

The dialogue of the deaf: Exploring textual silence in Stephen Chifunyise's play, *Intimate affairs*

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Abstract

This article examines Stephen Chifunyise's calculated focus on the domestic spaces – the family, personal relationships and the psycho-sexual dilemmas at the expense of the wider national socio-economic and political context during a period in Zimbabwe that has come to be known as the “decade of crisis”. Ignoring a plethora of social, economic and political challenges such as the collapse of a welfarist state, unprecedented inflation, political violence, sycophancy and corruption among others, the dramatist chooses to focus solely on the contradictions within the home and the family. The central question with which the article grapples is the ideological motivation behind this deliberate focus by the dramatist. Using Wall's (1989) theory of the dialogue of the deaf in conjunction with Macherey's (1978) theory of the “unsaid” in a text, the article argues that despite the author's calculated omission or silence on the socio-economic and political realities, the average intelligent reader is not only able to read into the dramatist's ideological position and motive but also the ugly reality that he is trying to cover up or hide from the reader.

Keywords: domestic spaces, silence, intelligent reader, hegemonic actors, patriotic intellectual

Introduction

This article examines Stephen Chifunyise's well calculated and deliberate focus on the domestic spaces – the family, personal relationships and the psycho-sexual dilemmas in one of his many social commentary plays, *Intimate affairs* (2008). It shall be argued that this focus on the domestic scene is done at the expense of the wider national context during a period in Zimbabwe's history that has come to be known as the “decade of crisis” (Hammar, Raftopoulos and Jensen 2003; Raftopoulos and Mlambo 2009; Zenenga 2010). Besides *Intimate affairs*, a number of Chifunyise's plays, among them: *Medicine for love* (1984);

Muramu (2008); *Lovers, friends and money* (2008); and *Love at crossroads* (2008); also focus on the contestation within the home and family. This focus also extends to some of his unpublished plays, such as *To love is to care, Not for sale* and *Wedding night*.

Born on 21 September 1948 in Shurugwi, Zimbabwe, Stephen Chifunyise has become one of the most outstanding playwrights and culture analysts in Zimbabwe. Unlike other leading Zimbabwean playwrights, such as Continue Loving Mhlanga, Raisedon Baya, George Mujajati and Gonzo Musengezi who have written on both the socio-economic and political aspects of the Zimbabwean society, Chifunyise has strikingly stood out in his consistent and persistent focus on the domestic social scene. His plays largely focus on love, family relationships and the African culture reminding one of the manuscript guidelines of the Literature Bureau in the former Rhodesia that expected African writers wishing to be sponsored to publish to shy away from religion and political issues (Velt-Flora 1993). In colonial Rhodesia and a few years after independence in Zimbabwe, the trend in play writing in English by black Zimbabweans was dominated by the social comedy genre. This comedy was marked by a preponderance of social themes revolving around the home and family over the political. Such plays can best be illustrated by two early plays by black playwrights, namely, Thompson Tsodzo's *Talking calabash* (1976) and Ben Sibenke's *My Uncle Grey Bhonzo* (1982). It can be argued that the policies of the Literature Bureau and the euphoria for independence subsequently led to self-censorship that manifested itself in the treatment of themes that tended to avoid the citizen-state contestation. The literature produced focused more on the personal-family and personal relationships and the psycho-sexual dilemmas as is the case with *Intimate affairs*. However, when *Intimate affairs* were published in 2008, the Zimbabwe of the 1980s had dramatically changed for the worse as will be demonstrated in this article. The central question that the article grapples with is why Chifunyise made a deliberate effort to discuss the personal rather than the glaring burning issues of state-citizen contestation witnessed during the "decade of crisis".

