

Article

Debunking the post-2000 masculinisation of political power in Zimbabwe: An approach to John Eppel's novel *Absent: The English Teacher*

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Zimbabwe's history of an often masculinised violent liberation war has created post-war gendered political power configurations bordering on political misogyny. Besides the more direct counter efforts by women's pressure groups to re-gender the political space, artists (particularly writers) have grappled with this problem – using fiction not only to expose the irrationality of using gender to exclude women from political power, but also imagining other inclusive forms of political dispensation. This paper focuses more on literary evocations of women in the political arena, problematising their place in the state's power system. I argue that feminist literary works published in the post-2000 period in Zimbabwe are both complex and artistic and they illuminate the practical gender dimensions of political power with a subversive flair that indicates alternative political dispensations.

By zooming in on literary evocations of politically powerful women in *Absent: The English Teacher* (with brief shifts to relevant short stories by Petina Gappah, Julius Chingono and Christopher Mlalazi), I focus particularly on the motif of masculinisation in the political space while exploring the subtle interconnections of women's power in the broader practice of gendered political patronage. Cognisant of the class heterogeneity of politically 'successful' women and the multi-dimensional forces underpinning such success, I make a deeper enquiry into the focal texts' engagement with one of the major controversies often associated with women's political ascendancy in post-2000 Zimbabwe – political patronage.

The literary engagement with the masculinisation of nation and state in Zimbabwe is not entirely a post-2000 phenomenon. Precedents in Zimbabwean literature can be found for such artistic intervention into the subject of gendered political power, for example, in Yvonne Vera's counter-discursive re-appropriation of the female figure in her novel *Nehanda* (1993). Here, the character Nehanda's historical role in some of the earliest anti-colonial uprisings foregrounds women's urgency and involvement in the making of the nation. Vera's novel presents, what may easily be one of the earliest post-independence literary contestations of the patriarchal occlusion of females in the political sphere, and is therefore an important work to begin to examine the (now widespread) post-2000 literary challenges to the gendering of political power in Zimbabwe. *Nehanda* is a re-appraisal of the story of Nehanda – the historic and mythic spirit-medium of the Shona people who inspired the first native uprising – initially in protest against the colonial hut tax.¹ *Nehanda* recreates the feminine revolutionary, not only to advance a female subjectivity, but more importantly, to make her the face and symbol of black resistance – and thus identify her with

the birth of the independent nation. Nehanda's central role in the *Chimurenga* wars is linked to the mythical significance attached to her identity by the later generation of liberation warriors who identified themselves as her "bones" that would "rise" and win over the settler regime in what is referred to as "The Second *Chimurenga*". This feminist claim to historical crisis disrupts previous male mythology of the *Chimurenga* wars. For Muchemwa and Muponde, in the post-2000 epoch, "outside the war ethic, driven by an excess of masculinity, individuals whose gender does not contribute to the war economy are under threat".²

While there is consensus on the national heroine status of Nehanda, national heroism in the post-independence epoch in Zimbabwe has undergone a phallogocentric re-interpretation. In appropriating a female figure with a national appeal, *Nehanda* recovers a forceful voice for women to articulate their relevance and lay equal claim to citizenship and the nation's founding legacy in the *Chimurenga* wars. In addition, more than simply subverting androcentric constructions of heroism, nationality and history, Vera's fictional reconstruction of the Shona spiritual legend of Nehanda as the pillar of the *Chimurenga* wars becomes an act of re-gendering national memory. Maurice Vambe infers this in his statement that, "[m]emories are crucial to the writing of the female identity of the self onto the emerging consciousness of nationhood".³

Thus for Vambe, the phenomenon of spirit possession entails "counter-memory".⁴ The religious concept of spirit possession establishes Nehanda as the medium of a national god namely, Charwe, the spirit of colonial resistance. However, unlike the historic Nehanda, Vera's fictional *Nehanda* is born just after colonial invasion: evoking her birth as the land's strategic reaction to colonialism. As an author, Vera may embellish some historical facts in order to render history useful, but in the process, the *Chimurenga* wars are reconstructed as the wars of women too and the liberated nation as belonging to them as well. Nehanda's symbolic significance as an inspirational site of resistance to oppression, however, transcends this colonial configuration and can be seen to still (directly and indirectly) influence the texture of civic, political and gender struggles in the twenty-first century.

