




# Reading Zimbabwe's structural and political violence through the trope of the *unnameable* and unnamed in Brian Chikwava's *Harare North*

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**Dates:**

Received: 24 Apr. 2016

Accepted: 16 Nov. 2016

Published: 24 Feb. 2017

**How to cite this article:**

Siziba, G., 2017, 'Reading Zimbabwe's structural and political violence through the trope of the *unnameable* and unnamed in Brian Chikwava's *Harare North*', *Literator* 38(1), a1302. <https://doi.org/10.4102/lit.v38i1.1302>

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This article reads Zimbabwe's structural and physical violence which extends to the country's diaspora through Brian Chikwava's novel *Harare North* (2009). The central argument the article makes is that the unnamed narrator is symbolic of the complex texture of Zimbabwe's crisis whose most evident characteristics are predatory politics and state-sanctioned violence. The unnamed narrator stands as a core part of the shadowy figures of violence that are unleashed on those who are perceived as anti-state. On the contrary, he also represents the subjectification and precariousness that epitomises being Zimbabwean at this moment in the country's history. The namelessness also evidences the slipperiness of the crisis and how it resists being made sense of and given form in simplistic ways. Notwithstanding the deformity assailing Zimbabweans as a mark of their country's failure, the unnamed character also demonstrates the desire to survive under harsh, confused and confusing circumstances.

**Zimbabwe se strukturele en politieke geweld gelees deur die troop van die onbenoembare en naamlose in Brian Chikwava se roman *Harare North*.** Die artikel lees Brian Chikwava se benutting van 'n naamlose protagonist-verteller in sy roman *Harare North* as 'n allegorie vir die duister figure van buite-regtelike geweld, ontkenning van en stilswye oor geweld, sowel as verskeie verdoeselings wat post-koloniale Zimbabwe onder ZANU-PF heerskappy kenmerk. Die naamlose en onnoembare kom op verskillende vlakke voor en tipeer beide die staat en sy burgers wat beide tuis en oorsee in ongemaklike verhoudings verstrengel is. Die artikel maak gebruik van sosiologiese en literêre insigte oor name en benaming om sin te maak van die belang van die verteller en sy posisie in die ervaring van Zimbabweërs.

## Introduction

This article reads Zimbabwe's structural and physical violence which extends to the country's diaspora through Brian Chikwava's novel *Harare North* (2009). Chikwava's deployment of an unnamed narrator, which foregrounds the invisible, anonymous, deformed, non-existent and uncanny, embodies and stitches together pervasive economic, social and political crises that confront Zimbabwe and Zimbabweans in the post-2000 period (Jones 2010). This article argues that this literary device is attuned to a range of issues across the Zimbabwe–United Kingdom migratory space(s). The technique highlights the workings of Zimbabwe's shadowy, invisible and unnameable figures that are engaged in extra-legal violence. It captures the precarity of underclasses living abject and invisible lives as well as the marginal and exploitable young people co-opted and (ab)used by the Zimbabwean state. Furthermore, it symbolises how state censorship renders other subjects unsayable, denies people voice and turns political commentary to taboo subjects. Across the two spaces of Zimbabwe and London, the namelessness frames the reproduction of Zimbabwean people's 'bare life' (Agamben 1995) as well as the precarious and dehumanising living conditions of migrants, particularly undocumented ones, who survive on the margins of the United Kingdom.

It is worth noting that Brian Chikwava is a Zimbabwean migrant in London and his novel is published in London. The novel benefits from his personal experiences and those of other African migrants in the city, as he reveals in an interview, 'the novel is very much a result of living in Brixton' (Chikwava: Writing pains). In another interview, Chikwava points out that in Brixton he has met several African migrants. These include a Ugandan who used to be 'in Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army' (Kociejowski 2011:56) and lived a life of violence which he still relished and recounted nostalgically yet he had claimed asylum in the United Kingdom.

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Chikwava thereafter ponders: 'I knew there were Rwandans somewhere about, so I figured there must be Green Bombers as well' (Kociejowski 2011:56). The unnamed narrator – a Green Bomber – as will be demonstrated, signifies diverse forms of unsettled and precarious living conditions in London and Zimbabwe that collapse the two spaces into one zone of tension and restlessness for Zimbabweans (cf. Muchemwa 2010).