Theoretical framework

Wall's (1989) dialogue of the deaf and Macherey's (1978) "unsaid" in a text are the two theories that inform the argument in the article. Wall (1989) argues that an author's gaps or silence on certain aspects of a given society are a tactical diversion meant to hide or cover up the burning ugly realities from the imagined reader. However, he further argues that this cover up cannot fool the intelligent reader as "... even the most authoritarian of texts is in reality forced to take into itself at least part of the view represented by voices it seeks to repress" (Wall 1989, p. 212). In other words, such a text ends up speaking about the forbidden subjects without speaking about them too explicitly. This paradox is what Wall (ibid) has chosen to refer to as the "dialogue of the deaf" in his article, "Silence as Weapon of Authoritarian Discourse". The textual silence, which is a discursive tactic adopted to cover up what is undesirable or strange from the intelligent reader, ends up opening itself to that which it is attempting to cover up. The aim of the silences (Macherey 1978) or semantic gaps (Iser 1974) is to discourage the reader from looking beyond what is explicitly given in the text. Thus, the textual silence becomes the "blanket which ends up covering over any reader's

imagination" (Wall 1989, p. 216). However, the attempt to cover up the reader's imagination may not always be successful to an intelligent reader. Thus, through the textual silences or semantic gaps in the text, the omissions still "show that it is, despite itself, open to all kinds of dialogical voices and contrary social forces that the author himself would not have been prepared to recognize" (ibid, p. 213).

Wall's (1989) theory of the "dialogue of the deaf" is closely linked to Macherey's (1978) theory of the unsaid in a text. In his analysis of the "unsaid" in a text Macherey (ibid) argues that it is the role of the reader and/or critic to plug up holes in the text in order to show that as an intelligent and ideologically sound person, the reader is not blinded by the ideology of the author. In the words of Wall (1989, p. 214):

The Critic's job becomes then a task of making explicit important things that the text does not say. It is a task of revealing those things that the text's author would have preferred to hide. In the text itself, such hiding is accompanied by speaking about all kinds of things that have little or nothing to do with what is supposed to remain hidden.

It is important to note that textual silence can be achieved through semantic gaps as argued by Iser (1974) or the unsaid in a text as advanced by Macherey (1978). As pointed out in the above quotation, silence in *Intimate affairs* is achieved by the dramatist "speaking about all kinds of things that have little or nothing to do with what is supposed to remain hidden from the reader". In such an instance, Wall (ibid) argues that the reader's job is to unmask or denounce this textual silence as ideologically motivated.

The socio-historical background: The "decade of crisis"

The "decade of crisis" in Zimbabwe is given as the period between 1998 and 2008 (Raftopoulos and Mlambo 2009; Zenenga 2008, 2010). Raftopoulos and Mlambo (2009, p. 202) argue that the "decade of crisis" manifested itself in many ways such as:

... confrontations over the land and property rights; contestations over the history and meaning of nationalism and citizenship; the emergence of critical civil society groupings campaigning around trade unionism, human rights and constitutional questions; the restrictions of the state in more authoritarian forms; the broader pan-African and anti-imperialist meanings of the struggles in Zimbabwe; the cultural representations of the crisis in Zimbabwean literature and the central role of Robert Mugabe.

From the above passage, the authors suggest that the crisis evolved around the land and property rights violations, history and meaning of nationalism, the emergence of a largely vocal oppositional civic society campaigning around human rights and trade unionism and President Robert Mugabe's rule. This view can be challenged as essentialist and Zuckerman (2008) has called it an agent-centric account of Zimbabwe's crisis, a narrative that lacks deep and informed analysis of the underlying factors behind the crisis decade in Zimbabwe. The agent-centric account considers President Mugabe as the architect of Zimbabwe's ruin. It ignores the many other factors that have contributed to the crisis, such as the natural hazards, the negative effects of the Structural Adjustment Programme and, most importantly,

the combination of political and economic factors which had their origins in the long-term colonialist economic and political policies. This suggestion is not to deny that the policies of the ruling party worsened the situation through a number of errors and omissions, such as the military intervention in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the pay-outs to war veterans (Sachikonye 2002). However, the article will not dwell on the genesis and evolution of the crisis. Instead it will argue that there was an unprecedented crisis that could not easily be ignored by the artist writing around the same period. Apart from the political dimension of the crisis, the socio-economic collapse that characterised the crisis was as catastrophic. Raftopoulos and Mlambo (2009, p. 202) summarise it in the following words: "... the rapid decline of the economy, characterised by amongst other things: steep decline in industrial and agricultural productivity; historic levels of hyperinflation; the informalisation of labour; the disintegration of economic transactions, displacements and a critical erosion of livelihoods".