In John Eppel's novel *Absent: The English Teacher* and some of the short stories in Petina Gappah's *An Elegy For Easterly*, female subjectivities are potential sites for subtle criticisms of the sullied nature of women's power acquired through male patronage. The gendering of the political space is contemptuously represented in *Absent*, not only through the evocation of a decadent empowerment of a woman, (Beauticious) by Gonzo, a male Minister, but perhaps more importantly, through her ridiculously excessive exercising of it on her inept white servant and former English teacher, George. The humour with which sexual politics acquire political significance demands a serious reading of the otherwise widespread "small house"⁵ phenomenon practised by Beauticious and Gonzo. Achille Mbembe hints at the role of humour when he ponders whether "humour in the post-colony is an expression of 'resistance' or not, whether it is, a priori, opposition or simply a manifestation of hostility towards

authority [...]”.⁶ The major satirical butts in this novel (the “queen”, Beauticious, and the “queen-maker” – Gonzo) are evoked with a sardonic affront on the strait-jacketed and stooge-like mentality exhibited by Beauticious after she has acquired “cosmetic” political empowerment in a political dispensation that enforces a masculine hegemony.

Annah-Leena Toivanen has incisively reflected on the gender controversy in post-independent Zimbabwe.

What is problematic is that while women are made to bear the symbolic meaning of the violated Motherland, national agency, that is, leadership and citizenship are defined as distinctively masculine. The same goes for national heroes: in the Zimbabwean freedom fight for instance, the war is represented mainly as a struggle between (real) men, “sons of the soil”.⁷

The contemporary Zimbabwean nation challenges the notions of “nation” based on Benedict Anderson’s conception of it as an “imagined community”⁸. Political and racial upheavals and tensions in post-2000 Zimbabwe resulted in hegemonic revisions and redefinitions of nationality and political power mainly premised on the Third *Chimurenga*’s prioritisation of indigenosity and gender. While Anderson claims that subjects in the national trajectory are too many and too varied to be known (and therefore have to be imagined), the most basic requirement to be a Zimbabwean in the past decade is for the subject to be known (especially) politically. This means to be identifiable within grand, national identity construction that borders on allegiance to the ruling political party and its masculinisation of the state. The contemporary predilection to imagine the nation metaphorically as an extended family with a fixed power hierarchy explains the problems facing any attempt to define the post-2000 Zimbabwean nation in Anderson’s terms. In this light, the Zimbabwean “family” is strictly patriarchal, consisting of “fathers” (the ruling elite/the state) overseeing the rest of the family members (women and children) – that is, the nation. The national family, then, is a community under surveillance.

The Zimbabwean nation (in the context of the post-2000 surge in what Mbembe has called “nativist” and “Afro-radicalism” rhetoric), then, comprises strictly members who support the hegemony in its masculinised form as well as its founding legacy (which is also the nation’s foundation legacy) – the *Chimurenga* wars. Lene Bull Christiansen alludes to this gendering of the nation both as a manipulative power-retention tactic, and as part of the ruling power’s culture of the spectacular:

The President represents himself as the ‘Father of the Nation’ in a classical paternalistic style, but also, as the ‘head of the family’ in an Africanist traditionalist sense, and as ‘the husband of the nation’ who is entitled to clamp down on anyone who attempts to ‘steal/rape’ his wife; that is, the people.⁹

For Christiansen, then, the biggest (and seemingly insurmountable) challenge for women who wish to enter the masculinised political fraternity is that they must switch sexes, as she asks,

[c]an ‘Mother Mujuru’¹⁰ become the icon of power in Zimbabwe? Can she establish herself in the Zimbabwean political imaginary of power in a position above ‘the boys’ club’ – as a new ‘Father of the Nation?’¹¹

Christopher Mlalazi satirises this machismo construction of national identity as a masculinised political power in his short story “Election Day” (in his short story anthology *Dancing with Life: Tales from the Township*). After losing an election, the President, His Excellency finds his advisor’s suggestion to relinquish power to be feminine, and accuses Twenty (the advisor who is constantly being emasculated by His Excellency throughout the story) of being out of touch with the basic political ‘fundamentals’ – meaning the masculine demands of the political game. He humorously advises his political advisor: “Let me tell you something for nothing my dear personal advisor. This is not a children’s game we are playing here. This is not *ara-wuru-wuru-shoko*. It is a game of true men. Men who are larger than life”.¹² To demonstrate his ability to defy the election verdict and the machismo required in the political arena, the President displays his aggressive virility by assaulting Twenty, who (according to protocol) is powerless to defend himself:

His Excellency’s teeth flashed in a grim smile. “I am the new Incredible Hulk of this continent.” He roared like Hulk, grabbed a startled Twenty and threw him to the ground. Twenty immediately rose up, fear on his face. His Excellency roared again, and threw him down for the second time. This time Twenty did not try to rise up.¹³

The Rabelaisian laughter (laughter which diminishes power and authority through humorous mimicry and mockery) evoked by this show of ‘palace’ violence is intentionally iconoclastic. Although presented in light humour, the President’s propensity to use gender in his political tactic (especially when read in the context of ZANU PF’s defeat in the 2008 plebiscite and the party’s eventual violent reversal of that defeat in a bloody run-off), is not only reflective of the influence of the socio-political pressures on the creative imagination, but (perhaps more importantly) reflects the story’s evaluative significance to the political processes in Zimbabwe by alluding to and condemning the politics of coercion anchored in the masculine reconstructions of the post-colonial nation. His Excellency successfully reverses his electoral defeat and suppresses the ‘feminine’ electoral demand by his ouster. However, his political survival is not without a sense of a disaffected authoritarian abuse of power which moves the reader, not only to disavow the coercive politics, but more importantly, to sympathise with Twenty, the symbolically effeminised advisor with his appealingly rational and democratic advice that His Excellency vacate power.

The fictional condemnations of the gendering of political power as found in such a male system of corporeal command, terror and punishment (of effeminated subjects/opposition political parties) are evoked by Christopher Mlalazi's short story. In arguing about the relationship between fictional narratives and the real world manifest in "Election Day", David Carr says:

[...] the real difference between art and 'life' is not organisation vs chaos but rather, the absence in life of that point of view which transforms events into a story by telling them. Telling is not just a verbal activity and not just a recounting of events but one informed by a certain kind of superior knowledge.¹⁴

The "superior knowledge" of the narrative voice in "Election Day" – that is, the short story's affective potential to lead us into a new consciousness of the political situation in post-millennial Zimbabwe – can be located in its subtle reorganisation and re-presentation of historical facts (the 2008 electoral defeat of Mugabe and his reversal of the result) into a humorous story that uses the stereotypes of weak women and strong men to satirise the violence of machismo political power.

Since Zimbabwe's promotion of Joice Mujuru in 2004 to the post of vice-president (at the expense of her male rival Emmerson Mnangagwa), political and gender discourses in Zimbabwe have largely centred on the controversy of Mujuru's qualification as a national leader and a successor to Mugabe whose advancing age threatens his rule. Christiansen expresses the widely held scepticism about Mujuru's political and gender capacity and her willingness to subvert the traditionally ingrained male constructions of power, manifest in such reverent projection of the national leader as the 'father' of the nation. Christiansen quotes Mujuru unconsciously confirming, not only the patriarchal character of political power, but also (tragically) her incapacity and reluctance to change it:

Women have a great role to play in uniting the nation because they are the household builders, mothers of the future generations and *wives to the rulers*. The more women cooperate the more prosperous will be our nation.¹⁵

Mujuru (in this quotation) reflects the subordination of women in the grand project of a self-serving patriarchal political establishment. Such a conformist and defeatist tendency is not only harmful to the feminist struggle for genuine political space, but it also confirms suspicions that her political rise is owed to male patronage.¹⁶

Joane Nagel highlights the importance of a gender approach to studies on the making and unmaking of nations that focuses on the mechanisms which exclude women from real political power:

This is not to say that women do not have roles to play in the making and unmaking of states: as citizens, as members of the nation, as activists, as leaders. It is to say that the scripts in which these roles are embedded are written primarily by men, for men, and about men, and that women are, by design, supporting actors whose roles reflect masculinist notions of femininity and of women's proper 'place'.¹⁷

This understanding of women as mere role-players in self-serving, masculinist political subjectivities can be fruitfully comprehended in fictional evocations of women in love relationships with politically powerful men, particularly (though not limited to representations of the first lady) in contemporary Zimbabwean fiction. Weaving through this uniquely post-2000 fascination with the male politician's female spouse is the predilection for the first lady. Representations of her in this literature signal a subtle encroachment into the previously sacred domain of state power and its typical spectacular manifestation. The first lady trope in such writing not only reflects the culture of excess underpinning the politics of the time, but more importantly, the controversy of a woman's place in the power matrix of family and politics.

