

Towards a welcoming society: An examination of Stephen Alumenda's *The girl who couldn't dance* and *Anani the Albino boy*

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ABSTRACT

Children's literature is a useful resource for transforming society for the better. In this study, I pay attention to Stephen Alumenda's ideological commitment to disadvantaged children. I undertake a literary analysis of his works that focus on marginalised children in order to establish how he puts forward a proposal for a new society. The study examines how Alumenda's children's stories address disability and albinism. It critiques Alumenda's approach, while appreciating his commitment to marginalised individuals and groups. The study highlights his sensitivity towards children living with disability and albinism. However, it questions his tendency of granting happy endings to his children's stories. Overall, the study appreciates Alumenda's willingness and courage to address neglected individuals and themes.

Keywords: disability, albinism, society, children, marginalized, attitudes

Introduction

Zimbabwean society has struggled to accommodate children with disabilities and those with albinism. For example, the late Jairos Jiri rose to national fame by setting up an organisation that looked after people with disabilities after he realised that they suffered a lot. As Pedzisai Mashiri (2000) observes, even the language that is used to refer to children with disabilities often carries negative connotations. For instance, a child with mental challenges is called *rema* or *dununu*, terms that carry the notion of being useless. Sometimes, a spiritual interpretation is used to explain the presence of disability in the family. In most cases, it is believed that witches are responsible for causing disability. At times, it is also maintained that wronged ancestors cause one of their descendants to become disabled as a means of forcing the living to remember their duties. In her informative study, *The Forgotten Tribe: people with disability in Zimbabwe*, Tsitsi Choruma (2007) has described the multiple challenges that people with disability face.

Some families have abandoned children with disabilities and albinism, while others keep them behind closed doors. Commenting on Dorris Lessing's *The fifth child* (1988), Hove (2013: 2) argues that the verbs such as 'dismembered and savage' used to describe

the deformed character of Ben likens him ‘to a wild, untamed beast. Ben’s physical and psychological deformities render him as different and push him to the margins of human identity and being,’ (Hove 2013: 2). This clearly demonstrates how the shame that is associated with disability and albinism results in such children facing a lot of stigma in both creative works of art and society. All this leads one to question whether the marginalised characters with deformity and albinism in children’s literature can provide any meaningful insights into the society within which they live. This study recognises the existence of children with disability and those with albinism in both the physical and creative worlds. The research, therefore, examines how children’s literature can be employed to influence positive societal attitudes towards disability and albinism. It utilises Alumenda’s *The girl who couldn’t dance* (2001) and *Anani the albino boy* (2002) to critique societal attitudes towards disability and albinism.

Formation of attitudes about disability and albinism in young children

Generally, indigenous Zimbabwean societies have socialised children to have negative attitudes towards people with disabilities and those with albinism. For example, adults discourage children from being mischievous by the threat that this leads to various types of disabilities. This in itself tends to reinforce the idea that individuals with disabilities are paying for their failure to observe the moral code of society. As in other societies, there is an underlying belief that someone must have sinned for a child to have a disability or albinism. This belief has resulted in many families experiencing tension when such a child is born. Therefore, it is important to make use of children’s literature as an option to positively influence societal attitudes towards disability.

Attitude formation is based on experience in three areas: affective, cognitive and behavioural. Children’s conceptualisation of, and attitudes towards disability are formed at a young age. Bandura (1986) suggested that attitudes are developed through observation and imitation of others. Initially, children observe and copy their parents, brothers and sisters. Then, as they reach school-going age, the imitated attitudes are transferred to and from schoolmates and teachers at school. Therefore, children construct their attitudes and comprehension of what it entails to live with a disability by observing what people around them do. This explains why Haralambos and Holborn (2004) argue that society plays a significant role in socialisation processes.

