

Poverty in the Context Violence in Noviolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* and Petina Gappah's *An Elegy of Easterly*

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Abstract. This study is a critical examination of the depictions of poverty in the context of violence in *We Need New Names* (2013) by NoViolet Bulawayo and Petina Gappah's *An Elegy Of Easterly* (2009). The paper is focused on the literary representations of poverty and the way in which the writers attempt in their depictions to give the voiceless a voice through narrative devices, thereby allowing the characters to claim agency and speak over the narrative of poverty in the context of violence in Zimbabwe. It is no news that the last decade in Zimbabwe was characterised by an unprecedented economic and political crisis. It is for this reason this study explores how the writers acknowledge poverty both culturally and aesthetically while at the same time emphasizing that violence and indigence is materially and socially real. In addition, the research deploys the desk research method to analyse the texts while paying specific attention to the socio-cultural and economic contexts within which the cultural production takes place. This involves an in-depth reading and study of both primary and secondary materials for the critical evaluation of the texts. The concept of Structural violence will be used for the analysis of the texts in order to examine the depiction of poverty in Zimbabwe as reflected in the selected texts, as well as investigate the portrayal of political violence after independence in the selected Zimbabwean texts. The study concludes that literature provides an exceptional prospect by highlighting on individual experiences of indigence as it accommodates the diversity of voices that express and voice these experiences. In other words, this study establishes that literary depictions of violence and poverty can be a source of authoritative knowledge on poverty, since they provide wide-ranging and focused descriptions of lived experiences of poverty

Keywords: Poverty, violence, Zimbabwe, crisis, women writers

1. Background to the study

This paper views poverty as a multidimensional and complex phenomenon experienced, understood and portrayed by selected authors as it affects the political, societal and economic aspects of the everyday lives of their fictional characters. As a loosely and broadly defined term, this research acknowledges that poverty is, “ hunger... lack of shelter. Poverty is being sick and not being able to see a doctor. Poverty is not having access to school and not knowing how to read. Poverty is not having a job, is fear for the future, living one day at a time” (World Bank 1999-2000). In other words, it is the lack of power to command resources. For many people in developing countries, acute poverty means difficulty making a living, as well as a lack of basic services in education and health. Both the socio-economic and cultural aspects of poverty that appear consistently and prominently in the selected texts have a place in the above definition because it is suitably expansive.

Violence on the other hand can be defined as any action that causes destruction, pain and suffering. Stanko (2001) defines violence as ‘any form of behaviour by an individual or individuals that intentionally threatens or causes physical, sexual or psychological harm to others or themselves’ (4). A wide range of coercive behaviours which can either be economic, emotional, physical and political targeted at having control over a victim characterizes the concept of violence (Alelhie 2011:63). It is a known fact that colonialism crippled the blacks politically, economically and socially as it undressed them of their freedom and made them function at the

beckoning and the whims of the white man. Like any form of oppression, it became unbearable that the blacks resolved to fight the whites so as to emancipate themselves- as in the case of Zimbabwe. Upon gaining their freedom, the white government was replaced by the black government that was to serve the interests of the majority in Zimbabwe. What the people had not envisioned was the violence and poverty that was heralded by independence. In Zimbabwe such violence appears in the forms of political violence, ethnic violence and poverty. The selected novels studied clearly grapple with questions of culpability, victimhood and survival in Zimbabwean violent contexts.

This study acknowledges that the crisis in Zimbabwe cannot be attributed to one single cause, but to a series of events. For instance, by 1990 the government realized that Zimbabwe was not in the position of acquiring wealth and saw the need for loans. It adopted the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) mandate which emphasized on the devaluation of the currency, economic liberalization and removal of government subsidies. “The failure of this programme left Zimbabwe crippled as it reduced the employment which grew at only 0.8%, instead of the annual 2.4%, while the public enterprise incurred \$3.8billion in its losses” (Moyo 2003:326). Many people were left without employment and could not afford to purchase necessities because inflation had also gone up by 16%.

