

***Ubuntu* AND THE PROLETARIANISATION OF THE AFRICAN
PEASANTRY IN CHIDZERO'S *Nzvengamutsvairo* (1957)**

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ABSTRACT

This article is an exegesis of how Chidzero conceptualises and depicts the African communitarian worldview of *ubuntu* (humanity to others) in *Nzvengamutsvairo* with the view to examining whether or not the writer's portrayal and understanding of *ubuntu* helps Africa's socio-cultural and political liberation. The African worldview of *ubuntu* celebrates virtues central to mutual social responsibility, mutual respect, trust, self-reliance, caring, among other attributes. The article attempts to ascertain the extent to which Chidzero's *Nzvengamutsvairo* is rooted in the African indigenous worldview of *ubuntu*. It dissects the writer's strengths and weaknesses in depicting *ubuntu* worldview. In that regard, the research assesses the extent to which the writer's vision of *ubuntu* is progressive and liberating. The research contends that the harmony that Chidzero advocates between the blacks and the whites during colonial epoch benefits the whites who are experiencing labour shortages. This research argues that Chidzero's conceptualisation of *ubuntu* and the proletarianisation of the African peasantry in *Nzvengamutsvairo* is not rooted in the African communitarian worldview of *ubuntu* and it does not promote Shona literature which is utilitarian.

Keywords: Communitarian, worldview, *ubuntu*, proletarianisation, utilitarian

1. INTRODUCTION

This study interrogates Chidzero's conceptualisation and depiction of the African communitarian worldview of *ubuntu* (humanity to others) in *Nzvengamutsvairo*. The African indigenous worldview of *ubuntu* embodies virtues that celebrate mutual social responsibility, mutual assistance, trust, sharing, self-reliance, caring and respect for others, among other ethical ethos. These axiological aspects influence the way people participate in various spheres of their lives. In this study, *ubuntu* is perceived as the school of African life that generates ethos which, in turn, proceeds to inform, govern and direct African people's social, religious, economic and

political institutions. *Ubuntu*, which is historically intergenerational, is a product of the African people's cultural experiences and derives from their cultural heritage (Mandova, 2012:358).

Through a conceptual dissection of *Nzvengamutsvairo*, the research locates itself within the broad context of discourses that aspire to fashion out an emancipatory and sustainable solution to Zimbabwe's contemporary nation building challenges. Given that the advent of colonialism in Africa witnessed a complete overhaul of African traditions, ethos and their way of life in general, this had negative consequences upon the African social and political structures, resulting in many challenges for the indigenous African people which are still felt today in the post-independence period. Accordingly, this study interrogates the role of Shona literary works in promulgating *ubuntu* as a central cog in the emancipatory trajectory of contemporary Zimbabwe. There have been various reflections on the challenges faced by Africa today which include bad governance, contrived electoral processes, conflict and political violence, corruption, lack of proper education, debilitating poverty and hunger, rising unemployment, prostitution, HIV/AIDS scourge inter-alia (Mandova, 2011:303). Writers of Shona fiction have attempted to capture some of these challenges with varying degrees of success. Through an analysis of *Nzvengamutsvairo*, the research contends that despite the globalisation trends, with a continuous interpretation, re-interpretation and re-appropriation, the *ubuntu* worldview remains relevant to our situation as it changes (Rukuni, 2007:72).

The thesis advanced in this article is that the indigenous worldview of *ubuntu* is portrayed and applied in Shona novels in ways that are both oppressive and liberating. It argues that Chidzero does not conceptualise and depict the *ubuntu* worldview in a way that produces Shona fiction which is utilitarian and which liberates Africans in the face of a harsh, exploitative, oppressive and dehumanising colonial regime. Chidzero's understanding of *ubuntu* is the existence of harmonious relationships between blacks and whites during the proletarianisation of the African peasantry in spite of the unequal socio-economic relations between the two races.

