

# Strugglers and Stragglers: Imagining the “War Veteran” from the 1890s to the Present in Zimbabwean Literary Discourse

**Muchativugwa Liberty Hove**

## Summary

This article interrogates the diverse images of the combative participant in the struggle for Zimbabwean independence. The war for independence took close to a century – from 1890 to 1980. The numerical inversion in the dates ironically mirrors the radical transformation in the perceptions of the hero. The article makes a historical survey of the rifts and shifts in the cultural memory and literary configurations of the African armed combatant. It deals with three genealogical periods of conceptualisation: the participant in the First Chimurenga, the guerrilla in the Second Chimurenga, the Ndebele “dissidents” and the “war veterans” in the “Third Chimurenga”. Genocide, xenophobia and massacre, too much, are unspeakable in the discourse of modernity because such crimes against humanity defy description and, as Adorno (1955: 34) submits, are impossible to write after Auschwitz. But to remain silent over the flare of systematised and authorised purging of dissenting chromatic configurations in the Zimbabwean situation is to be complicit in the enactment of both past and current horrors. Dialogue between Zimbabwe and the West, aid and media houses, is charged and polarised. Zimbabwe is sceptical about the purity and altruistic character of the West, global media and humanitarian workers, while the West imagines Foucauldian “biopolitics” (the ability to control populations) has contributed to the implosion in (an)other African state.

## Opsomming

Hierdie artikel plaas die uiteenlopende beelde van die vegtende deelnemer in die stryd om Zimbabwiese onafhanklikheid in die kollig. Die oorlog om onafhanklikheid het bykans ’n eeu geduur – van 1890 tot 1980 – die numeriese omkering in die datums weerspieël op ironiese wyse die radikale transformasie in die persepsies van die held. Die artikel doen ’n historiese opname van die skeurings en verskuiwings in die kulturele geheue en literêre konfigurasies van die Afrikaan gewapende stryder. Dit handel oor drie genealogiese konseptualiseringstydperke: die deelname aan die Eerste Chimurenga (stryd), die guerrilla in die Tweede Chimurenga, en die Ndebele-“afvalliges” en die “oorlogsveteraan” in die Derde Chimurenga. Volksmoord, xenofobie en massamoord is vir baie mense onnoembaar in die moderniteitsgesprek omdat sulke misdade teen die mensdom beskrywing te bowe gaan en, soos Adorno (1955: 34) dit stel, ná Auschwitz dit onmoontlik is om daaroor te skryf. Om egter stil te bly oor die uitbarsting van sistematiese en goedgekeurde suiwing van afvallige chromatiese konfigurasies in die Zimbabwiese situasie is om aandadig te wees aan die uitvoering

van sowel vorige as huidige gruweldade. Dialoog tussen Zimbabwe en die Weste, bystand en mediagroep is gelaai en gepolariseer. Zimbabwe is skepties oor die suiwer bedoelings en altruïstiese karakter van die Weste, globale media en humanitêre werkers, terwyl die Weste hom verbeel dat Foucault se biopolitiek (die vermoë om bevolkings te beheer) tot die inploffing van nog 'n Afrikastaat bygedra het.

## Introduction

If history is, indeed, written from the position of those in authority, then the concept of the war veteran in Zimbabwe is bound to be fraught with changes, metamorphoses, and transitions as authority shifts to other positions. For as long as those in power remain in control, the ascribed nomenclature that relates to those that bore the brunt of a particular struggle remains in place. “War veteran”, in nationalist cultural memory, acquired an aura of honour, dignity and veneration. Historically, in the short space of time that black Zimbabwean history has been written and read, this term has also had an enigmatic aura. This aura was lost after the “Third Chimurenga” – the fight to get land from the white farmers – where both the genuine guerrilla and fake “green bomber” (a popular derogatory term referring to the ruling-party militias) were driven into an engineered nationalist, anti-imperialist frenzy to traumatise and eventually “drive the white farmer off black soil”. The meanings attached to the African armed combatant in the First Chimurenga are presented as constructed by the settlers and as counter constructed to subvert settlerism by black oral traditions. This article presents the views of the combatants themselves in the Second Chimurenga, the views of the Rhodesian colonial authorities, the peasant views of the fighters and the “mutations” in naming in the third decade of independence.

## Historical Context: The Oral and the Graphemic Worlds in Contact

There was no written literature by black Zimbabwean writers until the 1950s. The first novel to be published was Solomon Mutsvairo’s *Feso* (1957) – the first Zimbabwean novel in Shona. Prior to that, a flexible underground oral tradition captures how the royal ancestral spirit (*mhondoro/amadlozi*) and the war hero (*gamba rechimurenga/amafelizwe*) were imagined. This article argues that these oral sources are contesting repositories of how the war veteran was perceived at the time in opposition to the perceptions found in historical archives and chronicles written by the district commissioners and missionaries till the 1960s from a colonial position. In the first uprising against colonial rule, the spirit mediums Chaminuka and Nehanda came to the fore in Shona cultural memory. As male and female, they fought alongside each other, convinced that the institutions represented by Pollard and Moffat and Rudd (“native commissioner”, preacher and “treaty maker” in the settler pioneer group respectively) were incompatible with and destructive of their own. Later, the



fallen were remembered as those who had died in defence of their nation and property and called *amafelizwe/magamba* (Liberators and sons of the soil).

