

# What Has Culture Got to Do With It?: Girl-Women Marginalisation and Human Rights Violations – The Case of Zimbabwean Women as Depicted in *Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region* (2003)

**Ruby Magosvongwe & Abner Nyamende**

## Summary

The article takes an African-centred approach in its examination of women's plight and strategies propagated by African women in pre- and post-independence Zimbabwe to create safe space and empower women with a view to building more stable families and sustainable social transformation for society's greater good. Bringing indigenous Zimbabwean African ideals and values to the centre of analyses, against the backdrop of lived socio-historical experiences, the article interrogates selected short stories contributed by some Zimbabwean authors in *Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region* (2003). It focuses on pertinent issues raised concerning problematic existential conditions particularly affecting women, including their ripple effects on the socio-cultural, economic and material conditions of the respective female protagonists' lives, families and communities. Because the contributors are themselves women, the assumption is that they know best where it pinches worst, including how best they envision strategies that can usher in sustainable transformation in their respective environments. The article argues that it is important that these issues be examined holistically within the women's respective socio-cultural and material contexts in order to validate pragmatic approaches that would enable women to wade with ingenuity in their respective community waters. Placed within their familiar cultural environments, women can ingeniously wrestle for meaningful and sustainable transformative change where it is necessary. Yet, women alone cannot usher in sustainable social transformation outside their existential and material conditions, begs the article.

## Opsomming

Hierdie artikel volg 'n Afrosentriese benadering tot sy ondersoek na vroue se benarde posisie en die strategieë wat Afrikavroue vóór en ná onafhanklikwording in Zimbabwe gepropageer het om 'n veilige ruimte te skep en om vroue te bemagtig om meer stabiele gesinne te vestig en volhoubare sosiale transformasie te bewerkstellig wat die hele samelewing tot voordeel strek. Inheemse Zimbabwiese Afrika-ideale en -waardes vorm die middelpunt van die ontleding teen die agtergrond van deurliefde

*JLS/TLW* 32(1), Mar./Mrt. 2016  
ISSN 0256-4718/Online 1753-5387  
© *JLS/TLW*  
DOI: 10.1080/02564718.2016.12108



sosiohistoriese ervarings, en die artikel ontleed uitgesoekte kortverhale deur Zimbabwiese outeurs wat in *Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region* (2003) gepubliseer is. Dit fokus op tersaaklike vraagstukke wat verband hou met bestaanstoestande, veral toestande wat vroue raak, en die uitklingeffek daarvan op die sosiokulturele, ekonomiese en materiële toestande van die onderskeie vroueprotagoniste se lewens, gesinne en gemeenskappe. Die medewerker is self ook vroue, dus word daar aanvaar dat hulle die beste kan aandui waar hulle die swaarste kry; hulle weet wat hulle as die beste strategieë beskou om volhoubare transformasie in hulle onderskeie gemeenskappe in te lei. Die artikel voer aan dat dit belangrik is dat hierdie vraagstukke op 'n holistiese wyse ondersoek moet word binne die vroue se onderskeie sosiokulturele en materiële kontekste sodat dit die pragmatiese benaderings wat vroue in staat stel om hulle gemeenskappe met vindingrykheid te betree, kan valideer. Binne hulle bekende kultuuromgewings kan vroue vernuftig veg vir betekenisvolle en volhoubare transformerende verandering indien dit nodig is. Die artikel voer egter aan dat vroue nie op hulle eie volhoubare sosiale transformasie buite hulle bestaans- en materiële toestande kan inlei nie.

## Introduction

Assertions from womanist and feminist discourses insist that women are at the margins and periphery of existence in most communities, a standpoint that seems to have been universalised. Furthermore, said discourses on how best women can be empowered, including creating safe spaces for women's unhindered development, also appear to be gendered, with the respective interest groups subtly safeguarding their interests first at the expense of the women that they purport to represent and fight for. For these reasons, strategies and approaches that are parachuted do not necessarily embrace the local cultural nuances that are the bedrock of the subterranean forces that partly shackle women. It therefore would not come as a surprise that critics could miss the philosophical basis of the standpoints that see women circumscribed and denied space to actualise their full potential. To this end, some of the earliest published Zimbabwean women's writings and voices as recorded in *Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region* (2003) offer an invaluable record of how women envision practicable and pragmatic strategies to empower and create space for African women in the so-called "modern" dispensation within the generally defined cultural expectations. This is notwithstanding the general view and widely acknowledged perception that African women are largely marginalised. Recorded lived experiences within and after the colonial capitalistic dispensations expose systems that promote and enhance deliberate exclusionary policies that undermine women's self-actualisation in environments and institutions that are heavily patriarchal.