At the peak of the "decade of crisis" in 2008, inflation reached 231 million per cent, an unprecedented level outside a war zone and political violence, suspicion and killings became the order of the day (Baya and Matsa 2009). Professionals left Zimbabwe in their thousands for other African countries, such as Botswana, Namibia, Mozambique, Malawi, Swaziland, South Africa and Zambia. Some professionals engaged in menial jobs in European countries and the United States despite their high levels of education and skills. Shortages of basic commodities became the norm and motorists had to resort to buying fuel on the parallel market. Basic food commodities such as mealie-meal, sugar and salt were difficult to come by as the formal system almost collapsed completely to give way to the parallel market. The "decade of crisis" reached a dog-eat-dog situation and many people, including pensioners who had saved their money in banks, were reduced to begging as their savings were wiped out by the unprecedented inflation levels. Zimbabweans, Africans and the whole world witnessed this catastrophe, quagmire and decay unfold. The question the reader should ask while reading *Intimate affairs* is: Does the dramatist's insistence on focusing on the psycho-sexual dilemmas of the two married couples come at the expense of the biting, crude and unprecedented socio-economic and political realities that gripped the Zimbabwean nation as described above?

Intimate affairs: The drama of psycho-sexual dilemmas

Intimate affairs focus on the contradictions and contestations within the domestic spaces of the home and family unit. It discusses the personal, psycho-sexual dilemmas in the homes of two married couples, the Gumbos and the Mutos. The play examines the sexual prejudices that the two married women characters encounter in the marriage institution. The two married women are haunted by a sense of hopelessness and exacerbation when both their husbands individually and collectively complain about their wives' inability to satisfy them in bed. For the first couple, Mr and Mrs Muto, the man complains that his wife is failing to please him in bed because she does not have vaginal dolls. For the second couple, Mr and Mrs Gumbo, Mrs Gumbo's vagina is too wet and too cold to excite and please Mr Gumbo sexually. It is around these two complaints that the play revolves, much to the amusement of the reader or audience

who questions the men's selfishness and arrogance in their self-fulfilling sexual desires.

After failing to resolve their domestic sexual contestations, both couples take their cases to a young psychologist with the hope that he will help resolve their sexual disputes. It is not the occasional naivety of the western trained young psychologist that catches the reader's attention, however, but the reasons given by the two men for failing to get any sexual satisfaction from their respective wives. The first couple, Mr and Mrs Muto, comes to consult the doctor because Mrs Muto does not have vaginal dolls and Mr Muto is furious because according to him: "Every grown up woman should have dolls. Every Shona woman should have ..." (2008, p. 7). He argues that it is natural for any Shona woman to have dolls since Shona women "are taught how to pull their womanhood until they become bigger than their lips" (ibid, p. 7). When counselled by the psychologist on the need to be patient and indulge in foreplay first before any sexual encounter, Mr Muto reveals his arrogance and most importantly, selfishness by arguing that kissing is a "strange" (ibid, p. 8) thing to do and that if his wife wants to be aroused then she should be able to excite herself. He complains:

My wife and I kiss. But it is not the same as playing with dolls. You can kiss while you are playing with dolls. Honestly Doctor, I find kissing a very strange thing to do. A grown up woman who has been taught should have no difficulty in getting herself excited. If she wants her husband to excite her quickly then she should have her dolls ready just when love making begins (ibid).