Extensive academic literature focuses on Zimbabwe being a de facto one party state since the country's independence in 1980, as well as on repression and the degeneration to brazen intolerance and violence (Chuma 2004; Muponde 2004; Ndlovu 2008; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013; Raftopoulos 2004; Rupiya 2004; Sithole & Makumbe 1997). *Harare North*, a fictional and satirical account, opens up ordinarily inaccessible spaces such as the psyche and subjectivity of a killer. It humanises the perpetrator and allows readers to understand him on his own terms. His unreliability and lack of remorse about state violence and his role in it suggest an unmasking of official state narratives that cover-up endemic repression. The humour allows for laughter at the absurd situation in the country. Chikwava's account, as this article will demonstrate, is a hard-hitting critique of the post-colonial Zimbabwean state. The article draws on sociological and literary insights on (un)naming, identity and the related questions of *being* and *becoming*. The article is divided, after the introduction and theoretical section, into six thematic sections which are followed by a conclusion.

## Theorising names, naming practices and 'unnameability'

Sacks (2015) attests that contemporary literature has seen a proliferation of 'an epidemic of namelessness'. He explains that this phenomenon is not entirely new and that the anonymity that is engendered by the namelessness of protagonists and other literary characters 'keeps the books in a state of quantum superstition between memoir and fiction. As long as the question is left open, both avenues of interpretation remain passable'. Although I agree with Sacks, I argue in my reading of *Harare North* that the namelessness of the protagonist works in tandem with other textual and meta-textual strategies that attempt to give a sanitised version of the violence perpetrated by the protagonist. Al-Halool (2008), in his reading of the nameless protagonist in Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*, explains that the literary strategy of not naming the main character is directly related to the uncanny nature of the character. This certainly rings true in relation to Chikwava's protagonist whose desire to survive makes him an unpredictable and uncanny figure that will do whatever is necessary to survive.

Ashley (2003:15) observes that in order 'to study names, we have to connect linguistics and literature to psychology and sociology, and to geography and history'. Such a framing of names and naming practices reveals that there exists a complex network of possibly significant

associations. Ashley (2011:16) explains elsewhere that names occupy a central place in the understanding and appreciation of literary texts given that:

Names can drive the plot [...]. Names can set the tone. They can create the atmosphere. They can build suspense. Terms of address can reveal relationships. Names can familiarise or distance the reader. [...] Names do much more than merely designate. Even the absence of a name can be significant [...] Names can be comic or satirical. Names can be deliberately ludicrous or, as the British say, spot on.

The question to ask at this point is why names are important. Ngubane (2013:168) explains that in Africa, 'an individual is not considered a human being until a name is bestowed, for giving a name is the acknowledgement of the existence of that particular human being'. This implies that there exists a close relationship between being (identity) and the act of naming or being named. Hughes (2004:1) argues that naming transcends this. He asserts that:

If names simply refer to their referents, it would seem, then names directly refer to their referents. In particular, names do not refer to their referents by specifying a condition which their referent uniquely satisfies. By contrast, if definite descriptions refer, they refer to their referents indirectly, by specifying a condition which their referent uniquely satisfies. (...) proper names, they turn out to be very different from definite descriptions.

In Hughes's reasoning, names cannot be viewed simply as abbreviations or disguises of character and identity. Notwithstanding this perspective, it is undeniable that names are important in characterising people. Herrscher (1986:126) explains that:

a person or a phenomenon enters into being and into existence through referential designation because 'without a name, a person or a thing barely exists, it becomes part of our consciousness only when it has a name'.

Herrscher implies that a person or thing ceases to be, or disappears, once they are not named or fail to name themselves.

Brian Chikwava's novel *Harare North* reveals an interesting handling of names. The novel's protagonist remains unnamed right through the narrative. This literary device achieves a certain number of objectives. To begin with, the protagonist is not identified by a proper name but rather by the actions he performs and the mental processes that dictate his behaviour in relation to others. This resonates with Butler's (1990) theory of performativity where she argues that identity is a 'stylised repetition of acts... which are internally discontinuous' (p. 25). Chikwava's protagonist is defined by his actions: he is at once naïve, gullible, callous and calculating.

Second, the namelessness relates to the protagonist's selective amnesia concerning his past. He uses unorthodox names for his actions, such as violence which he labels as 'forgiveness'. This sanitises his actions. The unnameability suggests a cover-up and functions as a mask concealing the identity of the perpetrator. Instead, he constructs a narrative through which he frames himself as a victim. Unnamed, he enters the United Kingdom in the guise of a victim: 'Me I tell them



I have been harass by them boys in dark glasses because I am a youth member of the opposition party' (p. 4).