The article therefore uses women's narratives to critique socio-cultural, economic, religious and political environments, interrogating how cultural space and institutions can best be navigated in women's favour. The view gets corroboration from Roach (1995) who argues that "those situated at the

margins [– presumably women in this case –] are better positioned to understand the world than those in power” (Baskin 1994: 3; cited in Roach, 1995: 135). The fact that the indigenous Zimbabwean women themselves self-narrate lived experiences from specific cultural oeuvres in their own voices, rather than giving them what Daymond, Driver, Meintjes, Molema, Musengezi, Orford and Rasebotsa (2003: 3) spell as “dissident space”, gives the women agency in negotiating and creating a niche for themselves in areas that the modern heavy patriarchal system would have naturally preserved for the official male voice. In addition to the latter, apart from documenting lived socio-historical experiences, the very act of self-narrating inadvertently assures revision of practices that have till now favoured and privileged certain sections of society above others.

Yet, “culture counts, and cultural identity is what is most meaningful to most people” (Huntington 2002: 20) because women live with and among respective communities whose support they need. In line with the Shona philosophy of *Unhu* and oneness/*Humwe* (Chigara 2004; 2012) that are premised on reciprocity and general regard and respect for human worth, self-narration subtly challenges society’s responsibility to safeguard the dignity and humanity of all. In a sure way, then, the self-narrations, for the necessity of enhancing social cohesion, challenge society to introspect on social responsibility and social accountability towards stemming attitudes and practices that prey on integration without which constructive and transformative change could be achieved. Further, self-describing, self-naming and self-defining (Morrison 1982; Hudson-Weems 2007a; Asante, 2007; Magosvongwe 2013) are the only sure way of safeguarding and guaranteeing both favourable existential conditions and collective survival. Any other approach could only entrench policies and systems that could be at best sympathetic, yet, subtly tangential to indigenous African women’s existential securities.

Thus, the best way to partly address women’s concerns, transform attitudes, influence constructive change and create more stable and peaceful spaces for women, could be to first understand the challenges, practices, conditions, considerations and possible opportunities from the perspective of women themselves in view of their respective cultural expectations and desired goals. The latter aspect, however, would sound contradictory to an uncritical ear, but it is not. Philosophies and ideologies flourish where the target and agents roll into one bundle that takes ownership of the same, contradictions notwithstanding. If women are the intended audiences and beneficiaries of programmes, policies, philosophies and opportunities, as is the case with *Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region*, then, it is only logical that women themselves assert their own voices from tangible cultural centres that they identify with. The need for borrowing intelligently from others, building upon the wisdom gleaned from respective lived experiences and indigenous knowledge systems, for the greater good, does not have to be

ignored. Everyone cannot belong “everywhere” and hope to retain both their dignity and clarity of vision. The latter psychologically empowers women to consciously contribute towards achieving safer space for themselves within their cultures and respective communities rather than fanning perceptions that consolidate and entrench prejudices that paint women as peripheral observers on issues that impinge upon their humaneness and being. The former has the potential to foreground women’s voices, in addition to bringing women’s contributions to the centre as active agents of the change that society desires, for the greater good. This inclusive approach, apart from its objective to build oneness/*Humwe* and social responsibility, highly propagates agency and ownership of suggested and envisioned pragmatic approaches that should further strengthen African values embedded in the broader philosophies of *Unhu* and *Humwe*.