2. A CRITIQUE

Chidzero's *Nzvengamutsvairo* (dodge the broom) is the second novel to be published in Shona. It was first published in 1957 after *Feso* which was published in 1956. The writer sets his novel in Chitehwe village in the 1950s, chronicling the agrarian and lifestyle changes in colonial Zimbabwe as a result of the dehumanising racial dominance of the white settlers in the colonial period. This study argues that Chidzero's conceptualisation of *ubuntu* and the proletarianisation of the African peasantry in *Nzvengamutsvairo* is not rooted in the African communitarian worldview of *ubuntu* and it does not promote Shona literature which is utilitarian. Chidzero employs the *ubuntu* value of harmonious co-existence in order to persuade Africans to supply

labour to white farmers and also to accept their condition since *ubuntu* celebrates harmony and peaceful co-existence. The author writes that:

Nyika ndeyedu tose vachena navatema, daiwo ruwadzano ruri rweduwo tose vachena navatema. Ganda rina mavara akapatsanuka unhu hwedu tose humwe chete.(p.54). (This country belongs to both of us blacks and whites accordingly, peace and harmony should also be among us both whites and blacks. The skin can assume different colours but our humanism is all the same).

The harmony that Chidzero advocates between the blacks and the whites during the colonial period benefits the whites who are experiencing labour shortages. It is not harmony whose interest in the African sense is the building and maintenance of societies with justice and mutual caring as Mugumbate and Nyanguru (2000:84) note “*Ubuntu* is the capacity in African culture to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, harmony and humanity in the interests of building and maintaining community with justice and mutual caring”. The presence of white settlers in colonial Zimbabwe led to inevitable conflicts and clashes of interest with indigenous African people such that harmonious relationships which the author advocates for lead to further exploitation of the people of Chitehwe village. Direct violence was supported by structural violence in the form of colonial laws which were crafted to discriminate Africans, for example the Masters and Servants Act of 1901, which clearly entrenched the servants status of blacks and the masters status class of whites, the Land Apportionment Act of 1930, African Accommodation and Registration Act of 1946, the Unlawful Organisations Act of 1959, the Law and Order Maintenance Act of 1960 and the Emergence Powers Act of 1960 which all buttressed the inferiority status of blacks while advancing the interests of the whites (Muchemwa, 2015:77). *Ubuntu* is “a way of life that seeks to promote and manifest itself and is best realised or, made evident in harmonious relations within society” (Munyaka and Motlhabi, 2009:65).

Given the unequal socio-economic relations between the whites and the blacks, Chidzero’s advocacy of harmony and peace between blacks and whites in his novel does not serve the interests of the Africans who are exploited by the colonial system. Furthermore, his statement that *unhu hwedu tose humwe chete* is not a conceptualisation of *ubuntu* from an African vantagepoint and it serves to obliterate the view that Western cultures and African traditional systems such as *ubuntu* do not align. Sibanda (2014: 26) points out that “According to Africanism, a white man can only have *hunhu* over and above his perpetual humanness if and only if he measures up to African traditional expectations”. The proletarianisation of the Africans actually led to humiliation and dehumanisation of the blacks in the farms, mines and towns, actions which stand inimical to the African worldview of *ubuntu*. African labourers were

harassed, beaten and reduced to a level less than that of human beings. Vengeyi (2013:20) observes:

White farmers throughout the country did not regard the native servants as real human beings who get tired, thirsty or with rationality. In all farms, mines and homes black labourers were treated like domestic animals if not really wild animals. In fact white men's animals such as horses, cattle, dogs, cats and others had by far better status than black people in general and labourers in particular.

Chidzero's observation that the blacks and whites subscribe to the *ubuntu* worldview of togetherness, brotherhood, equality, caring, sharing, harmony, collective unity and group solidarity is therefore superficial. It seems it is a statement by the author meant to convince the African villagers of Chitehwe to supply farmer Davies with cheap labour. Moreover, the artist's conceptualisation of the *ubuntu* tenet of interdependence and mutual reciprocity in society is not Afrocentric as it does not portray the situation obtaining in colonial Zimbabwe. Chidzero writes that "*Tinosevenzerana, tinotengerana, tinoyamurana, tiri hama kunyangwe tine ndimi dzakasiyana-siyana.* (p.54). (We work for each other, trade and assist each other, despite the fact that we speak different languages and originate from different places). The Shona proverb *munhu munhu navanhu* (a person is a person through other people) expresses a profound sense of interdependence extending from the extended family to the entire community. Muyaka and Motlhabi (2009:71) state that:

Ubuntu points to the interdependence that exists among people. Within the context of *ubuntu*, people are a family. They are expected to be in solidarity with one another. Individualistic and self-centered acts are seen not just as a failure to contribute to the well-being of both the person and the community, but as bringing about harm, misery and pain to others. Such acts are disapproved of as manifestations of dangerous elements disruptive to society and undesirable for its functioning and well-being.