By the 1960s and 1970s, there was another resolve to militarily dislodge the settler regime. To the regime, those who crossed the borders for military training were “terrorists”, “upstarts”, and “saboteurs”. After their organisation and their military strategies they called themselves “guerrillas” in the tradition of the socialist transformers like Che Guevara, Castro, Mao and Samora Machel. Their rural female supporters – “mothers of the revolution” as Irene Staunton (1993) affectionately called them, *vana/abantwana* (our children), *vakomana/abafana* (the boys), *mandugu* (a Swahili term meaning brother and comrade-in-arms), *magamba* (heroic saviours) and *ma comrades/ma camarada* (a Portuguese appropriation commonly used in the training camps in Mozambique, meaning our dear comrades). But it would be presumptuous of this article to submit that civilians saw the combatant as liberator throughout the war – or afterwards. *Magandanga*, for instance, was a pejorative term that the Rhodesian media used to stigmatise the combatants as “rebellious forces”. The peasants, among whom the guerrillas survived, referred to the guerrillas as *magandanga* when they were alienated by the surreptitious acts of the combatants, for instance their secretive sexual relations with *vanachimbwido* (pliant peasant girls who acceded to sex as gesture of commitment and fidelity to the struggle, but often out of fear and veneration of the guerrillas). Fiction by writers such as Stanley Nyamfukudza, Charles Sampindi, Alexander Kanengoni, George Mujajati, Yvonne Vera, the mass media and popular songs continue to portray the rifts and shifts in the standard perceptions of the war hero as sons and daughters of the soil committed to liberation. Mutsvairo in his historical novels (*Chaminuka* (1983); *Mapondera* (1986); *Nehanda* (1988)) popularised the perception of war heroes as “sons of the soil”. Other writers such as Mutasa (1983), Mazorodze (1984), Chipamaunga (1986), Musengezi (1988), Makari (1987) and Katiyo (1987) extended the son-of-the-soil image.

For the most part of combative Zimbabwean historiography, the African armed fighter has been imagined as male. The warrior is a key image in the texts through which the nation imagines itself, and the various ambivalent representations of the warrior acts like a fractured mirror that produces conflicting allegiances to the notion of the Zimbabwean nation. This unfortunate lapse and elision in the cultural memory of the combatant foregrounds masculinity at the expense of the imaginative historicisation of female participants.

## “Pioneers” and “Savage Rebels”: Binarised Worlds

From the point of crossing the Limpopo right up to the Shangani Patrol (the period of colonial occupation in Rhodesia; equally a period of strife and displacement for the native, i.e. 1890-1897), the whites saw Lobengula as a focal point of resistance (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009). Lobengula was perceived as a power resident in the wilderness whose metonymies are the veld, the wildlife and the Matabele *amabutho* (army). In 1893 Allan Wilson and his 33-man-



strong contingent perished at Shangani because the amaNdebele resisted subjugation. Before the death of the Wilson patrol, the missionary John Moffat had written that “the Matabele are a miserable people and as a military power it will be a blessing to the world when they are broken up” (Zachrisson 1978: 164). In the eyes of Moffat and the column of “pioneers”, the Ndebele were “an idle and bloodthirsty tribe of savages” (p. 164) who deserved to be eliminated. In this settler surveillant gaze, their resistance was a rebellion, meaning that the primitive space was attempting to reabsorb civilised space (Chennels 1995: 104; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009: 45). History documents (Martin & Johnson 1987) state that Jameson promised the pioneers in writing six thousand acres of land, twenty gold claims and a share of all the captured cattle if they cooperated to break the Ndebele power. The point is that in these early wars the black militants who died were given the status of *amafelizwe*, and *amaqawe* – those who died in defence of black sovereignty – in the memory of the black collective. The black armies of Lobengula lost, but the memory of those fighters was revived again and again by the “native” in the combative decades that followed, as this article illustrates.

Archival records, district commissioners’ memoirs, annotations by missionaries in colonial Rhodesia (Zachrisson 1978) compulsively show that Nehanda (the prototypical female medium and matrifocal inspiration of *Hondo* (the first uprising) was a witch, Chaminuka – a fake spirit that instigated the “native” to “cause alarm and despondency” in a territory “sparsely populated by savages and primitivity” (Zachrisson 1978). In the redemptionist trope of Zimbabwean historiography, Nehanda and Chaminuka (in Zimbabwean narratives inscribed as the first organisers and leaders of the rebellion against white incursion in 1893) have become the prototypical inspirational sources of the nationalist struggle. The pejorative words “native”, “savage” and “witch” mirror a white Rhodesian settler mindset and imagination that “hawks” on native sensibility and identity – conceptualising in rigid terms as a dichotomous and conflictual relationship with the “indigenous black munt” (Zachrisson 1978; Cary 1968). In the Second Chimurenga, after the structural and racialised fortifications of the Empire, this selectively racialised conception of the “savage militant” is projected in the pejorative terms of “saboteur”, “terrorist”, and “insurgent” or “dissident”. This dissident voice, in black narrative – particularly Solomon Mutsvairo’s *Nehanda* and *Chaminuka* – is given space to express a nationalist agenda and is therefore presented in reverent, ritual and iconic proportions and dimensions. This iconicity of the figure of Nehanda as the inspirational war veteran is also sketched in Charles Samupindi’s *Death Throes* (1992: 9-10) where “she was a country ... the nation ... a people”.

Nehanda is criminalised and treated like a terrorist when she is arrested for “wrongfully, unlawfully and maliciously killing one Henry Hawkins Pollard, in his lifetime a Native Commissioner ... near Mazoe” (Samupindi 1992: 32). She had to be physically subdued and “under the 32nd section of her Majesty’s Order-in-Council ... be hanged by the neck until she be dead” (Samupindi 1992: 33). When the district surgeon of Salisbury certifies that “life is extinct”, Samupindi wryly adds “the surgeon was wrong”: Nehanda was immortalised.



Even though it is a medical fact that she was hanged and died, Samupindi's narrative persists: it remains centrally positioned in the incantatory songs whose main objective is the mythologisation of a contestatory black nationalism.