Third, the protagonist's unnameability can also be linked to resisting naming perpetrators of violence. This also relates to the protagonist's ethnicity. Chikwava uses terminology that straddles Shona or Ndebele. Although he uses Shona-related terminology, when he thinks of his mother he refers to 'umbuyiso', a Ndebele rite of 'bringing home the dead'. A proper name and a surname would easily expose his ethnicity. Dzimiri et al. (2014:227) in this regard reckon, 'political violence in Zimbabwe cannot be explained in isolation from the ruling party hegemony and ethnic as well as the racial connotations'. Notwithstanding the above, it cannot be denied that even the namelessness of the protagonist-narrator bestows his character with some form of agency. Noxolo (2014:301) affirms that:

The novel is unflinching in its portrayal of the young narrator's ambivalent agency – even though the narrator was a perpetrator of violence in Zimbabwe and continues to be manipulative and violent now that he is in London, the novel can also be read as an extended meditation on the ways in which this young man is nonetheless a victim of his insecurity as an asylum seeker in London and a victim of the violence of Zimbabwean politics.

There is need to add that his agency also lies in the ambivalence of his existence as he is trapped between a cherished but socio-economically untenable homeland and an unwelcoming *Harare North*. He is trapped in Homi Bhabha's (1994) third space. The protagonist explains his anguish with these words:

You tell the right foot to go in the one direction and he is being traitor shoe-doctor and tell left foot to go in another direction. You stand there in them mental backstreets and one big battle rage even if you have no more ginger for it. (p. 230)

Given the pivotal role of names in the understanding of literary texts, the namelessness that is represented in Chikwava's novel can be viewed 'in terms of the psychic and social (dis)location brought about by displacements. This reflects the semantic and cognitive dissonance created by shifts in ways of experiencing and naming the world' (Moji 2015:182).

Moreover, the namelessness of the protagonist in Chikwava's novel is directly related to the development of the plot and character formation. His state of mind can be compared with the restive plot development which captures the precarious condition of the character. The protagonist, who is also an omniscient narrator, attempts to mediate his past and present through the diverse encounters he has with different people in *Harare North*. In fact, his namelessness can be considered an allegory of 'statelessness as a state of being – and, because the narrator has no proper home, he can also have no proper name' (Sacks 2015). His namelessness alludes to the complex issues that play out in the transnational displacement of bodies and in which identities are made fluid and perpetually questioned and challenged. This unnamed protagonist seems to struggle with assuring himself, albeit in vain, of the

plausibility of his very existence. In the sections that follow, I thematically analyse the connections between Chikwava's trope of the nameless and unnameable with socio-political reality and people's experiences in Zimbabwe.

## 'Green Bombers', CIOs and War Veterans: Zimbabwe's shadowy, dark and unnameable forces of violence

In the first instance, the narrator's namelessness typifies the pervasiveness and commonplaceness of crisis-induced emigration from Zimbabwe. Crush and Tevera (2010:1) allude to crisis-induced emigration from Zimbabwe being a 'rush for the exits' as Zimbabwe's crisis became emphatic. Marechera (1978) uses a similar technique in his novel, *The House of Hunger* (1978), to depict the generalised harsh realities and squalor of black African people's in Rhodesia. The commonplaceness and generalisation of the suffering and the precarity are aptly captured in the title *The House of Hunger*. Like Marechera's unnamed protagonist, Chikwava's nameless narrator escapes the structural violence and precarity of his context.

The year 2000 was a watershed one in Zimbabwe. Against a restive context of the 1990s of an ill-performing economy and state repression, civic society organisations and the nascent Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) party formed in 1999 successfully campaigned for a 'No Vote' to a constitutional referendum. Rupiya (2004:80) observes that '[t]he referendum rejected a position preferred by government in a move perceived as representing the agenda of the political opposition and civic society'. Thereafter, in the June poll of 2000, 'the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), barely ten months old, captured a credible 57 seats' (p. 80). The threat of the MDC, which was the biggest ZANU-PF faced since PF-ZAPU, a party seen to have been swallowed through a coercive Unity Accord (Muponde 2004), resulted in widespread repression and draconian legislation to muzzle freedom of expression, debate and association (Chuma 2004). Rupiya (2004) writes, during this period, of the 'politicisation of the military and the militarization of politics' (p. 79) with army officials publicly stating that they would not salute a president without liberation war credentials. The state's discourses increasingly made distinctions among Zimbabweans of 'us'/'them', 'patriots'/'sell-outs' (Muponde 2004). Although political violence was there at the inception of Zimbabwe (2015), after the year 2000 it became brazen (Msipa 2015; Muponde 2004; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009; Rupiya 2004).