Adjacent to the ESAP was the issue of the land distribution. The forceful acquisition of land from white farmers by the government after a failed referendum in 2000 led to civil unrest in Zimbabwe. In order to accommodate the grievances of war veterans who had been neglected by the government for two decades, land was taken by force from the whites and they were dispensed. Related to this was the recurrence of electoral violence in Zimbabwe. In the 2008 elections, violence was at its peak between political parties. The desire to remain in power became the reason why Zimbabwean elections are never peaceful and transparent. Unfortunately, in the process of this electoral violence, civilians are usually caught in between and loss of civic life becomes inevitable. It is on this backdrop that this study seeks to examine poverty in the context of violence in *We Need New Names* (2013) by NoViolet Bulawayo and Petina Gappah’s *An Elegy Of Easterly* (2009).

2. Statement of the Problem

The critical discourse on poverty and violence has been adequately worked upon in fields of study such as anthropology, social science, sociology, demography, just to mention a few. In addition, critics when working on the selected texts have analysed it from the point of view of gender, women marginalisation, colonialism and immigration and land dispossession. Examples include Magosvongwe, 2013; McDermott 2010; Tirivangana 2011. Concepts of identity and liberation struggle have been adequately researched upon by literary critics on the texts. This can be seen in works of, Gambahaya, 1999; Primorac, 2006; Kahari, 2009; Kirstin, 2007; Vambe and Chirere, 2006. Worthy of note is the fact that researchers have investigated and analysed the concept of violence and poverty. Although, their focus has been on works of Yvonne Vera, Tsitsi Dangarembga, and Doris Lessing, Chenjerai Hove, Dambudzo Marechera, just to mention a few. Hence, this study there adds to the body of Knowledge on Zimbabwe literature by examining the portrayal of poverty and violence in the selected texts.

3. Significance of Study

This research contributes to the discourse of violence and poverty by taking a literary perspective. While a lot has been written on this form of violence and poverty especially in other fields of study, little has been done in terms of how literary texts shed light on the experiences of individuals and communities in violent states. Such a commitment will obviously expand the discourse on poverty and bring to light how Zimbabwean literature is increasingly grappling with issues to do with ethnic, political and everyday violence in Zimbabwe.

The approach to this study is mainly socio-historical. This will be done by examining the selected text in the context of Zimbabwean history, and by paying attention to how the socio-political dynamics in post-independence Zimbabwe influenced the creative output of the authors especially in their portrayal of violence and poverty under the context of the Zimbabwean crisis

4. Theoretical Framework

To achieve the objectives of this research, the concept of structural violence as well as the Structural theory of poverty are chosen for the analysis of the texts. Structural violence is the violence of injustice and inequity “embedded in ubiquitous social structures and normalized by stable institutions and regular experience” ([Winter and Leighton 2001](#): 99).

By structures, this paper means social relations-political, religious, economic, legal, or cultural that determines how groups and individuals interact within a social system. In a broad-scale, these include, political, cultural and economic structures such as, colonialism, slavery, patriarchy, apartheid, caste and neoliberalism, as well as discrimination by, gender, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, and migrant/refugee status. These structures are violent because they result in avoidable deaths, illness, and injury; and they reproduce violence by marginalizing people and communities, constraining their capabilities and agency, assaulting their dignity, and sustaining inequalities

While these outcomes are “experienced individually, structural violence targets classes of people and subjects them to common forms of lived oppression. Hence, the experience of structural violence and the pain it produces has been called ‘social suffering’” (Singe and Erickson, 2011:1). Like structural violence, this concept “results from what political, economic, and institutional power does to people, and reciprocally, from how these forms of power themselves influence responses to social problems” (Kleinman and Lock, 1997:ix). Structural violence focuses attention on the social machinery of exploitation and oppression.

Structural theory of poverty states that poverty is a *structural* phenomenon. On this view, people are in poverty because they find themselves in ‘holes’ in the economic system that deliver them inadequate income. This is because “individual lives are dynamic, people do not sit in those holes forever. In other words, poverty is caused by the structure of the larger socio-economic order. It is the macro structure of society that produces inequality and consequently poverty.