Disability in Alumenda’s *The girl who couldn’t dance*: Promoting positive attitudes

The definition of disability is contested. According to the World Health Organisation, a disability is ‘any restriction or lack (resulting from any impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being’ (1976). However, this definition has been challenged. According to activists in the dis-

ability movement, the World Health Organisation has confused the terms 'disability' and 'impairment'. They maintain that impairment refers to physical or cognitive limitations that an individual may have, such as the inability to walk or speak. In contrast, disability refers to socially imposed restrictions, that is, the system of social constraints that are imposed on those with impairments by the discriminatory practices of society.

Thus, the Union of the Physically Impaired against Segregation has defined impairment and disability in the following manner:

An "impairment [is] lacking part of or all of a limb, or having a defective limb, organism or mechanism of the body. Disability [is] the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by contemporary organisation which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from the mainstream of social activities" (2).

The above definitions capture societal prejudice towards people with disability. Therefore, a conscious attempt to improve attitudes is important, as negative attitudes are often taken as the norm. According to Shapiro and Margolis (1988), being knowledgeable about disability plays a significant role in changing negative attitudes towards children with disabilities. Thus, Alumenda's *The girl who couldn't dance* is quite convincing in its effort to show negative societal attitudes towards disability, and the need to correct such attitudes in order for the world to be a better place in which to live for every citizen, whether living with a disability or not.

Alumenda tries to bring a new perspective to disability by showing how individuals with disabilities can interact with other members of society in a spirit of equality and friendship. His underlying conviction is that society needs to revise its attitude to people with disabilities. In other words, old stereotypes and misunderstandings of disability need to be replaced by new social constructions. Alumenda argues that society needs to come to terms with the needs and feelings of people with disabilities. As an author of children's books, he hopes that, by inculcating a positive spirit towards people with disabilities within the young, he can ensure a better world for all. For him, if children can begin to embrace people with disabilities, society will be transformed for the better. The power of children's texts as an agent in forming and reflecting cultural and societal attitudes cannot, it appears, be underestimated. This is why Meek (1988: 19) urges adults to read children's books "with your most adult awareness of life and literature and text, and you will see that the invitations they offer to young readers are far from infantile."

In his *The girl who couldn't dance*, Alumenda challenges society by presenting children who are sensitive to those with disabilities. The title itself is a reflection of the author's awareness of the need to use correct and acceptable terminology. The terminology used by a society reflects its culture, attitudes, bias and worldview. It is interesting to note that the title for Alumenda's story is 'The girl who couldn't *dance*', not 'The girl *with one leg*'. He is aware that language is critical in shaping and reflecting a people's thoughts, beliefs, feelings and concepts. Some words, by their very nature, degrade and diminish people with disabilities. In Alumenda's case, the title 'the girl with one leg' would have tended to convey a message that the only thing worth mentioning about the girl was

the fact that she had only one leg. Alumenda thus uses a more neutral title that does not emphasise this condition.

The title does not immediately give reasons why the girl ‘couldn’t dance’. It is only after reading the text that one realises that the girl’s failure to dance is a result of her involvement in a landmine accident in which she lost one of her legs. The title ‘The girl who couldn’t dance’ does not jump to a quick betrayal of societal attitudes towards disability. This is consistent with Alumenda’s desire for an embracing society, one that does not discriminate against its members, for whatever reason. The title is a clear indication that the central theme of the book is not the fact that the girl has one leg – and, indeed, it extends into an essential appreciation of a non-discriminatory society. This explains why linguists such as Gee (1999) argue that the understanding of words is brought according to one’s own experiences and expectations. In the same manner, disability could be viewed as a social construction evidenced in the texts as the described attitudes of both disabled and non-disabled characters.