The namelessness of the narrator corresponds with both the prevailing violence in Zimbabwe and how this violence operates. Before emigrating to the United Kingdom, the unnamed narrator was a Green Bomber. Mangena and Nyambi (2013) note that:

The name-cum-phrase 'Green Bomber' entered Zimbabwe's political discourse in the turn of the century when the ZANU PF party instituted a National Youth Service (mostly referred



to as Border Gezi Training, named after a former youth minister) where youths were 're-educated' to be 'patriotic', military style. (p. 80)

The ostensible aims of the National Youth Service are to engender development. However, its graduates have become synonymous with political violence. For Zimbabweans, the name Green Bomber refers to a type of 'common green bottle fly' whose scientific name is *Phaecinia sericata* or *Lucilia sericata*. In Ndebele-speaking areas, this green fly is also known as 'impukane yothuvi' (feaces fly). Mangena and Nyambi (2013:80) trace the etymology of Green Bomber to the 'health sector' which noted these flies were a hazard because they consume 'human waste' and thereafter 'literally "bomb" your food with cholera pathogens'. Green Bombers – the informal militia – are often deployed against political opposition and dissenters and their visibility is marked during election time. Writing about the 2001 presidential election, Chikuhwa (2004:180) states that 'the monster again unleashed green-fatigued brigades on the populace. Opposition activists who make futile noises against these "Green Bombers" [...] are paid nocturnal visits that silence them forever'.

In 2016, Machamire reports how '[a]head of the eagerly anticipated 22 October Norton by-election ZANU-PF is now appealing to the notorious national youth service graduates'. Temba Mliswa, a former ZANU-PF member, competing against ZANU-PF in the election characterised the youth as 'a congregation of desperate thugs' (Machamire 2016). Concerning the representation of 'Green Bombers' in *Harare North*, Mangena and Nyambi (2013) observe quite aptly that:

Chikwava is therefore using language-not so much to hide a political commentary that could be unpalatable to certain political actors – but to emphasize and to reinforce the despicability of the National Youth Service or institution or programme whose graduates are pejoratively referred to as 'Green Bombers'. 'Green Bomber' comes to signal the dirty tactics of creating and maintaining hegemony. (pp. 80–81)

The actions of the Green Bombers are well captured in the narrator's past which has seen him kill an opposition supporter. The derogatory constructions of Green Bombers which in part stem from their green army-like uniforms subvert the National Youth Service official narrative. This typifies Scott's (1990:138) description of how the weak or dominated resist power within 'a parameter of what authorities are obliged to permit or unable to prevent'.

Chikwava's unnamings of the 'Green Bomber' narrator is instructive. It shows how those affiliated with ZANU-PF and state violence are immune from the law – they are untouchable. Their violence is unseen, hence invisible, because they are propping up the state. Bratton and Masunungure (2008:48) argue that contemporary Zimbabwe is a 'militarized form of authoritarianism'. In addition to this, they assert that Green Bombers are part of ZANU-PF's 'informal militias' and are 'unleashed on opponents under the guise of a national youth-training program'. Chikwava's

narrator succinctly clarifies the role played by Green Bombers in Zimbabwe. He nostalgically recalls:

The Green Bombers is there to smoke them enemies of the state out of their corrugate-iron hovels and scatter them across the earth. (p. 8)

Sithole and Makumbe (1997:133) describe how after adopting 'Marxism-Leninism as its official ideology' in 1977 ZANU-PF 'declared 1979 "Gore Gukurahundi" (The Year of the Storm) – the revolutionary storm that would finally destroy the white settler regime; the "internal settlement puppets"; and finally, the capitalist system'. Gukurahundi 'was a policy of annihilation; annihilating the opposition (black and white)' (Sithole & Makumbe 1997:133). Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2012:6) argues that:

[t]he political philosophy of the annihilation of enemies has underpinned ZANU-PF's attitude to state power not only during the liberation struggle and the 1980 election; it has been consistently deployed at every subsequent election as a means of dealing with political opposition.

The Gukurahundi policy is underpinned by the *Chimurenga* ideology, which is 'premised on the doctrine of permanent nationalist revolution' and authorises a 'culture of violence' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013:33). ZANU-PF resorts to the Gukurahundi policy whenever its hegemony is threatened. The figure of the Green Bomber is a significant feature of this matrix.

The party (ZANU-PF) is the legitimating normative frame for the Green Bombers. When they storm a police station, their leader confronts and overrides the police: 'who do you think you serve by protecting enemies of the state when the president made it clear that we should give them all the forgiveness...?' (p. 182). The narrator recounts:

Officer-in charge suddenly realize that even if we is sons of the soil, we have a sharp nose for treason. Them stocks [jail cells] clang open and the traitor is quickly handed over. We drag him away to the forest where it is easy to give him plenty of forgiveness. (p. 182)

The unnamed character captures what in real-life has come to be known as 'enforced disappearances' (Langa and Ndlovu 2016) in Zimbabwe, often targeting political dissenters. Unknown figures who appear to be untraceable by the police are responsible for abductions. A case in point is that of Itai Dzamara of the one man 'Mugabe must go' campaign and later the 'Occupy Africa Unity Square' movement. Newspaper reports attest that:

Dzamara was increasingly becoming a thorn in the flesh for President Robert Mugabe's regime. In October last year, he delivered a petition to Mugabe's Munhumutapa offices in Harare to demand that the president step down immediately and pave the way for fresh elections. (Munyaka 2015)

Dzamara was abducted in March 2015 and has not been seen since then. According to the reports:

Dzamara (36) was kidnapped by five men in Harare's Glen View township on Monday morning when he was leaving a





barber's shop. The kidnappers are reported to have been in plain clothes and to have accused Dzamara of stealing cattle. They handcuffed him, forced him into a white bakkie with concealed number plates and drove off. His whereabouts are unknown. (Munyaka 2015)

Langa and Ndlovu (2016) note how the International Coalition Against Enforced Disappearance (ICAED) is making calls 'on Zimbabwe to come up with legislation to protect people from falling victim to forced disappearances'. They cite 'the disappearance of human rights activists Paul Chizuze and Itai Dzamara in 2012 and March 2015, respectively'. It is worth noting that there have been prior abductions, such as that of Jestina Mukoko, a human rights activist. Mukoko was abducted on 3 December 2008 at 5'o clock in the morning by people who did not identify themselves to her. She was tortured and detained for 21 days. Charumbira (2016), reporting on Mukoko's subsequent litigation against the state after it emerged that the people who kidnapped her were state agents, reveals that:

Mukoko said she was taken into a secret location where she was severely assaulted with a hose and a piece of iron on the soles of her feet during interrogations. During the period that she was being held, she thought the torture was a prelude to her murder as she was subjected to serious humiliation.

In an interview, Brian Chikwava shows keen awareness of the threat of speaking to power in Zimbabwe:

You wonder, 'Should I write about this? If I get it published, what will happen? Will I be OK? Will I have to leave the country?' You hear strange stories about what happens to people, especially journalists at the front line. Writers tend to be picked on rather quietly, which is also sinister. (*The Scotsman*, 2 April 2009)

The late novelist Chenjerai Hove shared similar fears. When he left Zimbabwe, his mother told him: 'Don't come back anytime soon, my son. They want to decapitate you' (Hove 2013). *They* is code for shadowy figures of violence. Chenjerai Hove eventually died in July 2015, still in exile. Several letters were dedicated to him by friends and detractors. Mabasa derisively scoffs at Hove's departure and death in exile. He charges:

But I dare you to speak. What were you running away from? Chinua Achebe said, 'A toad does not jump in broad daylight for nothing, something will be after its life'. Who was after your life? Why did you protect your persecutors by not *naming them if they were real?* (Mabasa 2015; italics my emphasis)

Win (2015) raises the subject of her own emigration from Zimbabwe and the spectre of the unseen and unknown:

You were devastated when I moved up to Johannesburg last year. You tried to understand. You cross-examined me about the choice I had made. Till the day you died, I don't think you never quite understood how a whole grown [woman] could run away from *Jesus' earthly deputies* and the now *seemingly ubiquitous goblins!*

Changamire aims to dispel 'mistruths' about Chenjerai Hove's death. He writes that: 'He [Chenjerai Hove] was tormented and haunted by men and women in dark glasses day and night' (Changamire 2015). The three letters are

instructive with Win's 'ubiquitous goblins!' underscoring the issue. *Harare North* speaks to these concerns.

## Non-existent and invisible lives: Zimbabwe's underclasses

The anonymity of the narrator in the novel also signifies the life of the poor in Zimbabwe. As Ngubane (2013:168) observes, without a name one 'is not considered a human being'. Being nameless can also be read as short-hand for Zimbabwe's underclasses whose living conditions, as the narrator's story and that of his mother show, dehumanise and reduce them to non-humans. The unnamed narrator in fact becomes a ZANU-PF youth in order to escape the crushing poverty and dehumanising conditions he is living in. He states that:

If you is [*sic.*] back home leading rubbish life and ZANU PF party offer you job in they [*sic.*] youth movement to give you chance to change your life and put big purpose in your life, you don't just sniff at it and walk away when no one else want to give you graft in the country even if you is prepared to become tea boy. (p. 17)

Interestingly, the notion of 'rubbish life' described by the unnamed protagonist sparks memories of Zimbabwe's 'Operation Murambatsvina' (Operation Drive out Rubbish) of 2005, which, as implied in the name, was meant to drive out 'filth' from the country's urban areas (Ndlovu 2008). The result was further impoverishment and precarity for the urban underclass that relies on the informal economy. Throughout the novel, the protagonist is plagued by questions of being and becoming with very limited options. His poor mother occupies his mind and is one of the conduits through which Chikwava clarifies the protagonist's marginal life. His dreams about his mother can be thought of as symbolising the subjective fear and unconscious activation of fear of the poverty that he emerges from in Zimbabwe. Although he has tried to escape his precarious life in Zimbabwe, recurrent dreams pursue him like poverty that refuses to be shaken off. The unnamed narrator signifies the experiences and marginal lives of Zimbabwe's underclasses. Shipler's (2004:3) book *The Working Poor: Invisible in America* grapples with the 'invisible hardships' that the intersection between poverty and invisibility causes. Indeed, the connection between poverty and invisibility is understood as self-evident.