As Rank (Rank, 2011) summarizes this view, “...poverty is largely the result of failings at the economic and political levels, rather than at the individual level...In contrast to [the individualistic] perspective, the basic problem lies in a shortage of viable opportunities for all.” (14). Of the various institutional environments that tend to sustain a multitude of economic barriers to different groups, it is discrimination based on race, ethnicity and gender that create the most insidious obstructions. “The disproportionately high rate of poverty among women may be viewed as the consequence of a patriarchal society that continues to resist their inclusion in a part of society that has been historically dominated by men, and as a consequence, welfare programs have been designed in ways that stigmatize

public support for women as opposed to marital support; both arrangements tend to reinforce patriarchy” (Abramovitz, 1996).

5. Poverty in the Context of Violence in NoViolet Bulawayo *We Need New Names*

Poverty as a complex phenomenon can be defined in numerous ways with lack of the necessities like food, shelter, health and education being at the centre of the definitions. Poverty is never a result of the lack of one thing but a lack of many interlocking needs.

Poverty has its various manifestations including hunger, ill-health, limited access to education, homelessness, no practice of one’s rights and unsafe environments. When people are deprived of these things, they always feel trapped and feel like when each day begins, the struggle also begins. These are some of the issues that this study focuses on as they are depicted in NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names*, with the intention of demonstrating how poverty easily takes the form of violence in character’s lives.

We Need New Names was written in 2013 by Noviolet Bulawayo and is set in Bulawayo where the protagonist and her family and friends live in a squatter camp in a place called Paradise. This novel is told from a child’s point of view and dwells on how the children perceive the ongoing activities in their lives. It is through the protagonist’s narration of the events that happen around her that we get a glimpse of the poverty that haunts the everyday life of the people of Paradise. In her novel, Bulawayo goes on to reveal the psychological aspects of poverty like powerlessness, dependency syndrome, and lack a voice therefore making the poor people an easy target to exploitation. Due to their powerlessness the poor people are vulnerable to the inhumane treatment, insults and humiliation that are thrown at them by those with the capability to help them.

The novel begins with Darling (protagonist) complaining on how she and her friends did not eat in the morning and how hungry she feels. It is in the beginning that Bulawayo introduces her theme of poverty manifesting itself through hunger. The children resort to stealing guavas at Budapest –the estate belonging to the whites and the rich- so that they can satisfy their hunger since their families cannot provide them adequate meals. To them stealing seems like a game but looking at it closer, it is due to the poverty they experience that they resort to theft. Bulawayo reveals how desperation has forced the children to resort to theft. Townsend

(1970) notes that poverty breeds desperation and desperation thus breeds crime and crime can become rampant in the state when the state fails to provide employment (4).

When the children go to Budapest to steal guavas, they risk being caught and imprisoned for stealing. Hunger forces them to neglect the consequences of stealing and they expose themselves to dangerous lifestyle. Because it is either you stay hungry or you find other means of acquiring food even if it means stealing. The children also know that too much consumption of guavas would lead to constipation. But they prefer to go through the pain rather than staying hungry.

This is the worst part of eating guavas...nobody says it, but I know we are constipated again...nobody is trying to talk, or get up and leave. We just eat a lot of guavas because it's the only way to kill our hunger, and when it comes to defecating, we get in so much pain it becomes an almost impossible task, like you are trying to give birth to a country (18)

Not only are the children exposed to the hunger but are also deprived of the necessary clothing. Darling's friend, Godknows constantly wears trousers that are torn on the buttocks and Darling is forced to go to church barefooted because her old shoes were now tight and uncomfortable and the new shoes that her mother had got from the Chinese shops had become torn. The adults also suffer from the same fate of being under clothed as showcased by Mother of Bones who goes to church wearing mismatching shoes and Darlings mother who complains about the clothes that are not always there.

Bulawayo ventures on to expose how the people of Paradise are forced to live like animals. Due to their poverty, most people in Paradise live in one roomed shacks, without any form of privacy. Darling and her mother also live in one room and anytime her mother invites her 'man' over, thinking that Darling is asleep, they engage in coitus. Darling overhears every sound that her mother and 'man' produce, making it even more difficult to sleep. A child witnessing their own mother having sexual intercourse disturbs the psychological stability of the child thereby violating her innocence. Bulawayo thus exposes how poverty and lack force people to live under precarious conditions to the point where privacy and discretion become unattainable.