After *impi yemvukela* (the war of resistance) the colonial figures selected for special study in schools were Jan van Riebeeck, Piet Retief, David Livingstone, Cecil John Rhodes, Leander Starr Jameson, Alfred Beit, Charles Rudd and Kingsley Fairbridge. The builders of Rhodesia were Rhodes, Rudd and Beit (Godwin & Hancock 1993: 35). These "heroes", historicised and chronicled in various volumes were white and no longer black. The pendulum had swung in favour of "the arrivants" (à la Edward Kamau Braithwaite) and therefore the black nationalist was appropriated and renamed by a grand white narrative as "munts driven by an atavistic lust for cruelty" (Chennels 1995: 105). The new Rhodesian historiography, the authorised version, resisted any attempt to stoke the nationalist embers through reciting tales that imagined or recreated Nehanda, Chaminuka, or Lobengula and their invincibility since this was perceived as subversion of the status quo. Peter Godwin (1993: 47) emphasises this point lucidly: "For white Rhodesians, there were traditions to reinforce and reflect the courage, independence and defiance of the true Rhodesian: every schoolboy (and -girl) knew the exploits and history of Allan Wilson's patrol which on the banks of the Shangani, died so bravely in 1893 when outnumbered by Lobengula's 'hordes'" (Godwin 1993: 47).

### **"Insurgents" or "Guerrillas": Worlds in Combat 1966-1979**

When the heat rose to an inferno in the nineteen seventies, white Rhodesia was "outraged" by a few "cowardly terrorists" that assaulted the innocent and defenceless. And, of course, reports on the attacks on Altena farm, Umvukwes, Sinoia, Whistfield and Wedza were played down as the government did not want to disclose its information on the escalating war for fear of "causing alarm and despondency" (Godwin & Hancock 1993: 96; Martin & Johnson 1981, Moorcraft 1980). As the heat of war wafted into white homes and explosions mocked the whites' sense of security, a number of novels cumulatively expressed a hysteria: Robert Early's *A Time of Madness* (1977), Merna Wilson's *Explosion* (1978) and Emily Dibb's *Spotted Soldiers* (1978).

Even in the early nineteen sixties and way into the seventies this mindset had not changed in any remarkable way: the war of liberation was "a communist conspiracy", nationalists were "black dissidents" and the entry of guerrillas was, in the media, projected and relayed as "terrorist incursions" (Godwin & Hancock 1993: 40, 53). In *Hold My Hand I'm Dying* (1979) we still encounter "munts, wogs jabbering in the bus ... black woolly-haired and ignorant and primitive insurgents (Wilson 1979: 92)": a process of defining and framing the "Other" that is characteristic of colonial historiography (Said 1995).



The novels and stories and poems of this period, coming mainly from the white section of the population, suggest, on the whole, an unyielding negative attitude towards the nationalist struggle. At the core of this writing is the belief that blacks cannot act effectively without whites directing them (Chennels 1995: 119); it is a discourse dependent on the rigid, binarised categories of race, where white is perceived as superior. The concept of protected villages (PVs in the parlance of the Rhodesian planners) was meant to "punish those Africans who collaborated with the enemy" and this included burning of huts or the confiscation of cattle where it was suspected individual members had either directly assisted the terrorists or "failed to report their presence" (Godwin & Hancock 1993). *A Time of Madness* (Early 1977), *The Mark of Time* (Dunlop 1977), *Rebel People* (Hills 1978) are all books that were intended to shore up support for a dying white republic. The introduction of convoys and restricted travel in operational areas, the blowout of the defence budget, cutting of emigration and holiday allowances in the years 1976, 1977, and 1978, which are detailed by historians (Moorcraft 1980), are given scant attention in the white-authored fictional works that attempted to prop up a beleaguered state. The fiction writers, like the "rebel leader" Ian Douglas Smith, did "not believe in majority rule ever in Rhodesia ... not even in a thousand years" and therefore their stories show that "the situation was completely normal, calm and under control" (Godwin & Hancock 1993: 148-149). Chennels (1995: 125) is definitive in arguing that no novelist from this crop of Rhodesian writers was sufficiently perceptive and skilful enough to embody the Rhodesian crisis in fiction.

During the nationalist war, and immediately after flag independence, black writers, from a counter-discourse, established a space to voice their own narrative, of the role, place and significance of the guerrilla (later the war veteran), using this space to write a black self into mainstream history. This time "the empire wrote back", reinscribing the lost and suppressed memories, redefining the social and political self, engendering in narrative the sense of a unitary nationalist collective. It is curious to note that this generation of writers is largely male. In a largely patriarchal society such as Zimbabwe, this has obvious limitations as the narrative of the warrior is further entrenched as predominantly a male domain. The point of view of most of the narratives is also male, giving further support to the perception that the "war veteran", the struggler for emancipation, is conventionally male.

In Nyamufukudza's *The Non-Believer's Journey* (1986, Sam is a complex variation of the uncommitted black nationalist. He is educated and has a respectable job. He carries an opinion that will be readily accepted by many that see him as the teacher. But Sam's heroism is vacillation – verbal and philosophic but without the battle fatigues. In fact, Sam dissociates himself from active combat. His struggle with self and the socium remains verbal and is therefore weak in identifying and eliminating the colonial settler enemy. The bathos of *The Non-Believer's Journey* lies in the death of Sam – from a combatant's bullet – as if to indict his non-participation in combat when all who share his insight about race relations actively confronted "the enemy". In this literature, the term *masoja* (soldiers) is reserved for those who were



fighting on the Rhodesian side. At convenient times, the peasants also called them *mapuruvheya*, *madzakutsaku*, (untranslatable idiophones and epithets mocking the loyalties of black soldiers in the Rhodesian army), and *mabhunu* (Boers). All three terms are more pejoratively nuanced than the borrowed term *masoja*.

