavily patched almost beyond repair (Tagwira 2006, 96). Onai (his mother) constantly worries about him because the absence of his father, Gari, means that Fari has no male mentor as he is the only boy in the family. The novel opens with a burglary in the early hours of the morning. Gari is not home to protect his wife and children and when he comes home he accuses his wife of giving away his television set to her boyfriends. He goes on to beat her and she ends up in hospital. Fortunately Fari has a happy disposition and does not give himself over to violence like his father does. The only time he tries to use force is in defence of his mother when Gari brings his mistress home. Fari genuinely loves his mother and tries to help as much as possible. At a young age he has realised the value of money and the need to work for it. He volunteers to sell fruit and snacks at the bus terminus after the market is closed. However, he considers this an adventure and does not realise the dangers of such a venture. Onai fails to protect her children, blinded by need and the poverty in her home. The arrest of the children shakes them all, leading Onai to relocate them and her mother to the village. The village environment is considered healthier for raising young men. Fari gets to learn agricultural skills such as herding cattle and ploughing. The dual training is likely to make him a better man and one who is more responsible than his father. Fari's personality seems to help him escape modelling himself on his father who does not set a good example.

TEENAGE GIRLS AND EMOTIONAL CONFLICT

All the texts discussed in this paper that depict teenage characters, describe children who are trying to come to terms with their worlds but at times fail to find adequate words to express their thoughts or to fully understand what they experience. Their challenge is that they are still children in need of parental guidance; yet in their interaction with the world, they at times gain more knowledge than their parents and consider themselves smarter than their parents. This usually results in conflict between the teenagers and their parents or in conflict within the teenagers, though they may observe social etiquette by not showing this conflict.

In *The Uncertainty of Hope* (Tagwira 2006), Ruva is sixteen and Rita is fifteen. The contradictions of teenagehood are best reflected in Rita. She has the body of a woman and the mind of a child who is still innocent, a combination that makes her vulnerable to abuse. The men at the terminus refer to her as "hot" and as having a great body and they make bawdy remarks. Onai is shocked and realises the danger she is exposing her children to by allowing them to vend at the terminus. Her thoughts are confirmed when an officer squeezes Rita's breast. Later, Rita refuses to go to school because she

has been sexually molested again. It is unfortunate that her body is viewed as a sexual object and the person inhabiting this body is ignored. Her experiences reveal the selfish nature of contemporary men whose attitudes are fuelled by the ways the female body is depicted on billboards, in the media and in the entertainment world. The fact that she is not academically gifted and that she is subjected to continued abuse has the potential to push her into prostitution. This might have happened if Rita adopted the identity her male abusers projected on her, but she rejects doing this and opts to hide from her abusers in the safety of her home. For children, home is a place of comfort and security, and Rita proves that she is a child regardless of her physical appearance.

Ruva is a bright student who is to write her Ordinary-level examinations in the year that Operation Murambatsvina takes place. She is affected by the domestic violence in her family and wishes her mother would deal with the situation in a different manner. This is a source of conflict between them as highlighted on the night of the burglary:

> Ruva whirled round to glare at her. "*Amai*, where is baba? Look at the time. It's three o'clock, *Amai*. He should have been here to protect us. Why isn't he here?" she railed, her soft adolescent features contorted by resentful anger.
>
> Onai looked at her and flinched from the intensity of her rage. "*Mwanangu*, just like you, I don't know where he is. We are safe now. Let's go back to sleep, *vanangu*," she said in a mother's calm, gentle voice. Inside she was seething. For a moment, she felt an irresistible urge to slap her daughter really hard, but with no small effort she suppressed it. She thought of uttering belittling remarks about Gari, but restrained herself. She would never admit openly to her children that their father was a blatantly irresponsible man. What purpose would it serve, except to further erode the flimsy fabric of Gari's relationship with his children? (Tagwira 2006, 4)

Here, Onai misses the point. Ruva is trying to deal with her emotions and all Onai needs to do is acknowledge them, comfort her daughter and enable them to go to bed. Ruva is only expressing the desire, albeit in rage, that their father was there to protect them. However, Onai treats her in the same way as she does the ten-year-old brother and the not-so-bright young sister. Onai forgets that in her absence, Ruva is a proxy mother. Every time Gari batters Onai, Ruva is the one who takes action and ensures she is taken to hospital and the children are looked after. As an intelligent child, Ruva fully understands the situation. Onai refuses to acknowledge the almost adult status of Ruva because she has not come to terms with her own situation. The good thing is that she resists slapping Ruva as that would have resulted in total alienation. Ruva can easily compare her parents' marriage to that of Katy and John or the Hondos next door and see the yawning gap. Ruva has the advantage of being taught at school what feminism is and how to deal with domestic violence. Ruva aspires to become a lawyer, so chances are that she reads about the laws of the country and follows the news. The gap between acquired knowledge and lived experience is a source of frustration to Ruva. However, she is lucky in that, while her mother refuses to engage with her, Faith, Katy's daughter, takes the role of a big sister and maintains the balance.