The narrator's subjectivity is greatly shaped by the anxious situation of his mother whom he thinks and dreams of often. The dreams stand as a parallel reality which forces him to think about state violence against the poor in Zimbabwe. His mind is preoccupied with his mother's unmarked grave and his desire to perform 'umbuyiso', a ceremony which is traditionally known as bringing one's deceased relative home, thus giving him or her some form of identity and existence within the family even in death. It is ironic that while he aspires to bring his mother home, her village is overrun and invaded by ZANU-PF. This triggers another form of invisibility and unmaking of his mother's identity



and by extension his own. The desire to perform 'umbuyiso' is what moors and grounds the unnamed protagonist while he is in *Harare North*. He reflects about his mother:

Now she spirit is still wandering in the wilderness because family squabbles end up preventing *umbuyiso* and this has not been done for years now. Me I have to go back home and organize *umbuyiso* for her. (p. 16)

The destruction of his mother's village and grave which is the only remaining connection to her is an allegory of the severing and burning up of the umbilical cord-like connection he has with his village. His mother's grave represents a connection between him and his home. Home is constituted by both the living and the dead whose memory and presence in the family are preserved through proper burial rites such as 'umbuyiso' marked graves which can be visited occasionally. The burning of the village shatters the sacred connections and bonds between him and his mother who is even in her death cast out from her home through the violence of fire and state eviction. The outcome is alienation of the narrator from his home and kin, rootlessness and psychological torment. His sense of belonging and being undergoes obliteration and erasure. The question raised by Sekai and Paul lingers in his mind:

Do you know what happens to things like people's graves when government takes over the area for mining? (p. 23)

Elsewhere the narrator distressingly muses:

Soon Mother's grave maybe end up being dug up by some machine, get wash away by rain and she bones come out in the open and get bleached by sun just like bones of dead bird and no one is going to care. (p. 74)

Disconnected from his mother's grave, the unnamed narrator is threatened by yet another form of loss of self and identity. His symbolic universe and belief system are threatened, as is his very sanity.

The unnamed narrator also stands as the marginal figure of Zimbabwe's young people, particularly the poor and uneducated who have limited life chances. They occupy the margins of the country's gerontocratic and phallogocentric sociocultural and political landscape. They are used and abused as disposable tools and resources for the ends of politicians. Writing about Green Bombers in Zimbabwe, Lindgren (2003) suggests that this exploitation and exclusion is in part gendered. He argues that: 'male youths are the ones who carry out most of the apparently undisciplined violence' (2003:9). Lindgren further asserts that with few productive prospects to offer the youth:

the ZANU PF government tries to appease discontented youth by encouraging them to commit violence towards the political opposition, and rewarding them with plots of land from the farms they occupy. (p. 9)

Being without a name clearly captures the minimisation of Zimbabwe's youth and symbolises that they 'barely exist'

(Herrscher 1986:126). During an interview, Chikwava reveals that the theme of violence in his book is inspired by happenings in contemporary Zimbabwe. Chikwava further explains that:

It's easier for the government to brainwash young people who haven't had such a good education, and get them to do things a normal thinking person would find hard to get on with. They end up being the people sent out to do the horrible acts. They are very unprepared for different points of view because that would expose that the life they'd been living was a lie. (*The Scotsman* 2009)

In the novel, the narrator is exploited as part of an informal army and also extorted by their commander. Upon discovering this ruse, the narrator laments:

Cde Mhiripiri just wanting to hit people's pockets to make himself rich. He try it on many people. Angirayi was also running around because Cde M say they want US\$ 4000 from him. Angirayi never find the money and he is still there and police not even interested in him or any of us because what they want is Cde M because he have humiliate them many times and Goromonzi police inspector have got scores to settle with him. And now people say he is parttime BBC in London. (p. 178)

The narrator has been working towards expunging his murder docket through Comrade Mhiripiri whom he trusts and reveres. His naiveté is exposed. This shows how with limited options young people are part of vulnerable groups that can be easily exploited by the powerful.