It is necessary to compare and contrast the image of the theoretician that Sam is with the images that emerge from Peter Armstrong's *Operation Zambezi: The Raid into Zambia* (1979). This will allow for contrasting perspectives: the warrior as seen through black and white lenses during the mortal combat for land. In *Operation Zambezi*, the ZIPRA combatant is through the entire operation an object of racist fury. Besides, by calling them "terrs", "Charlie-tangos" and "saboteurs", the combatants at Freedom Camp and JZ are invariably seen as cannon fodder. Armstrong presents them as incapable of a proper war strategy and with hobbies that range from "bayoneting pregnant women to looting and raping innocent ripe village girls". The surprise attack on them during morning parade is described with glee; the radio message from "Green Leader" is filled with both venom and spite. And the leadership of ZIPRA is seen as taciturn, underprepared and given to violent explosions of temper rather than as championing the cause for national liberation. Armstrong, like many white writers of the Rhodesian fictive world, believes that without China or Russia backing this black war, the threat of "insurgents" would have withered away. For Armstrong, as for Ian Smith, black dissidence had to be inspired from beyond Rhodesia's borders.

In the greater part of Armstrong's narrative of conquest, ZIPRA and ZANLA forces are shown as having clashed on many occasions. Paul L. Moorcraft (1980: 163), as if to underscore this point, writes that "sometimes the Rhodesian army would tip off one guerrilla group against another, then sit back and watch them kill each other". Jeremiah Chikerema, an infirm nationalist who routinely changed allegiances during the course of the war and whose views are therefore mediated by the audience he was playing to, remarked in 1970 that ZAPU military camps represented "the depth and height of decay, corruption, nepotism, tribalism, selfishness and gross irresponsibility on the part of the military administration from top to bottom" (Moorcraft 1980: 163). These three versions, that is, narratives of conquest, colonial historiography and opportunistic political revisionism – (un)intentionally inscribed the guerrilla as rapist, ethnocentric manipulator and selfish agent. The peasants who bore the brunt of the war expediently suppressed such "private, dangerous yet public knowledges" (Bhebhe 1999) because they were knowledges that were "taboo", interiorised in memory and were silenced in the presence of the guerrillas. They were truths that could not be spoken; in fact, truths that were never acknowledged as truths for fear of reprisals. Ethnic allegiances played a pivotal role in black nationalist politics. Again as Moorcraft observes,

[t]he path to independence had been charted before by other nationalist struggles in Africa before the Zimbabwean struggle: agitation, the growth of an elite organisation followed by the politicisation of the black popular mood into an



inchoate but pervasive expectation of uhuru and eventually the emergence of a sole charismatic leader who had served his apprenticeship in a colonial gaol.  
(Moorcraft 1980: 163)

The allegiance to Joshua Nkomo’s ZAPU or Mugabe’s ZANU meant a peasant consciousness that pitted one ethnic grouping against the other. This also meant hiding from each other the horrible shortcomings of one army in the face of the other. Whereas there was one historical target or enemy, colonial white Rhodesia, there was no consensus on the means of eliminating that core impediment amongst the nationalist armies. When need arose, especially in the ethnic-driven politicisation of the *povo*, and when the two nationalist sides encountered each other, there was bloodletting (Bhebhe 2000; Martin & Johnson 1985). After the bloodbath, survivors would pick and count their losses and realign for subsequent onslaughts on the core Rhodesian enemy. The weak peasant – weak by virtue of being the “unarmed” agent under the surveillant gaze of the Rhodesian, ZANLA, and ZIPRA armies – craved salvation from all. This meant they could not willingly disclose the positions of their “sons and daughters” to the Rhodesian enemy, except under coercive interrogation. Such a spatial, relational and politicised polarisation prevented dialogue among the sides. There is no doubt among the novelists and historians that politicisation had a marked effect on the consciousness of the peasants and they therefore knew what side they paid allegiance to. Historical experience also defined for them the positions of marginality that they occupied. In essence, therefore, the peasants were engaged in a confrontation with a multiplicity of forces that held sway in their lives. In the process of reinventing themselves through the “songs that won the liberation war” (Pongweni 1985), reinscribing themselves in history as active participants, the peasants displayed a keen awareness of danger and worked to stay alive throughout. This alertness is perhaps unparalleled in the combatants themselves who had both the ideological orientation and the advantage of weapons to carry out their liberatory mission. The combatants assumed *noms deguerre* that expressed the nationalist urge: *Mabhunu Muchapera* (All Boers shall be finished), *Sangoidema* (The forest is bleak/dark), *Mhereyenyoka* (The surreptitious advance of a snake) and *Teurai Ropa* (Spill the blood – for the nation).

Chenjerai Hove captures the fear and tension embedded in the drama of war years clearly:

In the turbulent years, 1977-1978, just before independence, Gokwe was a military goulash: one found Zanla and Zipra forces, plus Rhodesian soldiers. They were all hunting each other down. And as usual, when the elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers. There were so many sell-outs it was unbelievable. People of the Shona origin would sell out their neighbour of Ndebele origin and vice versa; those who were tortured by Rhodesian forces would sell out both the Shona and the Ndebele.