Petina Gappah's short story "At the Sound of the Last Post" in her short story collection *An Elegy for Easterly* (2009) is the epitome of literary works that grapple with the political and gender dimensions of the first lady figure. The story is narrated by Esther – wife to a high-ranking (but now late) politician and government minister. Through Esther's eyes and judgment, the reader perceives the first lady as nothing more than the president's site for a display of excess. Esther's condemnatory perspective of the first lady's mercenary attitude can be best understood in the context of the actual First Lady's public image in the post-2000 period. It was in this time that Grace Mugabe came into the limelight mostly due to her extravagant and showy lifestyle which earned her various nicknames such as "The first shopper", "Disgrace", "Harrods" etc. The fictional first lady of "At the Sound of the Last Post" is, however, not merely an imitation of the actual figure. Esther's descriptions of the first lady are also tinged with an evidently antagonistic and spiteful attitude to the first lady's largesse. This, one senses, is most possibly stirred up in contrast to Esther's own invisible status – being the wife of a junior politician. The fictional first lady is evoked in a way that affects readers and rouses antipathetic feelings towards her extravagance – as the following extract shows:

She [Edna] stumbles into the President's wife, the Second First lady, who soothes her with a perfumed hand to the shoulder. As Edna heaves dry sobs against the black silk of the Second First Lady's suit, my eyes travel down to Edna's shoes. She really should start investing more money in her shoes; her unshaped peasant's feet require something stronger than cheap zhing-zhong plastic leather shoes to contain him.¹⁸

Here, peasantry (which for Esther connotes backwardness) is connected to material lack in such a way that it accusingly projects the First Lady's 'progress'

as hinged on her plenty – symbolised by her exquisite dress. Esther’s husband’s sister is made an unsuspecting foil to the extraordinary financial power of the First Lady. The First Lady’s extravagance amid Edna’s lack becomes obscene, decadent and in need of change.

The first lady’s false sense of power in Gappah’s novel is analogous to Beauticious’s in Eppel’s novel. In its clear stylistic framing as a political satire, John Eppel’s novel *Absent: The English Teacher* can be usefully read as subversively engaging with the sexist barriers to women’s participation in the political fraternity in their own right - as autonomous subjects. Read in the context of Zimbabwe’s post-independence (and especially post-2000) masculinisation of power, *Absent*’s sense of political immorality is expressed through the fictional politician’s libido – both as a show of his moral deviance and a mark of his power (which is constantly displayed and exercised on the female subjects in his ‘small houses’). The novel’s satirical representation of what Fanon calls “pitfalls of national consciousness” evinces a gender dimension that covertly relates to the prevailing political gender configurations. My focus in analysing *Absent* as a political satire, with its wider implications to the current debate, is informed by the gendered political patronage system (epitomised by Joice Mujuru’s case) in Zimbabwe’s political landscape.

Although the political vice (in the form of a gender vice) is often manifest in the post-2000 decade, the novel *Absent* manages to covertly proffer a socio-political commentary - particularly through its presentation of the inflated libidinous and masculinised sense of power epitomised by the Minister, Gonzo. The same can be said of Julius Chingono’s satirical short story “An Early Supper” (in his anthology of short stories and poetry titled *Not Another Day*) which shows a woman (Mondo) desperate for political power who then realises that her only avenue to fulfil her political ambition is through the favour of the male minister Comrade (Cde) Chipikiri. In Chingono’s short story (as in Eppel’s novel), political power assumes a religious significance in which the male politician his phallic episteme make him a political god. Women who are excluded from this spiritualised political kingdom (but who aspire to enter it) have to pass through a male set of rites-of-passage – loyalty, compliance and subordination – which coalesce into an affinity for a sexual relationship with the male politician.