The girl who couldn’t dance: The story in brief

In *The girl who couldn’t dance*, Alumenda gives an insightful description of a girl with a disability. This work won the 2001 NAMA (National Arts Merit Award) in Zimbabwe for the Best Junior Adult Literature. The story is built around the friendship between Tamara, who lost her leg in a land-mine accident, and Lena. Alumenda expertly weaves the story by introducing the two children’s families who are just getting to know each other. Temba Mabvuto’s family, in which Lena plays a central role, decides to show some hospitality by offering to help Benjamin Mhando’s family to unpack. The Mhando family has relocated into the Mabvuto neighbourhood. It is through the eyes of the young and sympathetic Lena that the reader is introduced to Tamara’s disability. This is a deliberate strategy by the author to portray the innocence, sensitivity, watchfulness and eye for detail that characterise children. While her parents are busy assisting the newcomers, Lena’s vigilant eye is caught by Tamara’s disability.

Children play a significant role in the formation of societal attitudes. They are also generally alert and, sometimes, this has negative consequences when they copy the forms of injustice they might observe in society. For instance, when people with disabilities are treated as though they are less capable than others, both in their everyday surroundings and at school, children learn negative attitudes towards disability. These negative attitudes, then, often translate to negative behaviours.

Tamara’s brother is also shown as a supportive individual who does not look down upon his sister who has a disability. Lena is sensitive, but does not show pity to Tamara. Alumenda is highlighting the fact that people with disability need respect, not pity. He also criticises land-mines as they lead to unnecessary suffering. By portraying Lena as she tries to use Tamara’s crutches and realises how difficult they are to master, Alumenda is challenging society to view the world from the perspective of people with disability. His campaign against land-mines is made clear in his description of the children’s discus-

sion of photographs in which Tamara is shown as an active girl before her accident. He also brings out another perspective to disability when Tamara says, 'I was very lucky. Another child died' (8). Alumenda is encouraging people with disability to celebrate the gift of life instead of worrying about their condition. He encourages those who become disabled through accidents to have every reason to look at the brighter side, as they could have lost their lives. Alumenda also informs the reader that it is quite easy for anyone to become disabled through an accident. This echoes the Shona proverb, '*seka urema wafa*' (anyone can become disabled).

At school, Lena unswervingly protects Tamara against some pupils who want to make fun of her and she refuses to be involved in games that exclude her friend. The fundamental concepts in Alumenda's work are love, peace and harmony. He shows this in the way that Lena is in constant solidarity with Tamara. This leads other children to come up with games that allow Tamara to participate. The author thus clearly demonstrates that children's attitudes towards people with disability are capable of changing for the better when they interact more with them. In *The girl who couldn't dance*, as is the case with most didactic literary works for children, there is a happy ending when Lena and Tamara submit a winning portrait of Tamara with the caption, 'CLEAR LAND-MINES NOW' (24). The story of the girl who could not dance reveals that unexploded land-mines are a danger to humanity, mainly children, whose little bodies are the most easily damaged by land-mine explosions. Alumenda seems to be advising his readers that, in countries that have been affected by war, there is need for deliberate effort by governments to come up with landmine responsiveness and physical rehabilitation strategies. This explains why Lena and Tamara's portrait is awarded the first prize in the Art Competition for Schools. It is also another good example of children's literature being utilised for the well-being of society. While Lena's parents suggest that she uses the prize money for her own advancement, Lena suggests that she would like to buy Tamara a new leg (28). This is a gesture that depicts Alumenda's commitment to the disabled. The painting has been deliberately chosen for a special postage stamp in a campaign to clear land-mines so as to conscientise society on the harmful effects of land-mines, and the need to clear them in order to protect members of society from their impact. Alumenda shows that land-mines can cause disability.

The author ends the story with this passage:

They all went into the Mhondoros' house to celebrate. Obara pulled out an envelope and gave it to Lena.

"This is for you," he said. "I got it as soon as it came out."

It was the Campaign against Land-Mines-stamp, Lena's painting of Tamara, with the words "CLEAR LAND-MINES NOW!"

"We have got one too," said Obara. "It's the best stamp in our collection!" (31)

The fact that *The girl who couldn't dance* is a 2001 publication means that it hails from a time when the Zimbabwean community still utilised letters as one of its main modes

of communication. This also implies that stamps would have been an effective campaign strategy against land-mines, given their ability to reach different parts of the country, as well as the international community.