(Hove 2000: 72)



“Sell-outs” and those who were surreptitious informants to the Rhodesian forces were publicly executed at the nocturnal *pungwe* (political education vigils that were held during the night) and when such incidents occurred, the rural constituency expressed their shock and fear in the words of a song: *vanamukoma vanovuraya* (meaning these brothers kill; Pongweni 1985). Bhebhe (2000) writes of one guerrilla, *Chapungu chehondo* (the bataleur eagle of the struggle), who operated single-handedly because he preferred the strategy of intensified military offences in the Belingwe area. This distinctive *modus operandi* earned him the label “*Chapungu wakapanduka*” (a deserter, a dissenter) from his guerrilla group. Ironically, for the peasants, Chapungu was executing the primary nationalist mission of attacking military and colonial structures and this endeared him the more to the peasants, while the other guerrilla members were perceived as cowards. This illustration serves to indicate how the nationalist soldiers were perceived by the peasants. There were occasions when rural people were terrified of the guerrillas (Staunton 1990) and there were other occasions when the same peasants saw guerrillas as preferable to the Rhodesian forces. Bhebhe (2000) hints at ethnicised perceptions where the ZANLA combatants were called *opasi* by the amaNdebele (*Pasi* is a call name derived from the mobilisation strategies and slogans that ZANLA used among the peasants during the *pungwe*). Authorised Zimbabwean nationalist historiography is understandably silent about these conflicting constructions of the combatant.

Sam in *The Non-Believer's Journey* (1985: 21) is confronted by Thomas, an African nationalist politician, who remarks: “An educated person like you can see the injustice and oppression we live under more clearly than all of us here, why don't you come to our meetings and put us right, tell us where we are going wrong?” (Nyamufukudza 1985: 21).

Sam does the opposite and in the process incarnates the betrayer. Later he lays bare his non-committal stance, a stance pervasive in most university graduates:

“If you start talk about the revolution, they tell you straight, fuck the revolution. It's quite rare, somebody committing themselves. We all turn into money-grabbing boozers after going through that place [the university] ... we are all bastards.”

(Nyamufukudza 1985: 52)

The motif of bastardy, the contamination inherent in the hybridity enacted through education, cannot be overemphasised in relation to Sam's behaviour, his search for extrication from its cause and the sense of total betrayal that he parades.

There are strong differences between Peter Armstrong's perceptions of journalistic detail from a white perspective and of Stanley Nyamufukudza's fictive reinvention of the nationalist struggle – differences that point to a still active colour division that re-enacts the 19th-century disjuncture between the oral and the written. Where Nyamufukudza interrogates growth and conflictual identity formations in the process of nationalist struggle, Armstrong projects decay and stasis in the combative moment. Each of the writers selects details



from his particular stance. Armstrong convinces the reader of the might and invincibility of the Rhodesian arsenal while Nyamufukudza traces the contradictions and incoherencies of a small group of weakly armed ZANLA combatants. The successes and impediments that he chronicles are not necessarily the grand stories that find permanent places in the reversioned histories of the nationalist struggle. But he hints that these small victories, often obscure and undated – or even untraceable – cumulatively led to the demise of Rhodesia and carried the paradoxical and traumatic past with them into independence. Petty intra-party jealousies surface as dramatic, choreographed exemplifications of selling out. The past is ineradicable and continues to exert its compelling influence in the present opinions concerning the identities of the nationalist strugglers.

### **“War Heroes” and “Dissidents”: Decentred Worlds 1980-1987**

Independence in 1980 saw a flurry of activity in the publishing industry: novellas, poems and stories flooded the houses in all senses. *And Now the Poets Speak* (1981) was published in the euphoria of celebrating the flag. The statutory silencing that had stifled “other” voices was literally overcome. *The Contact* (Mutasa 1985) celebrated the singular achievements of guerrilla combat in skirmishes in the Shabani and Mapanzure areas of the Midlands Province. This is one of the overtly sentimental romanticisations of the liberationist poetics in Zimbabwean literature, creating an image of the combatant as invincible and ennobled by such mystical potency that is only comparable to the consubstantial versions of Nehanda and Chaminuka. When they “melted into thin air”, at the moment of contact with Rhodesian soldiers, the peasants affectionately called the combatants *vananyangarikai* (an untranslatable idiophone, both an act and an injunction, of disappearance from the combat scene without a trace).

In subsequent years the publishing houses gave the readers literary additions in the form of *Harvest of Thorns* (Chinodya 1985) and *Echoing Silences* (Kanengoni 1991). These were stories of pain and celebration and in them the nationalist combatant was reimagined through affirmative discourses and often uncritically praised. Songs were composed in honour of the fallen heroes. The “seven ZANU insurgents who had entered Rhodesia to undertake acts of sabotage and attack white farmers near Sinoia”, and who were killed on 28 April 1966, were immortalised as “martyrs of the battle of Chinhoyi” and, according to the new authorised version of modern Zimbabwean history, their last stand marked the beginning of the “Second Chimurenga”. (The standard history textbook in schools is a four-year series authored by nationalist apologist, Aeneas Chigwedere, and handily entitled *People Making History* (1984), a text that gives the version of the party in power. Martin and Johnson (1981) has also become the “official” source book on Zimbabwean history as it “standardises” versions of how the struggle was executed.) At Rufaro stadium on 18 April 1980 Robert Nester Marley provided entertainment par excellence and the song *Liberate Zimbabwe* rang for years as a quasi-national anthem.



In the views of the new planners in 1980, all the combatants could not, pragmatically, be accommodated in the new national army: some had to be demobilised and reintegrated into “common, civilian life” or get alternative employment. A new term, a new creature was being born into Zimbabwean history. Shimmer Chinodya (1985), Ray Choto (1992) and Alexander Kanengoni (1993) capture these days of the aftermath of independence. In *Harvest of Thorns* (Chinodya 1985) the title is metaphoric of the life of the “demobilised combatant” who fails to see the fruits of his sacrifice. The carte-blanche payment of a stipend that was meant to see the “excombatants” provide for themselves is the subject of bitter sarcasm and satire in this novel. Benjamin, the demobilised combatant and protagonist in *Harvest of Thorns*, finds life intolerable. His family and the immediate community mock his “wasted years” in the bush, particularly when post-traumatic stress disorder severely alienates him from work, love and companionship. A permanent sense of insanity pervades the novel *Pawns* (Samupindi 1987), that exhumes buried complexes and experiences traceable to the struggle. The ex-combatant scours for food in dustbins and wears rags. He becomes the scary man that every child runs away from. Indeed, as Munashe points out in the novel, he has been “the pawn that never made a choice”. The wrenching bitterness of the sacrificed pawn also courses through the poems of Chenjerai Hove (1985) and the plays of George Mujajati, including his single novel, *The Sun Will Rise Again* (1994).