The patriarchal configurations of power in this sexual relationship are symptomatic of the political power configurations set to prevail when the relationship (and the attendant’s political promotion) is consummated. Mondo, the anti-heroine in Chingono’s short story, accepts the reality of male-created gender constraints to her political ambition and believes that committing herself to conform to (rather than contest) the patriarchal dictates is the easier way to realise her political goal. The narrative descriptions capturing Mondo’s actions and psyche reveal her consciousness of the ‘power’ of her sexual appeal and intention to sexually commodify herself for Minister Chipikiri’s consumption or use. Mondo’s first encounter with Chipikiri confirms the efficacy of politics as both a masculine power fetishisation¹⁹ and retention tactic, as can be inferred from the description of their greeting:

‘Cde. Mondo, you look great in that beautiful scarf.’ He embraced the thirty-eight year- old woman, crushing her intimately against him. The woman wore a white T-shirt with the head of state emblazoned on the front. The hem of her white skirt was high above the knees like that of a tennis player [...] ‘Thank you, chief’ She gave him a blooming smile that prompted The Minister to rub and then pat her shoulders.²⁰

In this sexual telepathy, Chipikiri shows how libidinous and political influence provide access to the labyrinthian workings of a masculinised political arena. Here, power only exists within the framework of a dominating phallic political system that tactfully enshrines its power in the “masculine *commandement*”²¹ that demands certain performances and (sexual) allegiances from the dominated (especially feminine) subjects. For Mondo, however, her ‘tragic flaw’ has less to do with her political ambition than with her socialisation and ‘politicisation’ that make her believe that her inferiority, conformity and sycophancy are the only ‘acceptable’ ways to enter the corridors of political power. Muchemwa and Muponde highlight this phallic demand in Zimbabwean politics in their book *Manning the Nation: Father figures in Zimbabwean Literature and Society*. They argue that the essays in the book:

[...] attribute current cultures of violence to the insidious ways in which superphallicism predicated on physical power has invaded Zimbabwe’s socio-cultural space instilling fear in women, children, and marginalised masculinities acquiescence, silence and fear.²²

What Muchemwa and Muponde do not state, however, is the clear similarity and connection between the post-colonial phallic dominance and the silencing of the iconography of colonial nationalism.²³ Political power, in both colonial and post-colonial eras, assumes a gender configuration that economically and socially privilege the masculine at the expense of the feminine – or those perceived to be feminine. This domination of the female by the masculine is the object of the satire in *Absent: The English Teacher*. The focal point in *Absent*’s plot centres on the ironic reversal of status and social and political fortunes of George, the white former English teacher and the queerly named Beauticious Nyamayakanuna. It is through this somewhat melodramatic black mistress/white servant relationship that the novel’s allegorical engagement with the masculinisation of political power becomes more accessible.

The humour (akin to Bakhtin’s Rabelaisian laughter) which makes the acquisition of wealth and political power by Beauticious through her sexual relationship with Minister Gonzo so irrational and preposterous, acquires even more ridicule from what we already know about the changing land tenure system caused by land reforms in post-2000 Zimbabwe. In this sense, the absurdity of phallic political forces behind Beauticious’s attainment of wealth and political power borders on political misogyny, and not only reflects the sexist configurations of such politics but more importantly, the incompatibility of her

situation with her immorally acquired wealth and power. Eppel's verbal prowess in his depiction of the extra-marital affair (or the 'small house') between Beauticious and Gonzo, the "Minister of Child Welfare, Sweets and Biscuits," humorously unveils not only the ethical immorality of the 'small house' phenomenon, but more importantly, the tensions in self-serving patriarchal notions of women's empowerment as manifested in Beauticious's marriage of convenience to the Minister. We first encounter the Minister, sarcastically designated as leading the "Ministry of Child Welfare, Sweets and Biscuits"²⁴ but as his character becomes more fully delineated, one realises that subtle irony of such a designation for his ministry is derived from his insatiable appetite for beautiful women and the act of fathering. The magnet that traps wealth – and power-hungry women into his "small houses" is Gonzo's political power and its corresponding wealth – as the following description derisively suggests:

Beauticious was just one of the Minister's numerous mistresses. He kept a lady in all the major towns of Zimbabwe, set up in what is quaintly known as small houses. His big house, a mansion on several sprawling acres of prime land in Harare's Borrowdale suburb, was occupied by his wife and seven legitimate children. The Minister, like all men of great power in Africa (and the world for that matter) had broadcast his seed far and wide.²⁵