Mr Muto's chauvinistic attitude is revealing. He claims that every Shona woman has dolls when in actual fact not every Shona woman has them. As he rightly says, women are "taught" how to pull them out until they are bigger than one's lips but in the same breadth he claims it is a "natural" process. This is the selfishness and arrogance that characterise the men in the play. Both the men as well as the women are victims of socialisation. However, the patriarchal society tends to benefit men as women are oppressed by it. In reality, every Shona man and woman knows that not all Shona women have dolls as correctly argued by Mrs Muto when she objects to his explanation and points out, "No, not every Shona woman. I am Shona! I don't have dolls! My mother does not have dolls. My sisters don't have dolls!" (ibid, p. 7). It is clear from Mr Muto's argument that he is only interested in his own pleasure and not his wife's. This explains why Mr Muto does not care about his wife's sexual pleasure; she is an appendage to him that should exist as a source of sexual gratification.

The other couple in the play, Mr and Mrs Gumbo, also fail to reach out to each other sexually because, according to Mr Gumbo, "... when making love, my wife's womanhood is too cold and too wet" (ibid, p. 10). His anger and frustration is compounded by the fact that his wife has consistently and persistently refused to take traditional medicine-herbs which she says would result in her suffering from vaginal cancer if she were to apply them. The men's selfishness is brought out when Mrs Gumbo reminds her husband that she too has to reach an orgasm which she has never reached because he falls asleep just after having his own orgasm. Here the two males demonstrate what Connell (2002, p. 60) has referred to as "hegemonic masculinity" in gender-power relations. Hegemonic masculinity is a direct consequence of the private and cultural processes in most societies in Zimbabwe and beyond. However, Connell (ibid) quickly adds that hegemonic masculinity does not mean "total cultural dominance, the obliteration of alternatives". Thus, the other opposing patterns (from

women) are subordinated rather than eliminated and this explains why the two wives still have a voice despite all odds stacked against them in a patriarchal shona society.

Admittedly, no one dramatist can in any given play capture everything around him/her, but the process of selection, that is, choosing what to include and exclude from the surroundings into his/her works is largely fed by the writer's own ideological inclinations (Wall 1989). Similarly, there is nothing wrong in highlighting contradictions and contestations within the domestic spaces as that too is a record of the mores and experiences of society and the dramatist, the voice of vision. However, what makes Chifunyise fall short in his narrative is his failure to tell the "burning" ugly truth of his society in all its manifestations including the ugly truths beyond the domestic spaces of the home and the family. Admittedly, he is contributing to raising awareness on the domestic injustices in a patriarchal society but, it can still be argued that in the context of the Zimbabwean socio-economic and political realities that peaked in 2008, the year the play was published, his choice of reality becomes peripheral. Thus, there is a way in which the dramatist has failed to champion the fight against social, economic and political oppression and injustice in all its forms. Chifunyise lacks the courage of Wole Soyinka who has written on all forms of injustices and contestations, from the domestic to the national and beyond.

It is ironic to note that the play was published at the peak of the "decade of crisis" in 2008. Yet, in the play, direct reference to the broad socio-economic and political challenges that Zimbabweans were facing during the crisis decade is hard to come by. Only once on the very first page of the play does the reader get a rare glimpse into the challenges Zimbabwe was facing when the psychologist asks her girlfriend Susan to get fuel from her brother presumably sourced on the parallel market as was the case then. Yet, this was a crisis that not only caught the attention of Southern Africa but the whole world. Thus, Chifunyise should have dwelt on the crisis in one way or another in this play, but he does not. According to Ngugi (1981, p. x), writing and commenting on the burning issues of the day is the responsibility of every writer as every writer is a writer in politics. In other words, to write is either to write for or against the dominant hegemonic actors. Ngugi merely echoes what Marx and Engels suggest that literature should reflect social reality and portray its typical features. Choosing to focus on the psycho-sexual dilemmas within the family comes across as "trivia" as there were more burning issues that had to be discussed during the "decade of crisis", such as: the land question, runaway inflation, corruption, shortages of basic commodities and the collapse in institutions and infrastructure among others. Thus, the dramatist should have taken a stance on the broad prevailing situation and not "escaped" into the personal, that is, the family and the psycho-sexual dilemmas of the characters.