In return for modelling the portrait, the organisers in the story offer a new leg to Tamara. The story ends with a celebration following Tamara's return from hospital with her new leg. Alumenda shows that society, through efforts such as Lena's, can be influenced to include people with disabilities in a positive way. This view is reinforced by Clark (1999) who argues that social support is the most effective way of contributing to the positive adjustment of individuals living with a disability.

Limitations in *The girl who couldn't dance*

Alumenda challenges children and adults to be more positive in their interactions with people who have disabilities. He calls for a social evolution in attitudes towards disability in both the domestic and public spheres. Such an undertaking is praiseworthy as society sometimes continues to overlook the needs of people with disabilities. For instance, in Zimbabwe, some tertiary institutions do not adequately cater for students with disabilities (Runhare 2004). Alumenda emphasises the need for society to engage in practices that are supportive and sensitive to the lives of people with disabilities. It is through Lena's strong advocacy role that Tamara's life is changed for the better.

However, the happy ending takes the reader to Alumenda's tendency to mystify reality in most of his creative works for children – such as when orphans (Thopo) (1996) become great *n'angas* (traditional healers). The author does something similar when children on the streets such as Tamla and his gang (1999) assist the police in arresting bank robbers and get a reward of one hundred thousand dollars from the bank. (They use this to build a big house for all the homeless children, approach Father Vesta and Nurse Clara to live with them, begin to attend school, wear decent clothes and are able to afford enough food. In the last-mentioned story, the narrator remarks, quite incredibly, that “In the end, all our dreams came true” (Alumenda 1999:56).

In the real world, most children with disability – and those who are vulnerable – do not get their situations solved as smoothly as happens here, or resolved at all. Most of them actually struggle to death with their condition. By securing a practical solution to Tamara's disability, Alumenda might also be creating the wrong impression that it is possible to be released from disability. However, his passion against land-mines and for the promotion of better lives for people with disability should be acknowledged. Below, I further examine Alumenda's commitment to his ideology towards disadvantaged children who live with albinism.

***Anani the albino boy*: Alumenda's challenge to society**

Alumenda is a social advocate who touches on different issues that characterise both

children with disability and the marginalised. The theme of supporting marginalised social groups is also dominant in the story, *Anani the albino boy* (Alumenda 2002). The book received the NAMA award in the Children's Literature category in its year of publication. In it, Alumenda captures the challenges that are faced by people with albinism. He clearly portrays how young Anani detests the idea of going to school as he feels ill-treated. He describes the social exclusion that the young Anani faces. The narrator in Alumenda's story comments:

Anani felt as if he was in a prison at school. This was because he was a very strange person. Most of the people had not seen or met an albino before. Even Anani himself had not yet met a fellow albino (3).

The author outlines the different challenges that Anani encounters. While his mother loves him, and his siblings are always there for him, his father never hides the fact that Anani's albinism is a source of embarrassment for him. Other children call Anani bad names such as 'YELLOW BOY' (5). Worse still, his father does not hide his frustration with Anani's albinism. Anani is always the scapegoat at school and ends up fighting other children. Anani's experience confirms the notion that physical deformity can have a particularly significant effect on the social interactions of an individual, especially in the case of children and youth. Cash (1995p. 123) observes that 'appearance is the most common focus of interpersonal teasing in childhood'. In Anani's case, in line with Alumenda's vision for the marginalised, his brother, sister, and friend Tambu are willing to stand by him. In one incident, they challenge the teacher who wants to beat Anani. The author encourages children to try to be like Tambu, the girl who is sensitive to Anani's situation.

Tambu, like Lena in *The girl who couldn't dance*, seeks to understand Anani. As Anani explains his situation, most of the myths that are associated with albinism are exposed. Anani emphasises his basic humanity by proclaiming, 'But what I know very well is that I'm an ordinary person like you and [the] other pupils' (9). Myths that maintain that if a person touches an albino he or she will develop pimples or melt are discounted, as is the belief in witchcraft as the cause of albinism. Anani's alienation is shown when the author observes that other children did not want to share food with him or to touch his shoulder at assembly. Lund (2001) observes that children with albinism in Zimbabwean schools tended to encounter antagonism, avoidance and fear.