However, the artist assumes that the interdependence and mutual reciprocity that exist in the context of *ubuntu* is what is obtaining between farmer Davies and the Africans of Chitehwe village. While the statement that "*tinosevenzerana*" (we work for each other) is not true since there is no reciprocity, it is fundamental to note that it is only the Africans who supply cheap labour to white farmers and under conditions that strip Africans of their *ubuntu*. Vengeyi (2013:199) posits that "As Africans were forced to work on these farms, they were constantly harassed and beaten thoroughly. The conditions of labour were generally appalling and always dehumanising. Moreover, the view that "*tinoyamurana*" (we assist each other) applies within the context of *ubuntu* in a fair and just society and not in the context of unequal socio-economic

conditions. Colonialism was never meant to benefit the indigenous people. Boahen (1985:805) argues that:

It is precisely because colonial rulers not only did not see the development of Africans as their first priority but did not see it as a priority at all that they stand condemned. The colonial era will go down in history as a period of growth without development, one of the ruthless exploitation of the resources of Africa and on balance of the pauperisation and humiliation of the people of Africa.

The voice of the author, Samere, is a mission educated character who is portrayed as someone who is endowed with *ubuntu* values. With particular reference to Samere, *amai* Pedzisai (Pedzisai's mother), one of the village women remarks "*Ndiye anenge munhu kwaye pakati pavo vari vatatu* (p.70). (He looks the best person among the three boys). Matigimu, a village boy remarks that "*Samere munhu kwaye*". P.79. (Samere is a good, honest boy). With reference to Samere, Matirasa, one of the village girls says "*Tsika dzake dzinofadza samare, mai.* (p.53). (Mother, Samere's behaviour and character are good). The author writes that "*Nyemwerai naSamere vakanga vadana kare nekuti Samere aiva netsika tsvene* (p.51). (Nyemwererai and Samere had already fallen in love because Samere was a well mannered boy). Samere himself proves that he is endowed with *ubuntu* ethos. When Matigimu and Tikana are about to fight, he reiterates that "*Ko unhu hwedu huri kupi kana shamwari neshamwari dzichisvipirana mumeso* (p.16). (Where is our humanity when close friends fight each other?). Furthermore, when Samere and Tikana engage in an argument over their girlfriends, Samere is quick to remind Tikana that "*Kana usina unhu mauri, kana usina pfungwa, kana usina mwoyo, kana usingagone kuzvibata somunhu-zvakanaka ita maitiro asina tsarukano.* (p42-43). (If you lack humanness, if you do not reflect on your deeds, if you lack a good heart and you are not able to control yourself properly-then, you can behave in that ill-mannered way).

In contradistinction, Matigimu, a traditionalist is caricatured by the author as a dirty and ignorant village boy who lacks *ubuntu*. Tikana who refuses to work for farmer Davies is ridiculed by the author through his incompetence in the English language. He is also portrayed as a character who lacks *ubuntu*. Samere likens his friends Tikana and Matigimu to wild animals. He says "*Dai ndakaziva ndingadai ndisina kushamwaridzana nemhuka dzesango dzakadai.* (p.17). (If only I had known I would never have befriended such wild animals). The effect of the depiction of Samere as endowed with *ubuntu* and his friends as lacking *ubuntu* is that the Africans residing in Chitehwe village listen to Samere's call to supply labour to Davies' farm as a way of humanising them. Samere who is endowed with *ubuntu* convinces Matigimu and Tikana to work at Davies' farm. The author depicts Matigimu and Tikana as full human beings with *ubuntu* only after working at Davies' farm. He writes that "*Matigimu akanga ava munhu ane pfungwa, anogona kuzvibata. Tiri vanhu vazhinji pasi pose, asi tiri vashoma vane unhu.*(p.83). (Matigimu had