Discussing contestations that go beyond domestic tyranny would not have been a new phenomenon. During the pre-colonial and colonial times, artists led the way in pointing the direction in which society should go. And as Chinweizu et al (1980, pp. 253–254) say, "the writer's role is to perceive societal realities and making those perceptions available in works of art in order to help promote understanding and preservation of, or change in the society's values and norms...". In perceiving societal realities, the writer should be brave enough to expose the harsh realities, such as corruption, tribalism, economic sabotage and other ills. In pointing out these societal ills, the writer "throws light upon all that is happening; revealing all that lies hidden or concealed by darkness" (Ngugi 1981, pp. 7–8). What Ngugi and

Chinweizu et al are suggesting is that the dramatist should agitate on behalf of the voiceless not only on the domestic spaces but also the political and economic, in a more direct way. As Eagleton (1976, pp. 17–18) suggests, authentic art should be able to “transcend the ideological limits of its time, yielding us insight into the realities which ideology hides from view”. In the context of this article, the “ideological limits” referred to in the quotation above refers to the phobia that the ZANU PF narrative had to oppositional cultural formations that questioned its prevailing hegemonies during the crisis decade. Despite this opposition to dissenting voices, authentic art should be “brave” enough to push this anti-hegemonic stance as long as it is intended for the good of the majority of the ordinary people. In the case of Chifunyise, there appears to be a deliberate attempt on his part to avoid controversial issues in most of his plays. Such plays that deliberately avoid controversial burning issues through silence or gaps are known by Barthes (1975) as texts of pleasure. Such texts are linked to a comfortable reading that does not offend hegemonic actors at the various tiers of contestation in society. Delgado and Svich (2002, p. 26) call this narrow focus on the domestic space at the expense of the wider national context, “safety writing”. They argue that safety writing focuses “on the ‘personal’ – the family, relationships and psycho-sexual dilemmas and is seldom cast in within the larger context ...” (ibid).

Would this deliberate silence or omission of the broader situation in Zimbabwe in *Intimate affairs* fool the ordinary “intelligent” reader who knows what was happening in Zimbabwe from questioning and reading into his tactical diversion? Wall (1989, p. 212) argues that this tactical diversion from the broad socio-economic and political situation on the ground by an artist cannot fool the intelligent reader as: “Even the most authoritarian of texts is in reality forced to take into itself at least part of the view represented by voices it seeks to repress.” This is what he has chosen to call the dialogue of the deaf. Despite the textual silence and subsequent near black-out on the broad reality in *Intimate affairs*, it is paradoxical that through this silence, the play still shows “that it is, despite itself, open to all kinds of dialogical voices and contrary social forces that the author himself would not have been prepared to recognize” (ibid, p. 213). Chifunyise’s deliberate focus on the domestic scene during the crisis decade prompts the intelligent reader or audience to question the exclusion of the “burning” issues from his narrative. This way, the intelligent reader reads into the dramatist’s motivation on the textual silence.

Macherey (1978) in his analysis of the “unsaid” in a text also argues that it is the role of the reader and/or critic to plug up holes in a text in order to show that as an intelligent and ideologically sound reader one is not blinded by the ideology of the author. In the words of Walls (ibid, 214):

The Critic’s job becomes then a task of making explicit important things that the text does not say. It is a task of revealing those things that the text’s author would have preferred to hide. In the text itself, such hiding is accompanied by speaking about all kinds of things that have little or nothing to do with what is supposed to remain hidden.

In *Intimate affairs*, Chifunyise speaks about the psycho-sexual dilemmas, concerns that had “little or nothing to do” with the socio-economic and political crisis in Zimbabwe. Walls (ibid) argues that when a writer speaks about all kinds of things that have little or nothing to do with what they are hiding, then the reader should unmask or denounce as ideologically

motivated, the silence in the text. In many cases such silences could be associated with propaganda literature written by “patriotic intellectuals” (Tendi 2008). In other cases, it may be a result of fear of persecution, losing state patronage or fear of offending the prevailing hegemonies. This fear is particularly so during crises moments such as the crisis decade in Zimbabwe. As a result, a dramatist may resort to self-censorship and end up choosing to focus on contradictions within the domestic spaces or as a survival tactic write an allegory as is the case with Moyo’s *Belonging* (2009). The focus on the domestic space may also be a result of the polarisation that characterised the crisis decade in Zimbabwe. In a highly polarised society, dramatists may be eager to identify themselves with a certain ideological position they may not even believe in. However, for Stephen Chifunyise, the motivation to be “silent” might largely have been his long association with the ZANU PF hegemonic actors.