The mirth provided by Gonzo's ironic and ridiculous commitment to fulfil his national 'mandate' of bearing illegitimate offspring in 'small houses', awakens the reader not only to the immorality of his sexual philandering, but also, to the faulty power and economic security that he bestows on Beauticious. The defective and exploitative nature of the "small house" arrangement to the female partner is manifest in Beauticious's powerlessness to Gonzo and by contrast, her powerfulness to George, the white servant. Beauticious's major predicament is that the wealth and political power she now wields, and obscenely exercises over George, is precariously predicated on her perpetual allegiance to Gonzo (and his political party) as well as his willingness to maintain the relationship. The imagery of the "small house", while capturing both the Minister's deviance and Beauticious's means of wealth and power, also evokes its instability and the lurking possibility of the Minister's retreat to his "big house" – the legitimate family – or his moving on to establish another "small house". Read in the context of contemporary social discourse in Zimbabwe, the "small house" arrangement (unlike its predecessor – polygamy) does not guarantee security for the woman. In fact, the woman (exemplified by Beauticious) lives at the mercy of the man. Haunted by the constant fear of desertion and consequent reversal of material status, the woman easily becomes the man's lackey.

In *Absent*, the economic luxury and political authority of the woman in the "small house" is only secure when she can still sexually attract the man or inversely, when the man feels sexually attracted enough to stay. The reign of Beauticious (whose name has a seductive onomatopoeiaic quality) as the "Minister's favourite"²⁶ is premised on her beauty and sexual charm which is known to be temporary, and vulnerable to forces she cannot control. Throughout

the novel, Beauticious seems to succeed in maintaining her sexual allure and so sustains her position and the attendant benefits, but the narrative hints at the unsustainability of her status. The last we hear of the Minister, is that “he has made up his mind to ventur[e] incognito into the NGO world [because he has been advised of] fruitful pickings there”.²⁷ Eppel’s satire, then, is also a political and feminist one. It is a subtle exposé of the contemporary version of the age-old patriarchal social and political system in which women, excluded from the national configurations of power, are dominated and even abused by privileged male members of the society through a patronage system ostensibly tailor-made to emancipate them.

The ‘small house’ in *Absent: the English Teacher* is less a latent form of polygamy than it is a sign (and site) of a bastardised female empowerment. The female subject has her vulnerability to male exploitation exacerbated by a patriarchal act of ‘empowering’ her under austere conditions to adhere to the masculine political code. In the contemporary Zimbabwean imagery (and indeed in Eppel’s novel) the ‘small house’ connotatively suggests illegitimacy, unreliability and imperfection. If *Absent* is read with a consciousness of the current public resentment of the concept,²⁸ the relationship between Beauticious and Gonzo becomes retrogressively exploitative and a travesty of women’s search for genuine political space.

We have seen how Eppel deftly employs metaphorical and symbolic names to reflect the forces impacting on Beauticious’s femininity. Gonzo’s only interest in Beauticious is in her sexual appeal and this leaves no doubt as to what she would become in its absence. Beauticious’s surname (Nyamayakanuna) adds to her identity construction throughout the novel as a sexual commodity created and used by Gonzo as a spectacle of his political and economic power. Linked to her physical exquisiteness, as the name Beauticious suggests, the surname Nyamayakanuna (Shona for “appetising meat”) does not only describe Beauticious’s natural physical beauty, but more importantly, it covertly appeals to Gonzo’s sexual predatory instinct. However, from the stance of the intersectionality theorists, her political and economic dependence on Gonzo (and her susceptibility to sexual abuse) can be traced – not merely to her femininity, but perhaps more importantly, to intersecting factors informing her gender. Beauticious’s femininity in *Absent* renders her vulnerable in the familial, economic and political aspects of her relationship with Gonzo. While she is depicted throughout the novel as a wealthy woman of political (and sexual) power, an overwhelming sense of the perverse nature of this wealth and power pervades her ascendancy and this brings about a deep sense of scepticism and even indignation. Beauticious’s outrageously ignominious character reflects the dishonourable means with which she acquires her wealth and power and it is especially heightened by her vengeful authoritarian reign over George, whom she regards as Gonzo (and the nation’s) nemesis – the remnants of her forefathers’ colonisers.