### The unnamed narrator as the archetypal undocumented migrant

Being in *Harare North*, the unnamed narrator quickly learns his place as an undocumented migrant. His very first day orients him to the rules of the game for undocumented migrants and asylum seekers. He reveals that:

I disappoint them immigration people when I step forward to hand my passport to gumchewing man sitting behind desk, I mouth the magic word – asylum – and flash toothy grin of friendly African native. They detain me. (p. 4)

Having internalised this subject position, the narrator negotiates his undocumented status through ruses that are a staple for those in his situation. His namelessness is attuned to the marginal social world inhabited by undocumented migrants. His survival depends on undetected by authorities. Using Shingi's papers, he is defiant:

It don't matter that I am illegal; I have keep his passport because his asylum application get approved by the immigration people some while ago. His passport and National Insurance number come handy now. His mobile phone too. (p. 2)

The narrator depicts the lives of undocumented migrants and their creative survival strategies: swapping documents to access work and negotiate exclusion. Often, these strategies occur with the collusion of employers looking for cheap labour. The novel cites other migrants in similar situations,



thus demonstrating entrenchment of the practice. Aleck, who shares accommodation with the narrator and Shingi, also does not have a visa. The narrator reveals that:

His papers is not in order; he have do that style of getting visitor's visa and then stepping off with big plan to go home on the 44th of the month. That's a more direct way; many people do that style because other ways are complicated. (p. 34)

This precarious living outside the law resonates with Agamben's (1995) notion of 'bare life'. Migrants are reduced nearly to the level of animals where they are forced by the situation to do anything to survive. Writing on migrants in South Africa, Gordon (2010) argues that they:

are not subject to the normal protections of constitutional democracy and human rights obligations. Instead, migrants are treated as an exception, and as such, are relegated to a space outside the workings of the law. (p. 3)

The narrator describes the dehumanising existence:

You spend them weeks shifting mud with shovels and sweat beads come out of every pore in the body because you is putting out heaps of effort while your buttocks point to high heaven and migrant flesh stink around you as shirts and underpants get damp. (p. 49)

Situated in 'states of exception' (Agamben 1995), migrants have no protection against abuses as the nameless narrator reveals: '[t]hen one day you hear: take them your things and move it. That is what they say to us in Wimbledon' (p. 49). The narrator reveals that migrants from Africa occupy undignified forms of employment such as the 'British Bottom Cleaners' (BBC) work who 'look after people that poo they pants every hour' (p. 41). This sardonically reflects how desperation leads to degrading forms of employment which are at times at odds with their qualifications. McGregor's (2007) ethnographic work in the United Kingdom attests to the exclusions and limited work opportunities that confront Zimbabwean migrants resulting in them joining the BBC.

### **A stranger among other strangers: Harare North and the blasé attitude**

Although the narrator's namelessness reflects his liminality and locus in the 'third space' (Bhabha 1994), he also stands as a distant outsider and stranger even among the community of outsiders and strangers in *Harare North*. Although the rest of the community members who are Zimbabwean are named, the protagonist is unnamed and utilises broken English which is interwoven with Zimbabwean colloquial English. His language is laboured and disruptive and resists clarity, fluency and structure. This renders him fuzzy and illegible. He is endowed with a different subjectivity and is at odds with everyone and is misunderstood by everyone including Shingi with whom he shares some history.

Chikwava skilfully illustrates the narrator's detachment and containment in a world of his own through the intimate attachment he has with his suitcase. The suitcase which is always locked and hidden contains his secrets and all his

possessions. In a way, the suitcase represents the deep secrets that he is hiding, including murder. When he discovers that someone has opened his suitcase, and in a way opened his life up to scrutiny, he is upset and feels that he has been violated. He decries the treachery: 'Someone have sniff sniff and look inside my suitcase and they even thief my \$9.55. You can take the money but don't look inside my suitcase' (p. 69).

He is totally committed to the status quo in Zimbabwe and considers any questions about governance and justice as treasonous. He is willing to kill for the government yet he is averse to the Green Bombers being labelled ZANU-PF thugs and thinks to himself:

Sekai and Paul don't get that, but me I don't say anything and let Sekai yari yari on the phone, dissing Green Bombers. She know nothing. She don't even know Comrade Mugabe. The president can come out to whip you with the truth. (p. 8)

Despite being a mere foot soldier, he views himself as privy to a superior and truer knowledge about Mugabe. He constantly egotistically reminds himself: 'Me I am not civilian person; so I don't go paparapapara panicking' (p. 69). The narrator is trapped in an imaginary world in which he is the hero of Zimbabwe's undying revolution. This allows him to sanitise his past and present crimes. However, without a moral campus he spirals into further violence and crimes leading to his eventual unravelling. This is magnificently depicted when he forgets to lock his suitcase and he loses everything it contained. He states that:

Then I notice that because I forgot to lock it, my suitcase have break open and the things inside have unravel and scatter all over them streets and get lost. Even the proof; my test result. It's gone. Nothing is left inside suitcase except the smell of mother. (p. 228)

It is worth noting that although the narrator is estranged from *Harare North*, there is also a degree of general coldness in *Harare North* that is reminiscent of Georg Simmel's (1995) notion of the blasé attitude in his work *The Metropolis and Mental Life*. Everyone is hustling to survive and make ends meet and this engenders a degree of coldness, indifference as well as calculative and transactional associations. Despite this, the narrator is out of sync with everything and has a unique predatory nature, political subjectivity and naïveté.

### **Silence(s) and the unsayable in Zimbabwe**

Chikwava's novel also signals something about certain silence(s), the unsaid and unsayable in Zimbabwe. One of these issues is HIV and AIDS which remain a taboo subject and source of stigma in Zimbabwe. To this day, the secrecy over HIV and AIDS has been so ingrained that HIV- and AIDS-related deaths, particularly those of public officials, are euphemised as 'dying after a long illness'. The narrator's handling of HIV and AIDS nuances this and exposes the pervasive ignorance around the subject. What compounds





the narrator's anxiety and trauma is the fact that he was raped in prison. He is troubled by the rape ordeal and he resists explicitly describing or discussing the incident:

You can't tell me about HIV, I know, me I have been there in prison. I know all about it because me I have had bicycle spoke being hold close to my heart by some thug that give me no choice. (p. 211).

The narrator fails to find suitable words with which to come to terms with the rape that transpired in prison. He can only recount the violence (re)presented by the 'bicycle spoke' that 'gave him no choice'. The struggle to deal with this form of violence may be because of trauma, which is also connected to the hyper-masculinity exhibited by the narrator. Although the narrator (re)presents himself as a strong and even a military man, the rape emasculates him and he has to be secretive about it.

In addition to this failure to speak about his rape, the narrator is ignorant about HIV and AIDS, especially what testing and the results mean. Perplexed by Jenny's celebration of the outcome of her HIV test, the narrator muses: 'She's lunatic, Jenny. HIV-negative; how can negative be good news' (p. 211). Although the narrator's reaction to Jenny's news is hilarious, it points to the pervasive levels of ignorance and misinformation with regard to HIV and AIDS. Despite prodigious strides made with the availability of counselling and testing centres throughout Zimbabwe, cultural and religious beliefs continue to influence people's conceptions about HIV and AIDS. Some believe that it is a curse which can be cleansed through sexual intercourse with virgins or healed by traditional healers or prophets.

Other silences pertain to what are believed in Zimbabwe to be political killings and disappearances. There is a long list of prominent and outspoken politicians who have met curious deaths. In the novel, *The Sins of the Father*, Mungoshi (2003) approaches the subject by alluding to the fact that it is common knowledge that Mr Rwafa engineers the deaths of other politicians. Zhangazha (2013) in a story titled *Mystery Zim car crash deaths haunt Zanu PF* documents a long list of such deaths which are a 'taboo' subject. The mystery surrounding them is part of the unsayable and unsaid. The family of ZANLA General Josiah Tongogara are reported to have lamented the failure of the ZANU-PF government to clarify several inconsistencies associated with the claim that Tongogara was killed in a car accident. Makova (2013) quotes a family member stating that: '[t]here are so many glaring inconsistencies about what happened to our father. You can tell they [ZANU-PF Officials] are lying'. Another family member raises another query concerning the official version of events: 'If his body was burnt, why is it that the wreckage does not show any burns?' Such unanswered questions are commonplace in Zimbabwean politics.

## Conclusion

Chikwava's literary technique of deploying a nameless narrator, which he complements with broken and laboured English, allows him to skilfully address the endemic

structural and political violence in Zimbabwe and the attendant forms of precarity and dehumanisation that extend to the country's diaspora. Besides the violence, the namelessness also points to the diverse taboos and the injunction to be silent about certain 'sensitive subjects'. Zimbabwe has through systematic repression and state violence become a nation of silence and the silent. Citizens' subjectivities and forms of consciousness are heavily shaped by an atmosphere of fear and insecurity. Furthermore, the namelessness also attests to the marginality of the country's underclasses, a scenario which is reproduced in the host countries that Zimbabweans migrate to. Approaching the sombre subject of various forms of violence through a fictional account allows Chikwava to also infuse humour into his novel, which allows his audience to laugh at the absurdities assailing Zimbabweans, both at home and abroad.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

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