Alexander Kanengoni’s *Echoing Silences* (1993) focuses on the living combatant from the war front through the road to independence. Munashe reflects on the role that Fr. Erasmus plays to literally goad him to the training camps in Mozambique. He fights actively on the front; he is traumatised by the murders that he is forced to carry out on innocent women. On the eve of flag independence, Munashe is literally schizophrenic. He rages in his mind. He cannot sleep and he cannot adjust to the normalcy of the common people. Ultimately, he makes up his mind to confess to the murders that he committed. He atones for the past through a compelling confession and although he dies towards the finale, Munashe has exteriorised a troubled conscience. This repressed psycho-morbid world surfaces to challenge the “normative son-of-the-soil frameworks” of the war veteran. For Kanengoni, himself a participant in the nationalist struggle, the warrior’s sense of belonging to a community forged in suffering and an ambivalent heroism is problematised.

On his arrival in Mozambique Munashe is harassed to the point of making a false admission that he is a spy of the Rhodesian state. This incident echoes the various underground operations of the Rhodesian forces during this period. Black Central Intelligence Agents (CIO) and the Selous Scouts (named after the famed wildlife exploits of Courtney Selous and derisively called *madzakutsaku* by the peasants) posed as guerrilla recruits and “turned guerrillas” sold out their comrades. This confession that reads like a desperate attempt by Munashe is therefore not a hyperbolic rendition of the experiences of the aspiring guerrilla. It offers a rare insight into the defence mechanism that had to be put in place in order to ascertain the commitment of those that volunteered to join the struggle, especially after the bombings at Nyadzonia



and Chimoio. (The Rhodesian military machine constantly relied on its arsenal in the 1970s to attack refugee and guerrilla training camps in neighbouring states: Nyadzonia and Chimoio were bombed and literally razed in 1976 and 1977 respectively.)

Munashe gets greatly disappointed and frustrated. His dreams for the struggle are shattered by the ambiguous reality of the training camps. The liberation fighters, instead of being a dynamic and strategic assemblage of military efficiency, are a heterogeneity of factions. The weak members experience untold brutality at the hands of their more hardened fellow guerrillas. Munashe is compelled to kill a woman and her child, using a hoe. Bazooka is forced to confess that he is a witch. Kudzai, a female fighter, is raped incessantly by the section commander for over a year and is forced to have three abortions as a result. The Shona and Ndebele fighters are polarised and fight and rally behind tribal or ethnic allegiances. A section commander confides in Munashe: “This war does not have the capacity to utilise people like you. It will destroy you instead. It is so different from what we daydreamed about back in Salisbury. Damn it boy, there is no honour in more than half the things that are done here, all in the name of war” (Kanengoni 1993: 17).

The novel portrays this menacing multiplicity of conflictual attitudes towards the war and the combatant as continuing in independent Zimbabwe. Lizwe, a freedom fighter, gets injured in a civil war between ZANU and ZAPU, a few months after independence. He is not compensated for the simple reason that “technically, the injury occurred after the war” (p. 65). This is a menacing testimony of how the nationalist struggle divides, fractures and, at times, murders its own participants.

By the time the nationalist soldier became an “ex-combatant” and subsequently “demobilised”, a number of tags had been pinned onto his epaulettes. Because the naming process is constituted by ethnicised, stereotypical and experiential biases, some of the new labels range from reverence to edgy derision, reflecting a complex panoply of reactions to the “hero” who bore the brunt of war.

The period from 1983 to 1987 is a very difficult period in terms of the memories of war. Rifts and schisms in ethnic politics reared their ugly heads. Combatants aligned to ZAPU and those aligned to ZANU differed in principle. They differed in allegiance. And those who wielded political power fanned these ethnic differences. The former ZIPRA guerrillas earned a new name: *madissidents*. Peter Stiff (2000: 57) argues: “The authorities and the local black tribesmen had widely differing perceptions of the dissidents.” Stiff is writing from a stance critical of the government’s vindictive heavy-handedness in dealing with the problem of “dissidents”. He implies that Rhodesia was a better state when compared to this new “black on black violence”.

The government, on 3 February 1984, told the nation that it “was responding to an increasing infiltration of South African-backed ZIPRA dissidents and bandits”. The “democratic centralist” self-righteous state clamped a tight curfew on Matabeleland South, deploying Grey Scouts, security forces, the CIO, a Police Support Unit and the notorious 5 Brigade into the area to enforce this curfew that covered Gwanda, Kezi, Matobo, Bulalima-Mangwe, Insiza,



Filabusi, Fort Rixon and Umzingwane. Peter Godwin's *Mukiwa* (1995), focuses on these "trouble spots" and the inferno unleashed by the new government on suspected sympathisers with "dissidents". The period of Rhodesia and its hysteria, its polarisation and tragedies was, ironically, recreating and replaying itself. The sense of racial difference that perhaps had driven the war from 1896 to 1980 was taking on a new dimension in pitting the Mashona people against the amaNdebele between 1982 and 1987. Those sponsored by the state were largely ex-combatants; those who had "deserted" and were fighting on the Ndebele side were, historically, ex-combatants too. In the uneven turf of battle and contacts and skirmishes, it was the peasants who suffered the most. Again Peter Stiff sums up the inferno:

The authorities [government] estimated the murders by dissidents numbered between 700 and 800 .... Exhaustive research by the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace for *Breaking the Silence* failed to substantiate this ... (and) in Tsholotsho the locals attributed only 20 or 25 murders to dissidents. They believed, but could not prove, that many of those that died were victims of government agents, that is Parachute Battalion and 5 Brigade operators.