Stephen Chifunyise’s *Intimate affairs* can be read as an example of state sanctioned drama although it is not necessarily state sponsored. Until his retirement from active government employment in 2000, Chifunyise has always been associated with the Government of Zimbabwe since its inception in the early 1980s when he came back from self-imposed exile in Zambia in 1982. In 1983, he joined the Ministry of Youth, Sport and Culture and rose through the ranks to the position of Director of Arts and Culture. In 1988, he joined the office of the President and Cabinet as Deputy Secretary to the Vice President, a post he held until 1995 when he became Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Education, Arts, Sport and Culture, a position he held until he retired in 2000. Such an association with the Zimbabwean Government at that high level has seen him concentrate more on writing social comedies that discuss love to family relationships and other domestic conflicts within the Zimbabwean society. Although it is not true that everyone in government employment supports the ruling party’s ideological position, Chifunyise’s long close association with the state makes it possible to argue that he would rather identify with the prevailing hegemonic actors and their ideology. Whether he genuinely supports it or not is another issue.

On the other hand, Chifunyise could be writing *Intimate affairs* as a reformist who capitalises on the technique of ambiguity to cause social change within the dominant classes by covertly questioning the tyranny in the domestic spaces of the home and family. The depiction of the women characters, Mrs Muto and Mrs Gumbo could mean that Chifunyise is unclear and unhappy with the direction of social change in Zimbabwe especially change that involves cultural values. The ambivalence could be part of Chifunyise’s hit-and-run tactics to covertly comment on state politics in his attack of the domestic spaces. In *Intimate affairs* he could be employing the concepts of narrated time and time of narration (White 1981). Time of narration refers to the year the play was published. If the play was published in 2008 and eighteen years have lapsed since 1980, the narrated time, then the state has not done much to uplift the lives of women who have to face oppressive societal expectations such as vaginal dolls and the application of traditional medicines to the vagina which may cause cancer. The two married women still face oppression from the patriarchal society eighteen years after independence in 1980. So, the ambivalence in the play may be a way of concealing his disapproval of the treatment of women years after independence. Women such as Joyce Mujuru fought gallantly during the liberation struggle yet come independence; the same women are treated as second class citizens by the African men they fought side by side. Understood this way, Chifunyise is also protesting against the treatment of women

in the Zimbabwean society. The suggestion that Chifunyise is making is that independence will remain incomplete until the political and economic shifts are accompanied by shifts in the social and psychological make-up of the society. Despite the promise of equality and happiness for all, women have remained oppressed and that has to be addressed as well. In this sense *Intimate affairs* demonstrates what Grant and Crossan (2012, p. 103) refer to as “freedom to fail”. The state has the potential to reform and correct the anomaly in society but chooses to ignore the status. This way, the state has the freedom to fail and for choosing to ignore the injustices directed at women, the state should be challenged. This ambivalence in the play enables Chifunyise to question the status quo while advancing the interests of the two women in an ambivalent way. Read this way, Chifunyise is also commenting on the burning ugly realities of the day.