Ironically, *Unhu* and *Humwe* as philosophies hinge upon and gravitate around reciprocity, social accountability and social responsibility that define and undergird most cultural ideals, values and expectations among most indigenous Zimbabwean communities. In short then, women’s ingenuity as depicted in their respective contributions are weighted in view of *Unhu* and *Humwe*, bringing their voices to the centre with a view to cultivating and enhancing favourable cultural environments that nurture lives holistically. These are goals that central government, communities and families should consciously strive for in the new human rights-driven millennium. Ironically, the new millennium has been most vocal about respect for human rights and human life, contradictions notwithstanding. This is the trust that the present article adopts in its analyses of the Zimbabwean women-authored writings in the anthology *Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region* (2003).

## **African Child Marriages and Efforts to Create Safe Space for the Girls-Women: The Case of Disempowerment and Foiled Human Rights Issues**

### **An Overview**

The article analyses the convergence of matrixes compounding the crises-ridden life of the African girl-child-woman in colonial and post-independence Zimbabwe, cultural politics of womanhood in an African set-up, and ultimate female-marginalisation and dependency from an African perspective as depicted in four selected narratives. The narratives do not only offer closer personal engagement with the lived experiences of girl-women, but also offer a window through which the plurality of the often deemed “culturally nuanced” marginalisation of girl-women and proliferation of myths about human rights abuses can be examined. The interest is

“primarily in relation with and to the cultural politics of everyday life” (Werbner 1996: 7) and the plural arenas in which indigenous Zimbabwean girl-women lives are expressed. Though often subdued and side-lined in discourses on African girl-women human rights abuses and violations, malevolence can also be detected in “the everyday forms of coercion and suppression to which all villagers are subjected during [the colonial regime]” (England, in Werbner & Ranger 1996: 117). Though legally Zimbabwe has made some strides, anomalies still abound in everyday life.

### **The Narratives’ Synopses**

The analysis opens with sequential synopses of the narratives to be examined beginning with “Khami, Court Record” Zimbabwe, 1908 (Shangani), originally in Ndebele and translated into English by unknown transcribers and translators. The narrative recounts the travails of a 13-year-old girl-woman’s recourse to the Native Commissioner’s courts and intervention after being forced into marriage to a married octogenarian at 11 years. From the age of 11 years, she is subjected to multiple rapes and runs away but her efforts seem to be foiled because the cruel octogenarian “husband” paid a £21 down-payment of bride wealth to the father. The latter is coerced and physically fought to surrender his daughter to appease the covetous and brutal octogenarian neighbour. Despite ongoing coercion, multiple rapes and death-threats by the octogenarian should she refuse sexual intercourse and the registration of the marriage at the Native Commissioner’s, the girl-woman is resolute. She gets the Native Commissioner’s support and runs away, but family force her back to her matrimonial home as a co-wife.

The Khami narrative is followed by Joyce Simango’s narrative, “Women are wealth”, an excerpt translated into English from the first female-authored Shona novel published in 1974. The story focuses on 15-year-old Tambudzai’s polygamous father’s plans to marry off his daughter to a polygamous octogenarian as a fourth co-wife. VaMunhamo, Tambudzai’s mother was herself married off at fifteen in a polygamous marriage to Tambudzai’s father. VaMunhamo is ordered to prepare her daughter for departure to her new home because Tambudzai’s father wants bride wealth for yet another young wife. On the eve of the give-away ceremony, VaMunhamo flees with her children to her maternal uncle in Rusitu, eastern Rhodesia/Zimbabwe.

The examination then takes Colette Mutangadura’s “Ngonya’s Bride-Price” whose chief protagonist, 16-year-old Ngonya, is the writer’s great grandmother. The narrative exposes how Ngonya, a farm-house maid in early colonial Rhodesia, is raped by Mr Jan and cannot report the perpetrator because she fears for her family’s demise after learning about white brutality

in the 1896-1897 African failed-war of resistance. Ngonya falls pregnant and is removed from the village by her family who regard her as a traitor and disgrace. Farmer Jan, who is a family man, demands Ngonya's return and raids the whole village's cattle herds as punishment for the village's failure to return Ngonya. After secretly relocating to a far-away new village, one rainy night Ngonya's people recover all their cattle and take twenty of Jan's own as payment for the disgraceful treatment of their daughter and their own humiliation. Ngonya bears a son, Andrea, whom the family had ordered to be killed at birth because they regard it taboo to live with a white-skinned child. The child's life is spared because everyone loves him. Ngonya finally marries a man of her choice from the village who pays ten head of cattle as bride wealth to her father.