Anani's struggle is also visible on the home front. His father repeatedly refers to him as an albino, and refuses to go to Anani's school to defend him. When Anani's mother takes up the challenge, the headmaster is shown as having an inadequate grasp of Anani's situation. Most of the teachers also do not understand the need for affirmative action for Anani. Thus, Alumenda is highlighting the fact that prejudice against people with albinism runs deep. Even highly-placed people such as the headmaster and teachers do not appreciate the need to be sensitive to people with albinism. However, his class teacher, Mr Mukiwa, shows an awareness of the needs of people with albinism:

He has an eyesight problem and I've moved him closer to the blackboard so that he can clearly see *without straining his eyes*. He needs glasses for his eyesight and also a special cream called *Sunscreen lotion* which will protect his skin from the sun--(17) (Italics original).

Mr Mukiwa also understands why Anani sometimes gets absent-minded in class and so does not rebuke him or use the cane on him. This is Alumenda's call to teachers who have children with albinism in their classes. The author suggests that such teachers need to understand these children and the multiple burdens that they carry. According to Clark (1999), strong network of social support is consistently found to result in better adjustment and more successful outcomes. However, Anani's situation leads him to existential despair. He wonders why God even created him. He retreats to a small hill where he observes a train moving towards where a bridge should be. However, the heavy rains have washed away the bridge over which the railway line passed, posing a great risk to the people travelling by the train. Only Anani's heroic actions prevent a terrible accident from happening.

Alumenda creates a lot of suspense and drama for his young readers as Anani grabs the tail of a bull in order to cross the raging river and signal the danger to the train driver. His dedication to saving human lives is incredible. After overcoming major hurdles, Anani exposes his life dangerously by standing in front of the train and frantically signalling it to stop. Some of the passengers thought he was being naughty and voiced their prejudice by shouting, 'Hit the albino boy!' (20). The behaviour of these adult passengers demonstrates the hostility that confronts people with albinism in different social situations. Basically, Alumenda depicts a society that does not expect anything good from individuals with a visible irregularity such as albinism. On the contrary, attractive individuals are viewed as more competent, more intelligent and better adjusted (Thompson and Kent 2001).

Alumenda demonstrates how widespread the prejudice against people with albinism is. The passengers on the train are keen to identify Anani by his albinism, not his youthful identity. It is as if his being an albino qualifies him automatically for a beating. It is only when they see that the bridge has been washed away that the people realise that Anani is their saviour. The driver of the train sets the example by picking Anani up and hugging him, while the passengers collect money to buy Anani new clothes as his have been ruined in his rescue mission. In a sense, Alumenda is calling for a general confession and repentance by society for its ill-treatment of people with albinism. As the train driver overcomes the stigma by hugging Anani, Alumenda encourages society to embrace people with albinism. The near-accident provides an opportunity for people to overcome their negative attitudes towards people with albinism. This is the author's way of enlightening society on the need to embrace diversity in others.

A special assembly is called the following morning at school and the headmaster announces that a prize of some books will be given to Anani for his courage. Furthermore, Anani's photograph will be framed and hung in the headmaster's office. Everyone applauds, and Anani becomes the school's hero. The story has a happy ending with a representative from the railway company presenting Anani with a scholarship to pay all his tuition fees until he completes his education. The author optimistically informs the reader that, at this moment, Anani knows that his dream of becoming an engineer is going to come true.

Alumenda's story is a touching and informative account of the experiences of people with

albinism in Zimbabwe. He has clearly carried out research into the needs of children with albinism, as can be seen in the passage where Anani's class teacher spells these needs out. The needs detailed in the story are confirmed by a study on health and education of children with albinism in Zimbabwe (Lund 2001). Alumenda also highlights how people with albinism experience a great deal of discrimination, and how they are negatively called *masope* in Shona.