To better understand the flawed nature of Beauticious’s so-called ‘empowerment’, it is imperative to explore the symmetry between her uncouth

acquisition of power and her abuse of it over her employee, in a way that confirms Fanon's fear about the "envy" of the colonised which can warp their conception of independence to mean "replac[ing] the foreigner".²⁹

Being a creature of Gonzo's racially retributive and nativist regime (and bound to show gratitude and allegiance to it), Beauticious's identity and exercise of political power is in accord with that of the political regime. Paulo Freire's theorisation about the psychology of the oppressed can illuminate the flaws – not only of the post-independence regime represented by Gonzo, but more importantly, of its iniquitous political empowerment of women as shown by Beauticious's tyranny. Freire advises against a retributive mentality in the formerly colonised:

Because it is a distortion of being more fully human, sooner or later being less human leads the oppressed to struggle against those who made them so. In order for this struggle to have meaning, the oppressed must not, in seeking to regain their humanity (which is a way to create it), become in turn oppressors of the oppressors, but rather restorers of the humanity of both.³⁰

The sarcasm inherent in Beauticious's colonial master-style domination over George reflects her psychological sense of indebtedness to Gonzo and his regime's politics of racial retribution. Rendered in the comic narrative, Beauticious's tyranny – symptomatic of her sycophancy – is made to mimic her benefactor's politics and the humour emanates from her excessive display of ersatz political power (in apparent efforts at adulating Gonzo's hegemonic masculinity). This also helps to unmask the malignant connection of her political power with her sexual vulnerability. Her artificiality as a political puppet undermines all efforts to read her political power as any form of gender power. Consequently, she is, in fact, a mere strait-jacket and passenger on the gravy train of sexist politics where she is literally "singing for supper". This is comically revealed in the following dialogue in which she desperately shows her allegiance to Gonzo:

"Ipi lo toast joji? Lo boss yena funa hamba sebenza. Aziko time!"
 "Sorry Madam, the power has just gone. I'll have to use the outside fire."
 "No ZESA, no fuel, no food. Who is responsible Joji?" All five faces at the Formica table looked at him expectantly.
 "We are, Madam: the British, the Europeans, the Americans.
 "You have rapped our country barren, Joji. First our women and girls, next our motherland. Shame on you." The Minister clicked his tongue in sympathy.
 "Sorry, Madam".
 "Sorry? What is sorry? It is too late for that word, Joji. By the way have you been helping yourself to my sugar?"³¹

In this conversation, Beauticious's humiliation of George and her humorously sarcastic parody of ZANU (PF) politicians' scapegoat arguments for the post-2000 economic crisis in Zimbabwe, is revealed. She blames George for every problem bedeviling her country while revealing her stooge-like political identity. Her over-enthusiastic attempts to please Gonzo by fanatically exercising the political power he has bestowed on her on the inept George also makes Gonzo a political god to whom Beauticious owes praise.

However, besides her excessive show of gratitude for Gonzo's political patronage, Beauticious's authoritarian mentality is also a psychological vestige of her colonial past. Her experiences as a colonial subject have psychologically configured power as spectacular and meant to be constantly displayed and exercised on the powerless, as the narrative reveals:

Beauticious talked to George for the most part in what the Rhodesians called 'kitchen kaffir' or 'fanagalo' or 'chilapalapa' because that is how she remembered being talked to by white people when she was a little girl [...] Both her parents had been domestic workers for the same whites, her father a 'cook boy' and her mother a 'house girl', and she had grown up in servants' quarters not dissimilar to those that George now lived in.³²

However, what is more problematic about Beauticious's newly acquired political power may not be that it transforms her into a black "white colonist" (who commands George using colonial master codes) but that it idolises and serves the phallic configurations of political power. Seen in this light, her wealth and power is hollow – becoming instead the constant physical evidence of her class inferiority and inability to fight a cleaner gender struggle.

Just like Beauticious, Gonzo's legitimate wife (a flat character who is hardly visible throughout the novel) appears at an opportune moment to display her largesse and power as can be inferred from the following – her only description in the entire novel:

Cushion [Gonzo's legitimate wife] did better in the vehicle department, terrorising the cyclists and pedestrians of Harare in her beetle black Hummer with mounted machine gun and a place to hold a can of coke.³³

Women in Gonzo's other 'small houses', we are told, "drove Mitsubishi Pajeros³⁴ – all at forty kilometres per hour".³⁵ In this comic proclivity for the spectacular, Gonzo's women (including Beauticious) never appear as independent sites of power, instead their wealth and status rather ironically reveal their vulnerability and exploitation. The paradox reinforces the point that this sort of women's power leads them into a false sense of having acquired some genuine political status. More than functioning as a satirical burlesque which reveals the disaffections of the political pressures in post-2000 times, *Absent* may thus, also be fruitfully read from a feminist vantage point as a novel that

interrogates the marginalisation of women in the political sphere. Read in the historical context of the postcolonial regime's masculinisation of political power and also in the context of the discernible trend in women's political promotion through male political patronage, the novel transcends the usual oppressor/oppressed dichotomies to question the artificial power that exists for women within this framework.