Despite the suggested reformist agenda in the above paragraph, it still remains possible that Chifunyise as part and parcel of the patriotic intellectuals that could have been willing tools in the service of the dominant hegemonic actors to legitimise their cultural hegemony in Zimbabwe during the crisis decade. Gramsci (1971) sees the role of the intellectual as crucial in the maintenance of cultural hegemony. Gramsci further argues that the traditional intellectuals (artists and scholars) who may consider themselves independent of the ruling class are still tied to the establishment indirectly and in ways sufficiently subtle to permit them to maintain illusions. Chifunyise writing as an “independent” dramatist could easily fall into that category. His glaring textual silences on the state-citizens’ contestation during the crisis decade is deliberately calculated as part of the broad state diversionary tactics to take the reader away from the burning and controversial issues of the day especially those that went beyond the home and family. Macherey (1978) argues that a work of art is tied to ideology not so much by what it says as by what it does not say. Commenting on Macherey’s views on the unsaid in literature, Eagleton (1976) suggests that it is in the significant silences of the text, in its gaps and absences, that the presence of ideology can most be positively felt. A writer ideologically forbids a text to say certain things but in trying to tell the truth in his or her own way, he or she may be forced to reveal the limits of that which he is trying to avoid. Chifunyise’s deliberate attempt to ‘force’ the reader to ignore or accept certain realities at the expense of the other can also be discussed in the context of McCombs and Shaw’s (1972) theory of agenda setting.

Agenda setting as a theory emanates from McCombs and Shaw’s (1972) Chapel Hill study of the 1968 Presidential campaign in the United States. It discusses the interface between the mass media agenda and the public agenda. As suggested by McCombs (1993, p. 60) the opening phrases of agenda setting research concentrated on the question “who sets the public agenda and under what conditions?” Muin (2011) summarises McCombs and Shaw’s agenda setting theory as follows. Agenda setting theory says that it is the mass media that make people aware or not aware, pay attention to or neglect and play up or downgrade certain aspects of their public scene. Summarised, the theory says people tend to include or exclude what the media includes or excludes in their coverage of the reality.

Agenda setting is deployed in this article to explain the silences and omissions in *Intimate affairs*. The play can be read as an attempt by Chifunyise to set an agenda to take the reader’s mind away from the ugly socio-economic and political realities of the crisis decade. McCombs (1993) argues that political opinions, convictions and behaviour can change in

response to media messages. He cites the research findings from Page and Shapiro (1992) who found that news coverage was significant in influencing the salience of issues in society. Thus, the media can be used to promote social change in society. Understood this way, the media has the power of a hypodermic needle and once the reader is “injected” with the news he or she will respond the way the editor wants him or her to respond. This can be applied to Chifunyise’s *Intimate affairs*. The intention was to hide or cover up the ugly truth of the crisis decade by giving prominence to internal contradictions within the home and family. The domestic crisis is what the readers were supposed to talk about and not the crisis as it related to the broad national context.

However, recent studies by Muin (2011) have confirmed the fallacy of the media’s power to influence opinions and behaviour change among readers and the audience. In his research findings, Muin argues that political opinions, convictions and behaviour cannot easily be changed in response to media content and this is the position that this article takes. The media in reality merely tries to persuade not change the reader or audience. The agenda setting role of the media thus may as well be that of the dramatist and despite the spirited attempt to “silence” certain burning issues, the intelligent reader will read behind the dramatist’s own ideological trappings and unmask it for what it is. Chifunyise may avoid writing about the socio-political and economic situation in Zimbabwe in 2008, but the intelligent reader may not be fooled by such an endeavour. The textual silence in *Intimate affairs* is intended to stifle debate among citizens about the broad realities.

Conclusion

The aim of the article was to explore the significance of silence in Chifunyise’s play, *Intimate affairs*. In doing this, the article used Wall’s (1989) theory of the dialogue of the deaf and Macherey’s (1978) theory of the unsaid in a text to argue that the silence and omission in the play on the broader national context of national politics was a deliberate tactical diversion motivated by the dramatist’s desire to cover up or at worse hide the ugly truths about the crisis decade. Chifunyise attempted to achieve this cover up by focusing on issues that have nothing or very little to do with what he was hiding from the reader; the ugly truths during the decade of crisis. However, as argued in the article, in trying to “forbid” the text from saying the ugly truth about the crisis decade, Chifunyise revealed that which he was trying to hide from the reader as any “intelligent” reader on reading the play is bound to question the author’s focus on the domestic spaces at a time what he should have focused on was the “burning” political and economic issues in Zimbabwe located within the broader context of national politics, not the domestic spaces of the home and family.

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