become an improved person who could reason well and he was now well behaved. There are so many people in the world but very few have complete humaneness). Matigimu who had initially resisted to work for Davies boasts to his girlfriend Mhangwa that “*Ndiri kusevenza, ndiri kutambira mari, ndini Matigimu chaiye.* (p.83). (I now have a job, I earn a salary, I am the Matigimu you know). Tikana who had also vowed never to work for farmer Davies is also happy to be a wage labourer. He says to his girlfriend Matirasa “*Ndiri kubata basa rakanaka kwazvo, pamhiri pedu apo. Ndava munhu ane zano, Matirasa.* (83-84). (I am now in a good job I found at the nearby farm. My behaviour and manners have improved as a result, Matirasa). Above all, Tikana thanks Samere for finding him a job at Davies’ farm which has made him a full human being with *ubuntu* ethos. He says “*Ndinotenda Samere akandipinzisa basa.Dai pasina uyu mufana akanaka, ndinofunga kuti ndingadai ndiri mhuka yesango.*(p.84). (I would like to thank Samere who got me the job. If it was not for the good young man who got me this job, I could have turned into a wild animal).

Chidzero’s statement is that those Africans who resist to supply labour at Davies’ farm remain less than human and ignorant, and can only be full human beings after working at Davies’ farm. Tikana confesses that before joining farm labourers at Davies’ farm he was a wild animal. According to the Shona understanding of *ubuntu*, a person without *ubuntu* is like an animal. The Shona say *hauna unhu, uri mhuka yesango.* (you lack humaneness, you are a wild animal). The writer seems to be advancing the view that Africans should supply labour to the settler farmers in order to be civilised and to be accorded the status of a full human being that will enable them to participate fully in societal issues. However, it is important to note that the writer does not seem to acknowledge that it is through colonialism and the proletarianisation of the Africans that many indigenous people lost their *ubuntu*. Dolamo (2013:05) posits that:

After the arrival of colonialists, traders and missionaries in Africa, the sense of *botho/ubuntu* or African humanness became altered or distorted. Colonialism has also contributed to the dehumanisation of Africans. Whites regarded themselves as superior to the other races, with blacks at the bottom of the ladder. Africans believed that to be fully human they had to model themselves after the colonisers and reject everything that was African.

However, it is vital to note that the writer acknowledges that the working conditions in the farms were appalling and dehumanising. The writer acknowledges the prevalence of forced labour (*chibharo*) on the farms. Samere says to Matigimu and Tikana “*Ndakanzwa kunzi kuna mapurisa ari kutsvaga vanhu vechibharo.*(p.67). (I heard that the police are hunting down people to be recruited into forced labour). Chidzero’s description of farm labourers highlights the dehumanising working conditions at Davies’ farm. He writes that:

Vasevenzi vapapurazi iyoyo vakati vodzoka kubasa vachimhanyira kundobika sadza. Vamwe vakatakura mapadza kana matemo pamapfudzi, vamwe vaina masvinga ehuni, vamwe vakapfeka masaka, mamvemve, shangu dzendudzi nendudzi, vamwe vakapfeka midhabha, nezvikokorani zvinenge zvamasoja. (p.54).(When the workers at the farm dismissed from work, they rushed to cook sadza. Some carried hoes or axes on their shoulders, others carried piles of firewood on the heads, some wore sacks, tattered clothes and rags, different shapes and colours of shoes, others wore trousers and ragged coats like old soldiers' uniform).

When Matigimu sees Davies' farm labourers he remarks "Zvipuka zvekupi zvine tsvina yakadai? Zvinosevenza pano izvozvi? Baba wanguwe! 'vanhu ava! Pasi papinduka. Mukati vachiri vanhu ava!' (p.54). (What kind of animals are these? So dirty! Do they work here? Oh father! Are these human beings? The earth has turned upside down. Do you say these are still human beings or animals)? The author artistically reflects the conditions of farm labourers in colonial Zimbabwe. Through Matigimu's remarks the author shows that Africans lost their ubuntu through proletarianisation. However, after reflecting on workers' conditions that reduced them to sub-humans, the author does not explore further on the subject and even dismisses Matigimu's observations through Samere, his mouthpiece. Samere even advances the thesis that Europeans are Africa's benefactors and so Africa should be grateful. Samere pontificates that:

Chinondishamisa vakomana ndechokuti zvamunodya, zvamunopfeka, zvamunofamba nazvo, zvinokupai rugare-zvose zvose ndezvavaRungu, vaRungu vakomboreri vedu. Zvirokwazvo munhu mutema oga oga ane musoro uzere nemwoyo unodziya, anoziva kuti kune vaRungu vazhinji muno muAfrica nemhiri kwemakungwa nenyanza-vaRungu vazhinji, shamwari, vakomboreri navadi vavanhu vatema. Ndinofunga kuti pfungwa tsarukano ndeyokuti titende vakomboreri vedu. (p.56-57).(What amazes me, boys, is that what you eat, wear, travel on, what gives you peace and satisfaction all belong to whites. Whites are our benefactors. Truly every African who thinks properly and whose heart beats should know that there are many white people in Africa and abroad, many white people who are our friends and our benefactors. They like Africans and our progress. I think the best thing for us Africans is to thank these benefactors of ours).

Chidzero's approach thus diverts the attention of readers from the real exploitation that Africans are facing in the proletarianisation process, as observed by Matigimu. The contention is that the colonialists never intended to be Africa's benefactors and never engaged in projects meant to

benefit indigenous people. On the impact of colonialism in Africa, Ali Mazrui in Boahen (1985:784) argues that the positive effects were “by default, by the iron law of unintended consequences” while Boahen (ibid) suggests that “It should be emphasised right from the beginning that most of the positive effects were not deliberately calculated. They were by and large rather accidental by products of activities or measures intended to promote the interests of the colonisers”. While Chidzero engages the *ubuntu* values of interdependence, mutual reciprocity, brotherhood, co-operation and harmonious relationships to prevail between blacks and whites during the proletarianisation of the African peasantry, he does not extend the same to exist between Africans of different ethnic groups. He uses derogatory discourse such as *madzviti* (violent strangers) in his novel. In his description of Davies’ farm labourers, the author writes that “*Rumwe runotaura, rumwe runoimba, rumwe runyerere- haungati madzviti! Haungati ihondo!* (p.54). (There is so much noise of many people talking and shouting together. Some spoke so loudly, others sang and some were quiet like an uproar of Ndebele warriors).

The author’s use of derogatory terms is likely to further polarise the Shona and Ndebele at a time when these two main ethnic groups are expected to form a common front against the colonisers. The artist does not realise that by applying emphasis on the Shona-Ndebele antagonisms, he is actually serving British colonial interests. The misrepresentation and distortion of Ndebele-Shona relations serve to justify the British colonisation of Zimbabwe (Mandova and Wasosa, 2011:1945). Ndebele raids were used by the British and Rhodes to excuse Rhodes’ conquest in 1893 and the subsequent entrenchment of white rule (Beach, 1986:14). The writer’s perception of the Ndebele through anthropological and European eyeglasses serves European aspirations and not African interests as Ndlovu in Muchemwa (2015:77) argues that “Colonialism never wanted to create nations in Africa based on common national identity because this was going to fuel African nationalism. Colonialism wanted to create colonial states as ‘neo-Europe’ that served metropolitan material needs while maintaining Africans fragmented into numerous tribes and unable to unite against colonial oppression and domination”. Chidzero’s work is less likely to inspire the Ndebele people that he attacks. Zimbabwean writers writing during the colonial era therefore should have helped to deconstruct the myth created by the colonisers on the Shona-Ndebele relations and to forge unity among all ethnic groups in Zimbabwe. *Ubuntu* emphasises cohesion and not fragmentation. In short, Chidzero’s work records agrarian and lifestyle change in colonial Zimbabwe as a result of the colonial encounter. Although the writer highlights critical issues related to the proletarianisation of the African peasantry such as dehumanisation of Africans, he highlights these through Matigimu, a character he ridicules and whom he depicts as lacking *unhu*, hence readers do not take his observations seriously. Moreover, after Matigimu highlights the precarious working conditions at Davies’ farm, Samere, the writer’s mouthpiece who is endowed with *ubuntu*, quickly dismisses Matigimu’s critical observations albeit unconvincingly, leaving them hanging.