Marevasei Kachere's "War Memoir" about her liberation war experiences closes the analysis and examination of the girl-women travails and sustained efforts to create safe space for girls and women to realise their dreams and unlock their full potential. The narrator and protagonist narrates the coercion, oppression, violence-ridden and physical death threats that African villagers endure in Rhodesian African keeps/protected camps, loosely claimed as villages, during the armed liberation struggle, and her eventual escape to Mozambique to train as a liberation war fighter. Marevasei narrates the frugal conditions under which they stay as refugees before they are eventually trained. Central to the narrative is also her heart-rending narration of the 25 November 1977 Rhodesian bombings of the Tembwe refugee camp in Mozambique. Her eventual training, subsequent fighting and eventual ceasefire and independence are landmarks that Marevasei use to measure the betrayal of the liberation war promises and what she perceives as continual poverty of ordinary women in post-independence Zimbabwe.

### **What Has Culture Got to do With it?: Girl-Women Marginalisation And Human Rights Violations**

From the outset, the article acknowledges that the first two narratives do not provide both the material and environmental backgrounds against which the narratives are set. They also begin *in medias res*, focusing just on the parts that show the violations against the victim girls. Subtly and unwittingly, such approaches could culminate in what could be unfairly viewed and construed by some critics as sponsored writing for some set agenda by the project owners. Further, that the socio-historical background is left to readers' conjecture is unfortunate in that readers are denied the real circumstances under which the practice would normally thrive. This missing link is therefore important for validating the project owners' earnestness towards establishing transformative change for society's greater good.

Ironically, the only clear historical indicators are that the stories take place during the colonial period – and colonial administration’s orchestrated agendas generally disregarded issues of human security within the African communities. Whatever policies could be instituted, including institutions set up at the time, were for the expediency of settler control. Some critical readers would be justified, then, to assume that such writing could have been another subtle ploy to further intellectual hegemony under the much valorised civilisation agenda seeking to obliterate African knowledge systems and practices that were brandished as diabolic, often outside their material and environmental contexts. However, this is not to downplay the existence of child marriages and their dehumanising effects of sex slavery. The article begs that obtaining material conditions be examined in tandem with the emerging issues of violence, violation and marginalisation of the girl-wives or girl-women. To this end, any analysis that one hazards to make even at this juncture, far removed from the socio-historical settings in time and place, is bound to be faulty, and perhaps misleading.

In most indigenous Zimbabwean families and communities, conceptions and perceptions about who we are, how we understand our relationships with others and the environment, what we dream to become and what we would want to achieve in life, largely hinge on how we are socialised and culturally trained from infancy. Further, the material and intellectual environments have indelible impact on who and what people ultimately become. Impliedly, dreams and visions do not drop from space, but are a result of practices and existential philosophies undergirding the very practices that determine people’s conduct on a daily basis, including the values, material conditions and knowledge systems that they muster as moral defence. For instance, there could have been no justification for militarised, or nomadic hunters and gatherers communities to preserve cripples within their folds, as resources and the material environments, back then, could not allow such “luxury”. This explains the principle of elimination at birth inferred in “Ngonya’s Bride Wealth”. Ngonya’s people could not imagine how they could raise an alien in the form of a white child in a typical African rural environment. They were apprehensive about the unknown dangers involved and pre-empted any chances of impending doom, for society’s greater good. For these reasons, in examining forced early child marriages in “Khami: Court Records”, “Women are wealth” and “Ngonya’s Bride Wealth” summarised above, the material conditions and philosophies that are the root causes of these practices should have been provided for readers to come up with balanced, informed and objective criticism. Nevertheless, worth noting from Ngonya’s experiences is that girl-women can also immensely contribute towards public life by bringing in nurturing feminine qualities where need be – especially honesty and respect for sacredness of human life, because since women carry and bring life into the

world, their feminine qualities can help to transform their worlds and communities for the greater good.