(Stiff 2000: 210)

The Fifth Brigade which led the killings between 1983 and 1987 discredited the war veteran in two principal ways. Perence Shiri, himself a war veteran, was vilified by the ethnic amaNdebele, and justifiably so. He was perceived as ruthless and driven by an atavistic energy that was fuelled by a supplicatory allegiance to the national presidency. Being a *muShona* also implied, in people's narratives, that the war on dissidents was ethnically motivated rather than being an issue of political stability. On the second plane, many of the so-called dissidents were principally ZAPU cadres, disconcerted by their exclusion from politics and the national wealth that they perceived as being exclusively redistributed to ZANU loyalists (who were also largely ethnically Shona). This conflict implicitly conferred war veteran status on ZANU cadres and dissident status on the ZAPU cadres. After the "war on dissidents", Perence Shiri was "rewarded" and appointed national commander of the Air Force. This ethnicisation of war credentials and status marginalised ZAPU cadres, nurtured distrust for the ruling party and has remained the locus of much of the cynicism and brutalising legacies of the period.

In the black literary world, this period is captured in the rugged and intensely felt poetic prose of Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins* (2002). The Kezi folk rely on *amarula* and *imikiliwane* for food when government bans the trade in the staple maize meal during curfew hours. This ethnicised state regulation to "starve dissident sympathisers" was sanctioned and orchestrated by state agents. Black soldiers from the state looted cattle claiming "they were cattle stolen from our forefathers by you Ndebele" (Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace 2000). The peasant man or woman who escaped the cordon of curfew brought to the city "horrifying tales of persecution" (Vera 2002; Stiff 2000). In *Breaking the Silence* the researchers detail an incident where "villagers were forced to push army vehicles with their heads and then were



severely assaulted for bleeding on government property” and another incident when “molten plastic was dropped onto the vagina of an eleven-year-old girl and then she was subsequently shot” (2000: 213). Whereas *Breaking the Silence* should be read with reservation because of its hyperbole and ethnographic shocking detail, it is also fact that this is veritable detail that would *not* be sanctioned by the government of the day. This would explain why the government itself has practically “buried” this painful part of Zimbabwean history by marginalising and proscribing discourse on the period (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009: 14).

Nonceba, the protagonist in *The Stone Virgins*, witnesses her sister being hacked to death by the dissident Sibaso. She narrowly escapes death but loses her lips and virginity on the stiffening corpse of her sister. Her salvation and sanctuary in Bulawayo is a shadow from her sister’s past, a shadow that constantly evokes the destruction and deaths and anguished cries at Mahlathini store, way back in Kezi during the “era of the dissident”. Ranger (2002: 208) argues that “a beheading and mutilation and ... the destruction of a store” are all, in fact, *restrained projections* of the violence, fury, and grief generated by the dissident epoch in Zimbabwean history and literature. Political expediency – particularly ethnocentrism – becomes a factor that is intertwined with insidious state hooliganism and terrorism *after* independence.

It is important to state that after the war, the armed combatant was officially disarmed. That companionship of the bush became a memory, overtaken by events. In a number of instances there were rogue elements within the camp of those demobilised. The law caught up with their crimes, they were sentenced and served prison terms for armed robbery. In the process they lost the lustre of protectors and deliverers. Chenjerai Hove captures this era with an air of remorse and glee: “After independence came the dissident period and Gokwe (by extension Zimbabwe) was once again at the forefront of violence. The new army of Prime Minister Mugabe went to kill its own; ‘sell-outs’ and ‘dissidents’ did the same. It was another brutal period” (Hove 2000: 73). It is in this period that in areas such as Gokwe and Belingwe the term *opasi* became even more entrenched in the amaNdebele peasant constituency, specifically because the government soldiers “cut dissidents and civilians” and exhibited an ethnicised loyalty to the Mashona hegemony. There were no words for the raw butchery.

## **“War Veterans” and “Green Bombers”: Traumatized Worlds – 1998 to date**

In 1995, some guerrillas came up with the idea that what they had received as a demobilisation stipend was inadequate. (The demobilisation stipend in 1981 was 4 000 Zimbabwean dollars.) They championed the cause of the unsung heroes and those that lay in unmarked graves. They rallied behind a new and formidable force that called itself the National War Veterans Association. This association included at its inception ex-political prisoners and restrictees. Later



in 1997, this huge conglomerate of forces with unique yet disparate backgrounds was to diversify into various splinter groups with the National War Veterans Association as the most formidable. In the run-up to presidential elections in 2000 they threatened to march onto State House to force their patron and president of the nation to meet their monetary and land redistribution demands.

They claimed that they were living in abject poverty. They had no accommodation and lived as sojourners in the land that they had fought to liberate. Their pensions, which had not been regularly reviewed, were pathetic. And led by the fiery Chenjerai “Hitler” Hunzvi, the ex-combatants made their demands threatening: if the government of the day was not going to pay them the 50 000 dollars gratuity, assure them of homes and sending their children to school (including an annual review of a life pension based on an average of fifteen years of service in the army!), the war veterans would go back to the forest.

The anger of Hunzvi’s war veterans association was primed by their exclusion from the wealth that some “privileged and connected” Zimbabweans were accumulating. Their “rebellion” against the party and ipso facto removing the president, were conveniently not perceived as a “dissident factor”. ZANU(PF) exploited this fissure since the party and the presidium were being challenged. The militancy of the war veterans association was deliberately *re-mobilised against* perceived Western adversaries (Holland 2008: 204).

