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Book Review

While browsing through the internet on 25 February 2012, we were intrigued to note that Valentine, Isheunesu Mazorodze's 1989 book about Zimbabwe's liberation struggle had not yet been reviewed and we asked ourselves whether the book does not, in any way, bring anything of note. Our reading of this beautifully constructed biography illuminated that its

strongest point is that of objectivity. In *Silent Journey From the East*, unlike in other novels about the same liberation struggle, Mazorodze neither romanticises nor exaggerates the experiences of the 1970s war of liberation in Zimbabwe (formerly Rhodesia), but objectively chronicles the ordeals of this chapter of Zimbabwean history, alongside the ironies and contradictions that were at play such as hunger, penury, betrayal, miscalculations, hardships, disease, danger and regret in a manner that would shame pretentious participants of that war who, today, would like to privatise that national liberation struggle.

In the main, the novel celebrates the fortitude, indomitable willpower and selflessness of the revolutionary cadres from Zimbabwe. However, as already noted, Mazorodze does not romanticise this chapter of Zimbabwean history, but presents the contradictions and ironies of the Second Chimurenga as they are. This is a book which bluntly retorts the question: were all those who trekked East to Mozambique guided and filled with undiluted feelings of nationalism and patriotism? It seems to suggest that among the army of liberators were both the good intentioned and the 'mercenary' type: the motives for joining the struggle were multifarious.

The three main characters (Alexio, Donald and Charles) are school children at a boarding school who get entangled in the vicious web of their friend, Donald's crime of double murder of his lover and her father. The manner of commission of crime entrap these three erstwhile friends in an octopus grip whose only release can be afforded through their involuntary decision to go and join the liberation struggle, a struggle outlawed by the Rhodesian law enforcers who are relentlessly breathing down their necks. The novel, therefore, explicitly debates the reality that some people joined the struggle for other reasons other than the genuine desire to free their motherland, Zimbabwe. Some joined the struggle on the false assumption that once in Mozambique they would neatly engage in their previous and dream life career opportunities. Such dreams are shattered and ideals prove to be far removed, divorced from the ugly realities of life in the bush. Ideals about justice are challenged and contradicted as other cadres turn out to be pure mercenaries, not patriots. The other question the novel asks is whether the war needs characters who are latently violent such as Donald Chikara.

The struggle itself appears to have been a school on its own accord, teaching and moulding particular individuals and personalities. A question, however, crops up: does war have rules like sport which should be followed? If there are rules, doesn't it follow that both belligerent parties should adhere to them to the letter? Donald Chikara sees no point in trying to 'toe' so-called rules of the game of war.

The novel brings out the mythical and realistic role of the spirit mediums, or African cosmology in the struggle, something that is consistent with the nation's literary and non-literary depictions of the Second Chimurenga. In literary iconographies such as *Harvest of Thorns*, *Echoing Silences*, *When the Rain bird Cries* and *Guerrilla Snuff*, the bateleur eagle appears as the symbol and messenger of the war spirits. This fits well with the history of the 13th century Great Zimbabwe state whose guiding spiritual symbol was the *hungwe shiri yedenga*, better known as the Zimbabwe Bird,

which, today, is one of the most revered national symbols.

Mazorodze's stylistic prowess is evident where he slides in and out of autobiography, a style renowned for both its potential notoriety to construct the subjective story of the self making national history and also an objective configuration of the world as the author sees and experiences it. By choosing an omniscient commentator narrator, the writer rejects autobiography, but cannot entirely be free from its entangling effects. It should always be remembered that Mazorodze is a participant in the liberation struggle he fictitiously represents, having himself joined the Zimbabwean liberation struggle in 1978, as a recruit of Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA). By rejecting autobiography, yet depicting the realities of the chimurenga (war of liberation), we can therefore say it is like a witness' desire to use metaphor and innuendo in court, from which good listeners will sift through the figures of speech.

One of the running motifs is that suggested in the novel's title, *Silent Journey from the East*. Zimbabwe as a Christian nation will remember the biblical wise men's journey from the east that brought good tidings concerning Jesus' mission to free the world. The sun also rises from the east, bringing sunshine and light for natural growth. But for some formerly colonised African nations like Zimbabwe, the East was also a cite from which ideals of freedom from Western capitalist imperialism and colonialism were kindled and fanned by revolutionary bellows of the Soviet Union, China, Romania, East Germany and other members of the Eastern bloc. Closer at home, the East meant Mozambique under the leadership of the giant Pan Africanist, Samora Machel, that revolutionary icon who allowed the Zimbabwean freedom fighters to establish their military and refugee bases in that country. In the novel, Mazorodze clinically weaves various journey motifs in his desire to present the edifying and fulfilling nature of the process of journeying in life. This motif is closely intertwined with Alexio (Comrade Admire Chimurenga)'s life experiences. Alexio's train journey from Kadoma frees him from his parents, while at the same time it makes him

aware of the limitations and impingement of colonialism on the black folks that needed to be confronted. This journey and his subsequent life at the boarding school is one long journey of discovery where he discovers the inherent evil and beastly nature of humanity, a beastliness that is not confined to the callous Rhodesian regime and its soldiers alone, but also to some of his friends such as the murderous Donald Chikara and some of the commanders. In the words of the revolutionary leader of the Zimbabwe African National Union (Patriotic Front) (ZANU PF), Robert Gabriel Mugabe, there were excesses "... on both sides" (*Inside the Third Chimurenga*), highlighting that both the defenders of Rhodesia and the liberation forces were not immune to atrocities.

The perilous journey to and from Mozambique graphically reflects the dangers and pleasures of liberation war and, to the generality of readers, an accompanying witness to all this horror, inhumanity and disease that was the flipside of independence. So, it can be added that part of the journey motif fulfils the need for awareness of the ugly realities surrounding the revolutionary struggle. In this sense, Alexio appears to be the voice of the author.

Apart from the emotional third person delineations, the novel also boasts of an engaging dialogue that makes debate about the wartime realities dialectical and didactic. There is a well-handled use of stream of consciousness and verisimilitude. The use of song discourse is in keeping with most anti-colonial literature where song does not only provide combatants and collaborators the much

needed historical justness of the war, but also emotional attachment to the struggle and entertainment, popularly known as *morari* (high morale) during the war.

Mazorodze also employs the style of a story within a story to lay bare the experience and story of the oppressed and their struggle to free themselves and create a new nation and identity. This aspect of the novel is comparable to Ikem Osodi's thesis on the struggle we find in Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*.

The novel ends with Zimbabwe having gained independence in 1980 and all those who had been fighting in the bushes of Zimbabwe and those in friendly neighbouring countries embarking on a return journey to Zimbabwe. Why is the journey therefore a silent one? There are so many horrible things that happened during the war that were not said but this novel ironically breaks the silence and tells it all. The novel is capped with an emotional homecoming for Alexio, the writer's voice, now disabled and confined to a wheelchair. The cathartic journey's end is marked with tears, Alexio's first crying from the time he joined the gruesome war, thus releasing all the pressures that had bottled up in the struggle to purge his soul of all the pain and inner struggles and conflicts of the struggles. This links very well with the symbolic journey of the eel alluded to in the narrative of the novel. It is through the journey from one ocean to another that an eel breeds and discovers its destiny - that in order to gain awareness of the oceans it has to go on a journey and to guarantee posterity it has to go on a return journey.