The writer's understanding of *ubuntu* is the existence of harmonious relationships between blacks and whites during the proletarianisation of the African peasantry in light of the unequal socio-economic relations between the two races, a view that does not promote Shona fiction which is utilitarian. He advocates 'humane colonialism' which shows a compromised social vision. Chiwome (1996:88). The writer emphasises mutually affirming and enhancing relationships between blacks and whites and not between blacks of different ethnic backgrounds, a position that renders his work of art oppressive and not liberating. It is also a position which demonstrates that his work of art is not rooted in the African communitarian worldview of *ubuntu*. Chidzero's solution to the predicament of Africans living in Chitehwe reserve lies in co-operating with white farmers who ironically impoverished them by alienating the Africans from their land engendering a process of proletarianisation which dehumanised them and stripped them of their humanity. The study contends that the writer does not conceptualise and contextualise *ubuntu* in a way that produces Shona fiction which is utilitarian and which liberates Africans in the face of a harsh, exploitative, oppressive and dehumanising colonial regime.

3. CONCLUSION

The research has shown that *ubuntu* embodies virtues that celebrate sharing, unselfishness, accountability, respect for others, caring, trust, sympathy, compassion, equality, brotherhood, togetherness, group solidarity, mutual assistance, obedience, harmony, humanness, tolerance, conformity, empathy, collective unity and mutual social responsibility. The study has established that it is *ubuntu* which generates ethos that inform, govern and direct African people's institutions *viz* political, economic, social and religious. It is *ubuntu* which regulates and directs action and approaches to life and its challenges thus setting a premium on African people's behaviour and relations. The article has also shown that relationships among the Africans are sustained through the maintenance of ethos such as participation, harmony, hospitality and reciprocity. It has been demonstrated that traditional African societies celebrate connectedness and cohesion. The individual is not seen as solitary and unbound. The African people believe that social fragmentation is detrimental to the realisation of societal goals. It has been shown that Chidzero employs the *ubuntu* tenet of harmonious co-existence in a way that persuades Africans to supply cheap labour to white farmers since *ubuntu* celebrates harmony and peaceful co-existence. The harmony that Chidzero advocates for between the blacks and the whites during this period benefits the whites who are experiencing labour shortages. The presence of white settlers in colonial Zimbabwe led to inevitable conflicts and clashes of interests with indigenous African people such that harmonious relationships which the author advocates for lead to further exploitation of the African people of Chitehwe village.

Given the unequal socio-economic relations between the whites and the blacks, Chidzero's advocacy of harmony and peace between blacks and whites in his novel does not serve the interests of Africans who are exploited by the colonial system. To that extent, his *Nzvengamutsvairo* is not rooted in the African indigenous worldview of *ubuntu* and it does not promote Shona fiction which is utilitarian. The proletarianisation of Africans led to humiliation and dehumanisation of blacks in the farms, mines and towns, actions which are anathema to the African worldview of *ubuntu*. Africans were harassed, beaten and reduced to a level less than that of human beings. His work is therefore not progressive and liberating but oppressive as Thelwell (1987:227) observes "Any black writer who writes about black peoples, societies, and cultures but who addresses his work not to the people who are his subjects but to the Western literati is nothing but an exploiter of his own. Such a writer accepts and perpetuates the colonial mission in literature begun by the Kiplings and Conrads of the imperial age". Thelwell's observations corroborate this study's establishment that Chidzero's view that blacks and whites subscribe to the *ubuntu* worldview of togetherness, brotherhood, equality, caring, sharing, harmony, collective unity and group solidarity is superficial and oppressive. This research has also shown that Chidzero's conceptualisation of the *ubuntu* tenets of interdependence and mutual reciprocity in society is not Afrocentric as it does not portray the situation obtaining in colonial Zimbabwe. The artist assumes that the interdependence and mutual reciprocity that exist in the African concept of *Ubuntu* is what is obtaining between farmer Davies and the Africans of Chitehwe village. The study has shown that such an assumption distorts reality since there is no mutual reciprocity as it is only Africans who supply cheap labour to white farmers under conditions that strip Africans of their *ubuntu*. The study has also established that Chidzero's solution to the predicament of Africans living in Chitehwe village lies in co-operating with white farmers who ironically impoverished them by alienating the Africans from their land and engendering a process of proletarianisation which dehumanised them and stripped them of their humanity.

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