Running with Mother (Mlalazi 2012) is a story narrated by a fourteen-year-old girl called Rudo Jamela who finds herself in a war situation, with her family and neighbours having been killed (uncles, aunts and cousins) and captured (father and Sithabile) by armed soldiers. She does not know what is happening but has to deal with the pain and confusion. When her mother finds her on the road from school, Rudo collapses in her arms and weeps. She allows herself to be comforted by the mother's presence and gain a sense of calm in the presence of an adult she can rely on. When they assume the soldiers are going to shoot Rudo's father, the mother puts her daughter's head against her bosom to protect her from the terrible sight, and she does not resist. Rudo draws comfort from the presence of her mother throughout. This points to the central role that mothers play in the lives of their children. The mother is a role model for Rudo in that she seems to always know what to do and how to solve challenges. Unlike Onai in *The Uncertainty of Hope* (Tagwira 2006), Rudo's mother seems able to minister to her daughter's needs as she understands her hopes and fears. This relationship seems almost too perfect to be true. The mother figure is cast in the common nationalist trope of a "mother of the nation" who is nice to everyone and succeeds to overcome her struggles. This trope is representative of male nationalist discourse in which the concept of the male gaze (Boehmer 2005) is used. According to the male gaze, a good woman must be sacrificial, must consider other people's interests before her own and, like Mother Nature, must continue to give despite being abused. The fight over the radio (the only time that both mother and Rudo behave in an aggressive way) is brought on partly because of the need to preserve the battery and partly because of Rudo's hunger for knowledge. She acts as an interpreter when they miss the news presented in the vernacular and have to listen to the English bulletin. Rudo's education makes her feel superior to her aunt who can only read and write in Ndebele and whose handwriting is quite bad. This conflict seems to be internal as Rudo is generally a well-behaved child who tows the line.

In the novels of Dangarembga (*Nervous Conditions* 1989, *The Book of Not* 2006), the story is told of Tambu who grows up as a child in the village, at the mission school and at Sacred Heart, the multi-racial school during the colonial era. The stories are written in the first person, which allows Tambu, the narrator, to express in her own voice her feelings and perceptions of events as they happen. This enables the reader to note the influences in her life and how they impact on her identity. Tambu explains how the men in the family behaved when Babamukuru came to visit:

> The only times that he would expend any energy to help around the homestead were the times when Babamukuru sent word that he was coming to visit. On such days Nhamo would rise at dawn with the rest of us, working so hard that dirt ingrained itself into the skin of his hands and the sweat ran down his bare back, leaving him smelling and looking for all the world like an archetypal labourer. His strategy was perfect. He never returned to the homestead, no matter how tedious and heavy the tasks at hand, until Babamukuru, having arrived home and found it deserted, drove down to the fields.

> Sometimes Babamukuru wore shorts when he came to visit. If we were all at the fields on such an occasion he would take a hoe and join us for a while in our labours before driving back to the homestead with my father and Nhamo to listen to my father's progress report concerning how far behind we were with the sowing, the cultivating or the harvest; how the neighbours' cattle were plundering our fields; how Babamukuru should provide a barbed wire fence to keep out the baboons as well as the cattle. When Babamukuru was not wearing shorts they would return to the homestead immediately. My mother, lips pressed tight, would hitch little Rambanai more securely on her back and continue silently at her labours. The ferocious swings of her arms as she grabbed and stripped a maize stalk restrained Netsai and me from making the slightest murmur of rebellion. We imagined those ferocious movements of our mother's arms sending a switch whistling down on our legs and this thought made us very diligent. … We would follow in the tracks of my uncle's car when the sun began to set, herding the cattle back to their kraal as we went since there was no other young man in our family besides Nhamo to attend to this chore. We would travel as briskly as we could so that we would not be late in preparing the evening meal. Personally, I did not want to see Babamukuru in shorts, because in his mission clothes he was a dignified figure and that was how I liked to imagine him. (Dangarembga 1989, 7–8)