However, the article hastens to argue that without addressing the root causes and foundation of the anomalous and grievous conduct and behaviour by perpetrators and victims of child marriages alike, discussions on ills of child marriages and attendant human rights abuses would remain intellectual abstractions and cannon fodder for interest groups riding on the plight of the violated girl-women. Solutions must be sought where the problems originate, including interrogating the existential conditions and cultural perceptions of the same. Despite the noble outcomes intended, oftentimes solutions torpedoed from other cultural centres would thus be regarded as “poison” that should be “expunged” (Mararika in Muwati, Gambahaya, Gwekwerere & Magosvongwe (2012: 16). Therefore, any sustainable change, then, can best be achieved first by positively transforming the customs, beliefs, practices, values, institutions, language and interests that people cherish and want to be identified with.

Khami’s multiple violations and rape cited earlier appear to stem from Khami’s father’s poverty within the culturally, materially and psycho-spiritually deprived colonial set-up. If Khami’s father were well-to-do, he would not have been forced to send off his 11-year-old daughter to an octogenarian on a partial bride wealth of £21 that is forced into his hands. Together with Khami’s brothers, they are coerced to sanction Khami’s violent marriage, to the point that they relocate from their home to escape the threats of the violent “son-in-law” who scorns both tradition that demands respect for the parent-in-laws and the Native Commissioner’s order to leave Khami alone. Therefore, as can be gleaned from this narrative, tones of condemnation alone without turning around the debilitating material conditions that fan such practices indirectly act in complicity with the perpetrators who violate the girl-women by forcing them into despicable marital unions.

For Khami, home is not a safe haven. Neither is the open veldt where the 11-year-old girl sought sanctuary for four days before coming back to the very place where her innocence is forcibly surrendered to an avaricious, covetous and sexually deprived octogenarian. Her family watches helplessly. Through their inaction, a critical eye would conclude that they “aid” Khami’s rapist to take her as a junior co-wife in order to save their own lives. Poverty in their case is therefore depicted as the worst enemy that emasculates them. Thus, poverty should first be defeated for calmness, dignity and respect for human worth to be safeguarded. The Native Commissioners’ courts that have no laws against poverty, much like present-day legalism, are themselves as culpable as the violators that they purport to rein in.

It is apparent in Khami’s story that poverty in African families is girl-women’s worst enemy. Despite 11-year-old Khami’s resolute fight to stop the violent marital union, including the Native Commissioner’s word to the



same effect since the girl's consent to register the marriage had to be recorded, hers is a lone battle and a mockery of social "justice". The narrative insinuates that cultural, legal and material conditions are such that girls and women can only be seen, but never heard. If they are heard, it appears that material and environmental conditions seem to seal their fate as soft targets. Theirs can thus be viewed as a condition of multi-pronged vulnerability. Joyce Simango's narrative that recounts VaMunhamo and Tambudzai's plight and precarious escape summarised earlier, though void of the background, similarly replicates the violence depicted in Khami's court records, showing the prevalence of the debilitating practice.

Further, lived experiences as testified by Khami's case show that external interventions in the form of the courts are not sustainable as long as there are no tangible practicable efforts to stem the practice. Girl-women continue being thrown back to the source of their turmoil, to their peril. The court record shows no constructive action taken by the courts to rescue Khami. After repeated efforts to escape and seek recourse to colonial justice, she is sent back to the very home and environment that rapes her emotionally, physically and psychologically. For lack of more concise terminology, biological sex is the worst "crime" that could befall girl-women living in Khami and Tambudzai's existential conditions. For Khami, like all girl-women living under materially and morally depraved conditions, all securities are thrown to the wind. The Native Commissioner's courts, parents' home and biological family act in concert to nurture practices that dehumanise girls by making them sex slaves. It needs no begging that child marriages of this nature permanently destroy not only the victim-girl's future, but her progeny as well, because the cycle of violence would most likely replicate itself thereby rendering certain sections of society perpetual underdogs. The compounded effects of circumvented childhood on the girl-women's marital unions form a matter for a full debate for another paper. Suffice to say, as Chigara would succinctly surmise:

We shall all become, when our capacities to choose to recognise, promote and protect the inherent dignity of all individuals regardless, shall have become second nature in all our dealings with others.