In *Street Life* (1999), Alumenda describes the destitution experienced by Sithembile, a woman with albinism. She is treated with contempt by members of the public and by the police. She experiences multiple layers of exclusion; as a woman, as an albino and as a destitute individual. What Sithembile goes through is not unique to her situation. In Zimbabwe, for example, many people, including educated ones, shun people with albinism. Even successful people with albinism, such as the late Doctor John Makumbe of the Department of Political Science at the University of Zimbabwe, reported that some of his colleagues were uncomfortable in using cups that he would have used. Makumbe was influential in setting up the Albino Trust of Zimbabwe, an organisation that seeks to fight for the rights of people with albinism. Alumenda's story seeks to raise awareness of such issues.

The name 'Anani' could be Alumenda's question to society if it is translated from the vernacular. It means, 'who is he or she with?' Alumenda asks who will stand with the child with albinism amidst the numerous myths that perpetuate the marginalisation of this social group. One myth encourages expecting women to spit whenever they see a person with albinism. It is believed that this is a protective gesture to ensure that the woman will not give birth to a child with albinism. Another myth maintains that having a sexual relationship with a person with albinism cures HIV and AIDS. Many Shona people refer to a person with albinism as *murungu dunhu*. Loosely translated, this would mean a lost white person, perhaps in a rural landscape. Among the Shona, only black people count as 'human' (*munhu*). White people are regarded as strangers. The focus is on the "non-belonging" status of people with albinism. Alumenda seeks to challenge such attitudes and calls upon society to review its attitudes. In a recent study, Baker et al (2010) have also called for myths that lead to the marginalisation of people with albinism to be explored through the availability of a more scientific and culturally neutral explanation.

A critical appreciation of *Anani the Albino boy*

Although the story of Anani provides a significant literary breakthrough on a rather under-explored theme that has suffered scholarly neglect, it has some problematic dimensions. To begin with, Alumenda adopts the term 'albino' in his work— a term with too many negative connotations. (It would have been better for him to refer to 'people with albinism'. It is interesting to note here, though, that even an organisation such as the Albino Trust of Zimbabwe appears to be unaware of the problematic nature of the term. Furthermore, Anani gets accepted only after nearly sacrificing his life. One would then ask the questions: Do people with albinism first have to 'die' in order for society to embrace

them? Why is it that other children do not have to prove themselves in any way? Should those children with albinism who do not accomplish any outstanding feats remain on the margins of society? As I observed in my critique of Alumenda's approach to disability, the questions above point to the fact that it is important to adopt a more realistic approach in children's literature.

Alumenda competently explores the lives of children with albinism. His commitment to this social group can be detected from the tone employed in the narrative. His focus on this theme is relevant as different societies have such children. His familiarity with their struggles comes out forcefully in the story and, as he captures their encounters with the school environment, he articulates their vulnerability, hopes and aspirations. Unlike the endings in some of Alumenda's works, there is a more realistic ending that dwells on changing attitudes by members of society. Alumenda's passion for the welfare and rights of disadvantaged children is clear in his works.

Conclusion

In his children's stories, Alumenda offers an alternative vision of society. He seeks to empower his young readers to become acutely aware of the stigma that is experienced by various social groups. He writes in solidarity with members of these groups and calls upon society to change its oppressive attitudes towards them. The heroes in the stories discussed in this article, are children with disabilities and albinism – and those who are willing to stand by them. These children are put forward as examples of how the marginalised can achieve success against all odds.

In this paper, I have argued that Alumenda's commitment to such marginalised groups is sincere and outstanding within Zimbabwean literature. However, I have also pointed out that he sometimes adopts utopian conclusions, thereby compromising the viability of his project. His sensitivity towards the challenges of children living with disability, as well as those living albinism is remarkable. He invites other members of society to share his dream in order to ensure complete transformation.

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