The long quotation above summarises Tambu's attitude towards the formation of her identity and her aspirations for her future life. It, therefore, accounts for the young woman we meet in *The Book of Not* (Dangarembga 2006). Babamukuru represents power and civilization to Tambu and that is why she would prefer him to never wear shorts and join them. Everyone panders to him, including Nhamo and Jeremiah who act as tyrants in the absence of Babamukuru. Tambu, logically, aspires to be like Babamukuru. Babamukuru's presence upsets the general order in the home in the same way that the presence of white people disrupts the general lives of the blacks. The men return to the homestead for a formal meeting on the running of the home while the women do the actual work. The women are silenced—as evidenced by MaShingayi's silent protest. Tambu and Netsai remain under her influence because they can read her body language, and as girls they are still under her authority. Nhamo is MaShingayi's son, but because of colonial legislation that gave primary authority to men and made women perpetual minors, Nhamo has more privileges than his mother and sisters. At this time, Nhamo has just completed Standard 6, which means that he is employable and can run the affairs of his home. After Standard 6, black people could be trained either as teachers or nurses. Therefore, in the family hierarchy, Nhamo is closer to Babamukuru than any other member of the family. At this time, Tambu is like her mother in that she does the work expected of her and takes it in her stride despite her resentment towards the work. She does not like killing chickens and plucking them but accepts that it is part of her role as a woman and eldest daughter in the family. She also takes over herding cattle because she knows there is no one else to do it. She actually sympathises with her mother and tries to help as much as possible. Tambu has her mother's resilience and determination.

Nhamo is sent to school while Tambu remains at home because there is insufficient money to send them both to school. Tambu's desire to learn is not quenched: on the contrary, it is whetted by her taking Maiguru (Babamukuru's wife and mother figure

to Tambu) as her role model. Tambu knows that she needs not wallow in poverty and be confined to the communal lands—if only she can acquire a Western education. Her father's mockery that she cannot feed books to her husband actually increases her determination.

> His intention was to soothe me with comforting, sensible words, but I could not see the sense. (Dangarembga 1989, 16)

Tambu grades people according to their education and affluence and, therefore, she considers her mother to be inferior. She aspires to gain superiority and decides to plant her maize in order to raise her school fees. Ironically, she is able to achieve her dream by utilising her grandmother's and her mother's agricultural teachings, which she considers to be inferior to Western education. The difference between Tambu and her mother is that she decides to fight the system that thwarts her dreams, while her mother has become fatalistic as evident in her "burden of womanhood" speech (Dangarembga 1989, 16). The seeds for the development of Tambu's admiration of Babamukuru and her desire to learn are planted by her grandmother at a tender age. She is told of how the white people disrupted her grandparents' life, enslaved them to work on farms and mines, and left women and children destitute. It is her grandmother's ingenuity in surrendering Babamukuru to the missionaries that saved the family and led to his current glory. Tambu narrates:

> The white wizard had no use for women and children. He threw my grandmother and her children off his farm. Destitute, they travelled back to the homestead, where my great-grandfather, although he had not regained his former standard of living, had managed to keep his family together. And then my great-grandfather died and the family broke up, and it turned out my grandfather had not been a good man, for he was killed in the mines, and my grandmother was left with six children to support. And then she heard that beings similar in appearance to the wizards but not of them, for these were holy, had set up a mission not too far from the homestead. She walked with my uncle, with Babamukuru, who was nine years old and wearing a loin cloth, to the mission, where the holy wizards took him in. They set him to work on their farm by day. By night he was educated in their wizardry. For my grandmother, being sagacious and having foresight, had begged them to prepare him for the life in their world. (Dangarembga 1989, 18–19)

The quotation reveals that, at that time, there was no resistance to the white man as the blacks had accepted their defeat. The grandmother differentiates between white missionaries (who she classifies as good) and white farmers/traders/miners who exploit the people. Tambu's mother accepts the hierarchy instituted by colonialism by complying with whatever comes her way. Tambu decides to pursue Western education so that she too, like Babamukuru, will be equipped to succeed in the world created by the whites. She is eager to be assimilated so that she can gain material wealth and shed poverty. At this juncture, Tambu accepts the definition of a Shona woman as working hard and making things happen, but rejects the European domestication of Shona women that

seeks to confine them to communal areas without access to the city or jobs reserved for men.