Darling and her family did not always live in the shacks. They once lived in a proper well-built furnished house that was destroyed following the

instruction of the government forcing them to find shelter in the squatter camps of Paradise. She declares "we had a home and everything and we were happy" (65).

Now they live in a shack that has a small bed sitting on some bricks and poles which was made by Mother. The inside of their mattress was made of plastic, old pieces of cloth, chicken and duck feathers. When Mother's man comes over, Mother's laughter reminds Darling of the time they used to live in the real house. She states that ever since they moved to Paradise Mother does not laugh that way anymore. It is through Darling's analysis of Mother's laughter that Bulawayo illuminates on how poverty not only kills the spirit but changes the individual.

By depriving the children of an education, the illiteracy rate is thus fuelled up. In underdeveloped countries, illiteracy is at its highest level which becomes problematic in trying to improve the people's livelihood. By virtue of being illiterate, the poor have limited access and knowledge on the prevailing technologies and preventive health measures. "Illiteracy can (therefore) be the reason why diseases like Malaria or HIV are widespread amongst the poor" (Runciman 1966: 44). This is portrayed in the novel where a major cause of death is not only hunger but HIV/AIDS. The fear of the virus leads an unnamed woman into committing suicide. Darling and her friends while relieving themselves in the bush see the dead woman hanged to the tree. They initially react with shock and start running after having seen the terrifying hanging body whose "eyes are the scariest part, they are almost too white, and they look like they want to pop out" (17). Then they overcome their fear and they decided to steal the dead woman's shoes and exchange it for bread. Rather than the children being afraid or scared (a major attribute of children) they run excitedly towards the dead woman. And rather than them smell the decomposing body of the dead, they fantasize over the bread they would exchange the shoes for. The prospect of food therefore becomes greater than the fear of the dead.

We Need New Names also broadcasts how the poor go through the pangs of humiliation from the very people they can access help from. When the NGO people come to distribute food and clothing to the people of Paradise, they seem reluctant to touch the children and when Darling says 'Thank you', the NGO lady does not respond as if Darling "just barked". When the NGO people take pictures of the children, the children feel embarrassed because of their dirty appearances.

Bulawayo continues to show how poverty dehumanizes the people. Instead of using proper sanitation facilities, Darling and her friends are forced to defecate in the bushes like animals due to the lack of sanitation infrastructure. This signifies the level of poverty Bulawayo's characters experience. There is absolute poverty (United Nations Report 1995:6). Absolute poverty entails the lack of all the necessary things needed for every day survival.

The raping of Chipo -an eleven year old girl- in *We Need New Names* entails how feelings of powerlessness due to poverty engender violence in men. It is only when she and Darling are at church that she reveals who had impregnated her. It is in this part that the reader finds out that Chipo had been raped by her grandfather and yet no punishment has been rendered on the perpetrator. It is notable that those who are poor usually face high risk of sexual violence and due to their lack of a voice, the prevailing patriarchal society lets the crime slip by and forces victims to continue with their everyday lives. It is through Chipo's ordeal that Bulawayo reveals how poverty and sexual violence are entangled. Chipo's ordeal reveals what the girl child has to go through in the face of poverty. She not only worry about food and clothing, but also stand the risk of being sexually abused.

We Need New Names showcases how poverty subjects one to the inaccessibility of health facilities thereby forcing them to try other methods of healing which later subject them to exploitation and oppression. Darling's father returns from South Africa inflicted with AIDS and instead of being taken to the hospital, he is kept at home to be looked after by Darling and her Mother. Mother of Bones then implores Prophet Bitchington Revelations Mborro to pray for her brother (Darling's father) so that he can be well again, but the Prophet is of no help because he believes that Father is possessed and a sacrifice of two virgin goats should be offered together with a payment of five hundred U.S dollars for his wellbeing. Bulawayo thus reveals how the church oppresses its own people despite knowing how impoverished its members are. Mother seems to be the only one who realizes that they were being exploited by Prophet Bitchington Revelations Mborro because after the Prophet states his price, Mother storms out of the shack angry.