The subsequent deluge of farm invasions was called the Third Chimurenga in order to “legitimise” them and to confer the stature on the invaders that someone who had taken part in the Second Chimurenga possessed. Nonetheless, in spite of state-sponsored propaganda, militancy in the Third Chimurenga failed to achieve the credibility and respectability of participants of the Second Chimurenga.

From this point in the history of the Zimbabwean struggle the combatants received very divergent receptions. Writers like Chenjerai Hove (2000) saw them as disruptive and inconsistent people who held the nation at ransom. They were making unrealistic demands when the national economy was experiencing a downturn and the international community was beginning to see the country as a pariah state. Musicians, too, have captured conflicting perspectives on the war veteran. Thomas Mapfumo, social commentator and Chimurenga musician par excellence, satirises the inversion in the war hero image through his now banned “*Mamvemve*” (The nation is torn to shreds), “*Disaster*” (There is a disaster looming in the nation) and “*Sabhuku*” (The village head is no longer in control of the affairs of his people). Dick Chingaira (aka Comrade Chinx), a combatant himself, has paired up with the national police band to prop up the battered image of the veteran through a state-sponsored and -marketed song, “*Hondo Yeminda*” (The war for the land is now on, a major offensive to repossess the land is unstoppable). As if to underscore the siege of the nation and to warn of the incessant challenges to the presidency, Simon Chimbetu, another war veteran who at one time won the



hearts of many fans through his song “*Pane Asipo*” (one of us, one who was with us at the war front, is not here sharing the spoils of war and the national cake), defiantly cackles “*KuState House Kure*” (State House, the residence of the national president, is not for novices, the uninitiated). Even when cabinet ministers such as Elliot Manyika poke the embers of the liberation war and its concomitant strife in “*Nora*” and “*Rambai Makashinga*” (Do not relent, keep up the fighting spirit even in the wake of insurmountable social and economic problems) there appears a relentless sense of disillusionment and disgust at the manner in which the war veterans – genuine strugglers and hired stragglers – try to authenticate their credentials to civilians when there is no food on the table. An overzealous Joseph Chinotimba was part of this association of war veterans who endorsed the haemorrhaging of the nation. His hallmark in Chenjerai Hove’s *Palaver Finish* was a bark-woven hat that resembled a bird’s nest and Hove satirised it as a symbol of violence:

A man appears in the newspapers, with a hat that looks like a bird’s nest. Whoever wove that contraption for solar protection could never have imagined that it would become a symbol of tyranny worn by the chief commander of farm invasions. He is in the same class as another who publicly proclaimed that he has arms hidden all over the place, which he would be prepared to use if his party loses the elections. *These are men who say they understand democracy.*  
(Hove 2002: 41)

The creator of this hat had imagined protection from the heat of summer, but the hat became the de facto symbol of farm invasions and the unplanned resettlement of “new farmers”. Catherine Buckle captures this trauma of white farmers in *African Tears* (2001). It was a reminder of torture and untold harassment to the white farmers. And even to those who refused to be forced to chant nationalist slogans twenty years after their immediate relevance, that Chinotimba hat has remained a symbol of awe, desperation and apparent regression to some days in Zimbabwe’s primal past where a nomadic existence was the norm rather than the exception.

After the “land insurgent invasion”, war veterans were used by the state apparatus as shock troops to invade white farms. Their leaders were rewarded with some of the seized farms. The “Green Bombers”, products of the Youth Brigade (derogatorily called *maBorder Gezi* after the infamous Minister of Youth Development) were not war veterans: they sought social and political relevance and legitimacy under the banner of the war veterans of the Second Chimurenga. Robert Mugabe himself, “the freedom fighter ... turned tyrant” (Holland 2008) had to vilify the West in order to re-legitimise himself as patron of the war veterans association. Since then, many writers, social commentators and historians (Godwin 2007; Holland 2008; Raftopoulous 2010; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009) perceive passive subjugation, the politics of deference, the demonisation of adversaries, obedience and loyalty as instruments that have been used to reinscribe nationalist poetics as legitimising practices in Zimbabwe.



## Conclusion: Impediments to “Worlds in Dialogue”

The crises that led to the Gukurahundi Matabeleland massacres and genocide, the impetuous “Operation Murambatsvina” and the militarisation of the “Green Bombers”, including the traumatic aftermaths, go beyond the juridical, political, literary and factual accounts proffered on the Zimbabwean experiences to date. The West and Africa, particularly the politics of non-governmental aid, human rights and press freedom have all been banalised in a rhetoric of blame and hate. Every attempt has been made to involve everyone so there would be no one left to point a finger. The overly trumpeted demonisation of the West’s duplicity in the implosion of the nation-state has not facilitated dialogic processes. The humanitarian failure that has been dramatised in Zimbabwe ascribes responsibility on the collectivity of the population, local and global, in so far as subjectivity also depends on group membership and the fact that these two exist in a dynamic dialectic. The political currency of “guerrilla”, “combatant” and “war veteran” in Zimbabwe has undergone dramatic re-evaluation. In the kaleidoscope of naming the war veteran in Zimbabwean literary discourse, there are nagging questions: whether the son-of-the-soil liberator in liberation history invariably turns into a violent manipulator and invidious traumatising instrument, whether the displacement of colonial coercive instruments has created space for re-enactment in the new black political dispensation. Alternatives, inclusive of negotiation and dialogue, need to be integrated into the dynamic discourses on the literary, economic and political legitimacy-building imperatives of the state.

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**Muchativugwa Liberty Hove**  
North West University, Mafikeng, South Africa  
muchativugwahv@gmail.com