With such determination it is not surprising that Tambu works hard enough to get a scholarship to attend Sacred Heart, a school run by nuns for young ladies. By the end of the novel, Tambu is aware that joining the world of white people is fraught with tensions, and that doing so is not the romance story she imagined as a child listening to her grandmother. As is clear from the quotation below, she is caught between two worlds and is aware of the need to carefully negotiate her identity:

> Mother knew a lot of things and I had regard for her knowledge. Be careful, she had said, and I thought about Nyasha and Chido and Nhamo, who had succumbed, and of my own creeping feelings of doom. Was I being careful enough? I wondered. For I was beginning to have a suspicion, no more than the seed of suspicion, that I had been too eager to leave the homestead and embrace the "Englishness" of the mission; and after that the more concentrated "Englishness" of Sacred Heart. The suspicion remained for a few days, during which time it transformed itself into guilt, and then I had nightmares about Nhamo, and Chido and Nyasha two nights in a row. That should tell you how much my mother's words disturbed me: I had not had a nightmare since the first time I went to the mission. But term-time was fast approaching and the thought of returning to Sacred Heart filled me with pleasure. The books, the games, the films, the debates—all these things were things that I wanted. I told myself I was a much more sensible person than Nyasha, because I knew what could or couldn't be done. In this way, I banished the suspicion, buried it in the depths of my subconscious, and happily went back to Sacred Heart. (Dangarembga 1989, 203)

At this juncture, Tambu embraces her hybrid identity: valuing her mother's knowledge of how Shona society works and what is appropriate behaviour, and, coupled with that, embracing Western knowledge found in the books, games and films at Sacred Heart. She considers herself superior to Nyasha who went to England and forgot Shona culture. She also imagines herself as respectful to elders and therefore would never commit the error of disrespect as Nhamo, Nyasha and Chido have done.

However, Tambu's education at Sacred Heart continues to alienate her from her people and this alienation is reinforced by the violence she witnesses at the *pungwe* (night gatherings during the liberation struggle where the guerrillas taught the masses about the revolution) as described in *The Book of Not* (Dangarembga 2006). Babamukuru is accused of being a sellout and beaten thoroughly while the crowd sings. Tambu considers this to be primitive behaviour that can be equated with that of the caveman; hence she decides to align herself with the whites who represent civilization. Babamukuru's refusal to discuss the headmistress's negative comment and siding with her without listening to Tambu's side of the story alienates him from her. Tambu is thus cut off from her former role models and forced to find her own answers to the many questions she has as a teenager. Without parental guidance she reaches many false conclusions and acts erroneously. During the liberation struggle, she decides to knit jumpers for Rhodesian soldiers fighting terrorists but believes she is exhibiting *unhu*

(humaneness). When she turns out to be the best O-level student, she has no adult to stand up for her and fight for what is rightfully hers.

Tambu therefore represents a marooned teenager who has no anchor and is left adrift on the ocean of life to reach the shore on her own. Her life lacks direction and is later beset by a series of failures. Tambu fails to escape her negative upbringing and lack of mentorship. The gap between her lived experience and that of her mentors makes life difficult for her. She wishes she could discuss books with her mother, but the mother has an aversion towards what she calls "Englishness", a term which she expresses sarcastically. The sensitive Tambu shuts her mother out in order to protect herself. Babamukuru is focused on grooming an ideal woman in the context of colonial expectations: an obedient, subservient woman. He hammers on any signs of rebellion without seeking to understand the reality. Tambu's teenage questions about growing up are thus left unanswered. Equally unattended to is the question of what it means to be a black, educated woman in colonial Zimbabwe, a country then known as Rhodesia.

CONCLUSION

Children are important in society. As demonstrated in the discussion of the children characters in the books *Nervous Conditions* (Dangarembga 1989), *The Book of Not* (Dangarembga 2006), *Running with Mother* (Mlalazi 2012) and *The Uncertainty of Hope* (Tagwira 2006), it is important to be sensitive to their needs if they are to grow up to be good citizens who contribute meaningfully to society.

Some children, like Tambu, fail to escape the entrapment of improper education. Some children suffer because of people's wrong perceptions. There is a need to be sensitive to a child's physical appearance and to their cognitive ability as these aspects have a bearing on how they are perceived by others; and other's perceptions can harm their personhood, especially in the case of girls. The incongruity between physical appearance and mental maturity must be noted and dealt with accordingly.

It is also important to recognise teenagers for the reasoning beings they are by responding to their questions and not simply silencing them and demanding obedience. If they get the wrong answers elsewhere they are likely to be destroyed. Ruva is saved by Katy's daughter who takes her under her wing, whereas Tambu remains adrift and her life is destroyed.

Boys need to have role models that allow them to develop masculine qualities that are non-toxic. Fari's father and uncle represent toxic masculinities; one can only hope that a boy like him, who is sensitive and considerate, would not acquire their qualities and follow their example when he grows older.

In their books, Tagwira and Dangarembga portray the tensions that can exist between mothers and daughters; tensions that have the potential of marring the all-important mother-daughter relationship forever.

Children vary and it is important to consider each one of them as a unique person with their own identity. Childhood years are delicate years, and the way children are handled can either make or break them, can leave an indelible impression on them and can determine the characters of the adults they are able to become.

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