(2012a: v)

Court justice and legalism, then and now, thus, appears to be tokenism of "social justice" as long as no practical measures are taken to censure and stem rampant violation of the innocent and already marginalised girl-women. As indicated earlier, violence and violations include non-provision of safe havens where the forcibly-married girl-women can get refuge and be empowered to be in control of their lives in adulthood. Further, that the latter could only be temporary reprieve is beyond debate. These issues, then, demand that society thinks through them in order to come up with lasting practicable measures. The Zimbabwean 23rd Junior Parliament, opened on

Saturday 20 June 2015 in Harare, in commemoration of the Day of the African Child held annually in honour of the June 16, 1976 Soweto massacres, focused on why and how early child marriages can be stemmed as part of an awareness campaign.

Worth noting is that for most, if not all, victims from rural or communal lands like in Khami and Tambudzai's stories, people can mostly survive and sustain themselves if they have access to principal primary resources such as productive land that they can use for subsistence or small-scale farming. Women generally have limited access to such land, since most traditional leaders and public officers have patriarchal biases in the allocation of land and other principal resources. The assurance and insurance for girl-women's sustenance can only be best expressed and defined by the victims themselves as they muster agency over their lives, rather than be defined by others. Be that as it may, as Ngonya's case narrated earlier shows, "[t]he notion of self as a primary issue and family as a lesser priority is unfounded and unworkable in the reality of the African woman" (Hudson-Weems 2004: 60).

Sixteen-year-old Ngonya endures rape at settler Farmer Jan's hands to a point of appearing to be a willing participant, for fear of having her whole family exterminated. Lived historical experiences inscribed in Ngonya's psych-space proved beyond doubt that resistance to white domination in whatever form courted death (Vambe 1972; Ranger 1967). Ngonya therefore silently suffers abuse and scorn from both family and villagers for sleeping with a white man for sugar, becoming a village gossip subject. Her reality can best be understood and appreciated in the context of racist sexism that reduces the African girl-woman to a sex slave and copulation beast. Ngonya's experiences are slavery rapes playing out in a different set-up on mainland Africa – the farm frontier, an enclosed miniature self-ruled colony.

However, clothed in any other name and in whatever historical epoch, space or frontier, for whatever reasons, rape and sexual violation remain violent dehumanising experiences with similar debilitating effects that should never be trivialised. Ngonya subverts her violation by playing ball and eventually running away to give birth to a "coloured" son Andrea, whom she fondly nurtures despite the earlier emotional and psychological hurts and scars. That her father and people also finally embrace Andrea as one of their very own, despite earlier directives to have the infant killed, points towards the nurturing attributes that the public at large would benefit from should more opportunities arise for more women to occupy public office and are accorded less restricted space and time.

It is therefore important to deconstruct the issues of girl-women child marriages, explore and expose the distortions that emanate from prejudices about cultural practices that are at times used as a scapegoat to explain some injustices and malpractices that seem to be taking root in most discourses concerning marginalisation and abuses of girl-women in most African families and communities. There are other encroaching alien elements that

continue being either ignored or downplayed. There was no cultural connection between Ngonya's rape by Farmer Jan and her begetting a son outside marriage. Neither was there any cultural justification for Jan to raid all the cattle from Ngonya's village so that villagers could surrender Ngonya as a free "wench" solely for Jan's egotistic sexual pleasure and unhindered plunder as a white master. The rape of Ngonya and her dehumanisation is metonymic of the rape of both her people and their resources.

With the whole village dispossessed of their only wealth in the form of cattle in addition to the forcible removal from their original fertile land to make way for settler Farmer Jan, compounded by forced labour on the same settler farms that expose girls, boys and men to settler commercial farming and its vices, it goes without saying that African poverty and morbid existence are human-manufactured, let alone the ripple effects of child marriages discussed earlier, avarice and covetousness notwithstanding. That a radical approach to these child marriages is thus highly political and potentially socially disruptive is worth noting. Discourses that downplay or totally ignore conditions that nurture the considerable violence on girls and women's lives, their perennial disempowerment and economic turmoil that continuously render them victims of sex manipulation and abuse are misleading. They also point towards inattention, lack of political will and unwillingness to foster practicable and lasting solutions to erstwhile culturally-justifiable practices.