It is in Darling's dream that Bulawayo sheds light on Operation Murambatsvina, a 'clean-up' operation which happened in Zimbabwe in 2005 with the approval of the government. The aftermath of the 2005 elections led to Operation Murambatsvina which critics believed to have being targeted towards

the communities who voted for the opposition. "This operation left thousands of people homeless as its main aim was to destroy all illegally erected buildings and vending sites" (Tibaijuka 2005:12). Not only did this leave thousands homeless, it also left them without any source of income, forcing the people to migrate to the neighbouring countries like South Africa and Botswana. "Operation Murambatsvina was carried out in an unjustified manner that ignored all human suffering and violated numerous human rights" (Chan 2003:44). *We Need New Names* shows how the government was unable to provide housing and social amenities to the people, thereby forcing them to erect illegal structures in urban areas. Instead of addressing this issue of scarce housing, the government decided to embark on an operation for the demolition of these structures.

When Mai Tari tries to protect her house by standing in front of the bulldozer, she is hit with a gun on her head by one of the soldiers and blood gushes out and no one says or does anything about it. Due to the people's powerlessness, they are exploited as they are humiliated by the policemen who are supposed to help them. In the destruction of their homes a series of human rights are violated like the malicious damage of property, assault and forced relocation. Bulawayo not only highlights how powerless the people are when their houses are destroyed but also how their fate is not theirs to dictate. It got to the point that the people's hatred for the government surpassed their hatred for the whites.

They shouldn't have done this to us, no, they shouldn't have...we fought to liberate this country. Wasn't it like this before independence? I was there, you were there, wasn't it just like this?... You are wrong. Better a white thief do that to you than your own black brother. Better a wretched white thief. (77)

It is also in Darling's dream the reader gets to know about the death of Nomviyo's son 'Freedom' who had been left in the house when the bulldozers destroyed her house, killing the poor child. There is nowhere in the novel where Bulawayo highlights on who was accountable for the death of Freedom and how they were punished. This in turn shows the corruptive nature of the government forces who are supposed to help the people but instead turn a blind eye to the murder of an innocent child. It is like Bulawayo is saying that if you are poor, you are an easy target to the violence of the government officials. "The novel clearly captures how hierarchy, inequality and power normalize violence" (Kleinman and Kleinman 1991:275)

The murder of Bornfree who was an opposition activist is an example of how the ruling party maintained its status quo. It is after his funeral that Bulawayo, through the game Darling and her friends' play, showcases how Bornfree was murdered and clobbered without remorse in front of the whole town. It is not a secret as to who murdered Bornfree but the people of Paradise do nothing about it fearing for their own lives. To them Bornfree is an unsung hero who died for 'Change'. By publicizing the violence inflicted on Bornfree, fear is instilled amongst the people of Paradise and all their dreams and hopes for change are shattered because their expressions for their basic needs and freedom are responded to violently. His death was witnessed by Darling and her friends. And they re-enacted it in form of a game. The game is so much so gruesome that the reader is shocked as to how the children can play such a game.

We dance. We lift our weapons...we jump high...we look at each other and we have become fierce and really ugly men... After the dancing we pounce on Bastard, who is now Bornfree...who are you working for ? sellout! friend of the colonists! you think you can just vote for whoever you want? ...you want change, today we will show you change!...then Godknows swing a hammer...It hits Bornfree at the back of the head and I hear the sound of something breaking...next a machete catches him in the face, splits him from eyes to chin. Then we are just all on him. Thrashing beating pounding clobbering. Axes to the head, kicks to the ribs, legs...we only laugh and keep hitting. Hitting, hitting, hitting...There is blood everywhere...But the pounding doesn't stop...(143) Unlike Darling who blames her family's poverty on the destruction of their home (Operation Murambatsvina), Mother of Bones (Darling's aunt) blames her poverty on the continuous decline of the buying power of the Zimbabwean dollar. She cannot improve her living conditions because she cannot access foreign currency like other people. She complains about the devaluation of the lumps of Zimbabwean dollars which she possesses but cannot even purchase a grain of salt. She says 'What I don't understand is how this very money that I have in lumps cannot even buy a grain of salt I mean that there is what I don't understand.' (25). When Mother of Bones is talking, there is so much resentment and hurt in her voice. It is as if she feels the pangs of betrayal. This shows how Zimbabwe failed to stabilize its economy after independence leading to the devaluation of the Zimbabwean dollar and the introduction of foreign currency as the currency used in everyday life. By introducing the foreign currency,

the poor became poorer because they do not have access to the foreign currency.