Notes

¹ A form of taxation whereby Africans were forced to contribute to the colonial economy through cash, labour or livestock.

² K. Muchemwa and R. Muponde (Eds.), "Introduction". *Manning the Nation: Father figures in Zimbabwean literature and Society*. Harare: Weaver. 2007, p. xxviii.

³ M. Vambe, "Spirit possession and the paradox of post-colonial resistance in Yvonne Vera's Nehanda." In M. Maodzwa-Taruvunga and R. Muponde. *Sign and Taboo: Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera*. Harare: Weaver. 2002, p. 129.

⁴ M. Vambe, "Spirit possession and the paradox of post-colonial resistance in Yvonne Vera's Nehanda". 2002, p. 130.

⁵ A term used to refer to an extra-marital relationship. It became popular in the post-2000 period in Zimbabwe.

⁶ A. Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*. Los Angeles: University of California Press. 2001, p. 103.

⁷ Toivanen Annah-Leena. "Women on the fringes of the national community in Yvonne Vera's *Why Don't You Carve Other Animals*". *Gender, Nation, Narration: Critical Readings of Cultural Phenomena*. (Ed.) T. Lahdesmaki, Jyvaskyla: University of Jyvaskyla, 2010), p. 69.

⁸ B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 2006, p.14.

⁹ L. B. Christiansen, "Mai Mujuru: Father of the Nation?" in *Manning the Nation: Father figures in Zimbabwean literature and Society*. Eds. Kizito Z. Muchemwa and Robert Muponde. Harare: Weaver, 2007, p. 90.

¹⁰ Joice Mujuru is one of Zimbabwe's two deputy presidents.

¹¹ L.B. Christiansen, "Mai Mujuru: Father of the Nation?" p. 88.

¹² C. Mlalazi, *Dancing with Life: Tales from the Township*. Bulawayo: AmaBooks. 2008, pp.10-11.

¹³ C. Mlalazi, *Dancing with Life: Tales from the Township*, p.10.

¹⁴ D. Carr. "Narrative and the Real World: An Argument for Continuity." *History and Theory* (1986), p. 124.

¹⁵ L.B. Christiansen, "Mai Mujuru: Father of the Nation?" p. 88.

¹⁶ The late Joice Mujuru's husband, Solomon Mujuru, was one of the most powerful army generals in the regime.

¹⁷ J.Nagel. "Masculinity and nationalism: gender and sexuality in the making of nations." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*: 1998, p. 243.

¹⁸ P. Gappah, *An Elegy for Easterly*. London: Faber and Faber. 2009, p. 8.

¹⁹ In Mbembe's sense of unquestionable and sacred power.

²⁰ J. Chingono, *Not Another Day*. Harare: Weaver. 2006: p. 89.

²¹ Mbembe's word refers to the postcolonial authoritarianism that resembles colonial despotism.

²² K. Muchemwa and R. Muponde, *ibid.* p. xix.

²³ This is revealed, for instance, in Rebecca Scott's article entitled "The Dark Continent: Africa as Female Body in Haggard's Adventure Fiction" (1989). Cf. R. Scott. "The Dark Continent: Africa as Female Body in Haggard's Adventure Fiction." *Feminist Review*, (39), 1989.

²⁴ J. Eppel, *Absent: The English Teacher*. Harare: Weaver. 2008, p. 27.

²⁵ J. Eppel, *Absent: The English Teacher*, p. 46.

²⁶ J. Eppel, *Absent: The English Teacher*, p. 46.

²⁷ J. Eppel, *Absent: The English Teacher*, p. 46.

²⁸ Such resentment was shown, for instance, in the public outcry which forced producers of a popular television soap opera previously called *The Small House Saga* to change it to simply *The Saga* as well as the widespread derogative re-labeling of the "small house" as the "smell house".

²⁹ F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Middlesex: Penguin. 1963, p. 49.

³⁰ P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Herder and Herder. 1970, p. 29.

³¹ J. Eppel, *Absent: The English Teacher*, p. 46.

³² J. Eppel, *Absent: The English Teacher*, p. 30.

³³ J. Eppel, *Absent: The English Teacher*, p. 47.

³⁴ Once the Ministerial car in Zimbabwe, the Pajero was associated with wealth and power.

³⁵ J. Eppel, *Absent: The English Teacher*, p. 89.