However, clearly discernible from depictions of both Khami and Ngonya's people's lived experiences, the wealthy and privileged few ensure that the poor and the destitute are denied both dignity and the honour to safeguard their humaneness by any means necessary. The difference between Ngonya's violator, Jan, and Khami's violator, is only skin-deep, pointing to a male nature that can never be attributed to cultural permissiveness. Only the shades and tactics differ as shown in these stories. The narratives therefore become critical points by which strides to redress injustices against girl-women since colonial times can be measured, especially in a human rights driven 21st century, notwithstanding race, creed, political experiences, religious affiliation and ethnicity.

The visible legacy of racist sexism that explains the existence of a "coloured" or people of mixed race in the Zimbabwean society, and other African communities, as shown in Ngonya's case and its multi-pronged horrors, has not received adequate attention in studies on girl-women abuses on mainland Africa, aspects that deal partial treatment to women's empowerment and emancipation outside the issues of cultural space and practices. It would appear that perpetrators are adroitly manufactured by those wielding wealth and power to give themselves "divine" control over the "lesser" beings around them. However, the fundamental issues at play lay with the general differential human worth accorded to certain sections of society deriving from skin pigmentation and biological sex. Issues of racial

and class superiority as culpable for some of the abuses witnessed in colonial and present-day Zimbabwe, get closer attention in Marevasei Kachere's description of horrendous experiences of the liberation war, the analysis of which concludes this article. Marevasei Kachere's voice exposes the colonial oppressive conditions and attempted genocide against the Africans in colonial Rhodesia during the armed liberation struggle, thereby denying advocates of human rights moral high ground to censure human rights abuses in Zimbabwean African homes, families and communities. Marevasei Kachere's narrative begs all advocates of peace and human rights

to remember and to understand the war: to understand it at the level of high analysis and to understand it at the level of suffering and trauma. We need to understand it for reviewing policy, for making the record more complete, for healing memories.

(Bhebhe & Ranger 1995: 1)

The notorious Rhodesian "protected villages" or "death traps" that force Marevasei Kachere to join the liberation war at primary school going age, in her view, appear to be flagrantly replicated in the poverty-ridden family that she rejoins after the war. Kachere's narrative exposes "the contradictions confronting women [and society in the struggles and] process of fighting for black [women's] emancipation" as shown in her embittered tone. (Mguni-Gambahaya & Magosvongwe 2005: 5). Further, if not carefully negotiated within the material and cultural conditions after the war, it would not be surprising that Zimbabwe ends up internally stricken along gender and racial lines and missing out on the real issues of resources mobilisation and access that should be addressed in order to find holistic solutions.

Apparent in the cited sources could be only the overwhelming plight of girl-women. Veiled from the public eye, however, could also be the boy child living in equally unimaginable trauma and turmoil, subjected to and quietly consenting to sodomy and homosexuality in exchange for material comfort. Therefore, "helping white people and black people to overcome psychological distortions about the significance of human worth should be the starting point of all social reconstruction efforts in [all Zimbabwean families, communities and institutions]" (Chigara 2012b: 220). Approaches that focus on certain sections of society, excluding others, risk dealing with symptoms rather than dealing a blow to the root causes that are saliently masked in the name of cultural permissiveness and cultural abuses.