This can be accredited to the November 14, 1997 incident 'Black Friday' when the Zimbabwean dollar declined by 71.5% against the United States dollar. This incident led to the crash of the stock market forcing investors of the Zimbabwean dollar to pull off (Mambodlani 2014:10). Not only did the use of foreign currency cut deep through the nation's dignity but it reminded the nation of everything that came with accepting help from the Westerners- a brutal reminder of the colonial times.

We Need New Names reveals how one's political affiliation can subject an individual to become a victim of this violence. It can be noted that the reason that Darling's family house was destroyed along with the others is because of their political affiliation. It is quite evident that the people of Paradise are supporting the opposition party because Messenger and Bornfree ask Darling and her friends to put up posters written 'Change, Real Change' on everyone's door. They believe that if the opposition party wins the elections, their predicaments would change and their poverty alleviated. The fact that they believe that by voting for the opposition party their lives could be improved emphasizes the notion of how poverty is man-made. There are people responsible and maintain the suffering of the impoverished thereby violating the basic human rights. Little do the people of Paradise realize that change does not come easy and publicizing your sentiments about the ruling party only puts one in a more uncomfortable situation after the elections especially if the ruling party wins. It is quite clear that one's political inclination in postcolonial Zimbabwe is the deciding factor of one's fate and social stature (Scheper-Hughes 1993:62).

Bulawayo further illuminates on how poverty has required the women to become the primary sources of the family income. Darling's mother engages in cross boarder trading so as to be able to fend for her family. The traditional setup of the men being the breadwinner of the family is eroded because the women too need to feed their children. The men are forced to work dangerous jobs such as illegal mining where their lives are constantly at risk or to go seek work in other countries. For example, Darling's father who leaves for South Africa in search of employment while Thando is stuck working in the mines for meager wages but ends up leaving for South Africa like Darling's father. Here Bulawayo shows how poverty pushes one to migrate to other countries leaving behind their families. It is through this migration that the people lose their own identity.

**6. Poverty and Violence in Petina Gappah's
*An Elegy for Easterly***

The title gives a clue to what's in store. "Elegy" is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "A song of lamentation, esp. a funeral song or lament for the dead". This book feels like Petina Gappah's lament for the Zimbabwe she grew up in, a Zimbabwe that has been scarred by political corruption, economic chaos and the scourge of AIDS.

The title story is a lamentation for the destruction of the shanty town of Easterly, which is made up of "houses of pole and mud, of thick black plastic sheeting for walls and clear plastic for windows" (27). The squalid conditions in the township are further shown by shortage of basic amenities such as water as indicated by the long queues of people "waiting with plastic buckets to take water from Easterly's only tap" (27). Told from the third person point of view, it ferries us into the squatter community of Easterly Farm and allowing us a peak into the daily toils of the small scale informal traders of Zimbabwe. The story is mainly centred around 'Martha Mupengo', a mad woman who goes around asking for twenty cents and lifting her dress. Gappah foregrounds the theme of poverty early in the story with this description of the shanty town.

The children "followed her, as they often did, past the houses in easterly Farm, houses of pole and mud, of thick black plastic sheeting for walls and clear plastic for windows..." (27)

After painting the picture of Easterly, the third person narrator introduces a beggar, Martha Mupengo, who is the laughing stock of the town as she habitually raises her dress and asks: "May I have twenty cents" (28). The mentally unstable woman has become the object of entertainment for children; she is however the epitome of the terrible conditions in the town. The story opens with people being shocked about the pregnancy of Mupengo, and they wonder as to who could be responsible for the pregnancy. Mupengo's pregnancy is accounted for in the text and the birth of her baby coincides with the demolition of what the government terms "illegal structures" in the settlement, leaving countless people homeless.