## **Conclusion**

The selected narratives seem to underlay differently the need to interrogate more closely the material and environmental conditions accounting for early child marriages and girl-women's sexual slavery during the then colonial

period. Further, the narratives subtly expose the pitfalls of half-informed examinations that would most likely lead to ill-informed judgements and solutions to perceived challenges, problems and conditions militating against total empowerment of girl-women in Zimbabwean families and communities. Therefore, issues of child early marriages and human rights abuses should be deconstructed if they are to be dealt with holistically, embracing the “Southern Africa’s own age-old social engineering principle of *humwe/ubuntu/ubwananyina*” Chigara (2012b). As Chigara rightly concludes on issues of land and human rights in SADC countries, property rights and peaceful co-existence in the new millennium:

*Humwe* literally means: “We are in this together”. Therefore, it is in our common interest to co-operate in order to succeed. It is a principle of individual and social altruism for the benefit of the whole. Schools, colleges, universities, [churches], and grassroots campaigns should be used/involved [to raise awareness and empower Zimbabweans to rid themselves of this malevolent and virulent cancer].

(2012b: 224)

The article does not in any way trivialise the scourge of child marriages and girl-women sexual abuses, economic turmoil and vulnerable existential conditions rampant in colonial and post-independence Zimbabwe that undermine women’s potential and actualisation. Rather, in foregrounding the complexities imbuing cultural and material existential conditions, it demands conscious commitment from all and sundry to seriously self-introspect and consciously act from a position of critical knowledge, to make existential conditions for girl-women more favourable. This is not just an issue of gender, but of resources mobilisation and accessibility so that every family member can live in a safe and sustaining environment.

## References

- Bhebhe, N & Ranger, T. (eds)  
1995 *Soldiers in Zimbabwe’s Liberation War: Volume 1*. Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications.
- Brake, M.  
1995 *Comparative Youth Culture: The Sociology of Youth Cultures and Youth Subcultures in America, Britain and Canada*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Chigara, B.  
2004 *Land Reform Policy: The Challenge of Human Rights Law*. Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited.
- 2012a *Southern African Development Community Land Issues: Towards a New Sustainable Land Relations Policy*. London/New York: Routledge.

- 2012b *Re-Conceiving Property Rights in the New Millenium: Towards a New Sustainable Land Relations Policy*. London: Routledge.
- Daymond, M.J., Driver, D., Meintjes, S., Molema, L., Musengezi, C., Orford, M. & Rasebotsa, N. (eds)  
2003 *Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region*. New York: Feminist Press.
- England, H.  
1996 *Between God and Kamuzu: The Transition to Multi-Party Politics in Central Malawi*. In: *Postcolonial Identities in Africa* (eds) R. Werbner & T. Ranger. London & New Jersey: Zed Books, pp. 107-135.
- Hudson-Weems, C.  
2004 *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*. Fourth edition. Troy, Michigan: Bedford Publishers.  
2007a *Contemporary Africana Theory, Thought and Action: A Guide to Africana Studies*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.  
2007b *Nommo/Self-Naming, Self-definition, and The History of Africana Womanism*. In: *Contemporary Africana Theory, Thought and Action: A Guide to Africana Studies* (ed.) C. Hudson-Weems. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, pp. 290-307.
- Huntington, S.P.  
2002 *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. London: The Free Press.
- Magosvongwe, R.  
2013 *Land and Identity in Zimbabwean Fiction Writings in English from 2000 to 2010: A Critical Analysis*. University of Cape Town. PhD thesis.
- Mararike, C.G.  
2012 *Developing the Whole Person: Education Based on Concepts Drawn from Culture*. In: *Rediscoursing African Womanhood in the Search for Sustainable Renaissance: Africana Womanism in Multi-disciplinary Approaches* (eds) I. Muwati, Z. Mguni, T. Gwekwerere & R. Magosvongwe. Harare: College Press Publishers, pp. 8-16.
- Mguni-Gambahaya, Z. & Magosvongwe, R.  
2005 *Zimbabwean Women's Voices and the Struggle for Liberation: An Analysis of Selected Texts*. *Zambezia* 32(ii): 1-18.
- Roach, C.  
1995 *Women and Communication Technologies: What are the Issues*. In: *The Democratization of Communication* (ed.) P. Lee. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, pp. 130-142.
- Werbner, R. & Ranger, T. (eds)  
1996 *Postcolonial Identities in Africa*. London & New Jersey: Zed Books.

**Ruby Magosvongwe**  
University of Zimbabwe  
ruby.magosvongwe@yahoo.com

**Abner Nyamende**  
University of Cape Town  
abner.nyamende@uct.ac.za