The everyday struggles for survival shown through careful and intricate characterisation, are juxtaposed with the insincere and dishonest conduct of the government with regard to conditions in the town. While poor, ordinary characters confront their situations in order to find solutions, the government

seeks to hide the poverty from the eyes of outsiders. In preparation for a visit by the queen of England the government resorts to a desperate attempt to conceal the truth:

The government cleaned the townships to make Harare pristine for the three-day visit of the Queen of England. All the women who walk alone at night are prostitutes, the government said, lock them up, the Queen is coming. There are illegal structures in the townships they said – clean them up. The townships are too full of people, they said, gather them up and put them in the places the Queen will not see... [a]nd so the government hid away the poverty, the people put on plastic smiles and the city council planted new flowers in the streets. (32)

The story shows how the post-Independence government fails to address the challenges facing their people, but instead chooses to conceal the reality of abject poverty, overcrowding and prostitution. The narrator shows that this is a fruitless exercise as even more people come.

Gappah shows her disillusionment with the post-Independence government for presiding over the collapse of the economy. She blames the government for the economic hardships faced by ordinary citizens of Zimbabwe. Through a story told by BaToby, the reader is taken back to the good old days "before a loaf of bread cost half a million dollars" (32).

The indictment of the government continues in the reference to the influx of foreign goods into the Zimbabwean market. There is a humorous description of one side of Mbare:

On the other side, among the zhing zhong products from China, the shiny clothes spelling out cheerful poverty, the glittery tank tops and body tops imported in striped carrier bags from Dubai, among the Gucci bags and Prada shoes, among the Louise Vilton bags, the boys of Mupedanhamo competed to get the best customers. (36)

The quotation above paints a complex picture of the socio-economic situation in the town where the poor people can only afford low quality cheap garments from China while the rich buy expensive European labels. Through the wrong spelling of the famous Western label "Louis Vuitton", Gappah makes the point that the market is flooded by cheap rip-offs sold by the Chinese. The fake goods find favour with the local consumers because they cannot afford the originals. The quotation paints a clear case of poverty amidst plenty, as economic disparities become more pronounced in the society. Dress code and clothing labels are in this instance clear signs of wealth or lack of it, with the poor easily identifiable by the misspelt

Chinese brands while the rich can afford the better quality originals.

The story ends the way it started, with the beggar Martha at the centre of the narrative during the “winter of the birth of Martha’s child” (42). The birth of the child coincides with the failure by Josephat’s wife to bear children. After rescuing the child by literally playing the role of a midwife, she takes the baby away to be her own. In a perfectly placed flashback, the author reveals to the reader the circumstances that led to the pregnancy. The reader is shown how Josephat raped the mentally disturbed woman: the child that Josephat’s wife takes is actually that of her husband. In anger and hatred for the government, his poor economic situation and his wife’s sudden love for the church, he transfers his aggression and violently rape the mad woman. The story ends with uniformed men and their bulldozers violently charging towards the town and destroying and razing it down- without any prior notice from the government. Poverty in this story is depicted as a product of economic policies that encourage economic disparities, instead of closing the gap between the poor and the rich.

7. Conclusion

As we have seen, literature provides a unique opportunity to capture individual experiences of local indigence as it accommodates the multiplicity of voices that articulate these experiences. The various view-points on poverty often complement and at times contend against one another, providing a comprehensive and complex picture of how different people deal with poverty. Poverty in the texts constitutes different forms of deprivation from one person to another regardless of whether they belong to the same family, community or country.

The study established that literary depictions of violence and poverty can be a source of authoritative knowledge on indigence, since they provide comprehensive and focused descriptions of lived experiences of poverty. The fictional texts are important documents of inquiry into the subject matter as they explore the topic on different levels, from individuals trying to escape from the “house of hunger” to communities and nations struggling to survive “the acids of gut-rot” (Marechera 13).

Through the selected theory, this paper has endeavoured to demonstrate the power of literature to provide moving and instructive accounts of lived realities of poverty. Hence, illustrating that different characters in all the texts respond differently to poverty and violence.

And through the nuance that is made possible by the variety of viewpoints and narrative styles, the study provides a unique body of knowledge in the study of poverty and violence as it manages to discern the complexities of socio-economic struggles at all levels of society.

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