

***Together*, by Julius Chingono and John Eppel**

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In a country that is ruled through fundamentalist narratives along racial, tribal, political and property ownership lines, *Together* is not only refreshing but highly symbolic. The book brings into conversation, Julius Chingono and John Eppel, a black and white Zimbabwean respectively. Through their poetry and short fiction, both writers strike the pose of a jester in their views of what has come to be known as the Zimbabwean “crisis”. Following the axiom that the truth is told in jokes, the two writers use humour as social commentary to explore, amongst other issues, abject poverty, shortages of basic commodities, state brutality, the travesty of justice, the abuse of political power as well as the complicity of the oppressed in their oppression. The two are satirists who poke fun at the “absurd”, exposing folly amongst the oppressed themselves but more so amongst the oppressing clique. They reserve their contempt for the latter. The two writers focus on the everydayness of life to illustrate that, in a situation characterised by fundamentalist attitudes, the truth lies in between; that in fact, the very stuff of everyday life exposes the vacuity that so characterises the rhetoric of racial and political extremism. Similarly, their work evinces that, in the face of adversity, ordinary Zimbabweans have been most creative and resilient.

Chingono has a deceptively simple style that he uses to devastating effect. His sympathies, like those of John Eppel, lie with the poor and downtrodden, who may be wantonly killed in cross-fire, kept waiting by politicians only interested in getting votes, made poor and hungry through political machinations or have their houses bulldozed by the government in a “clean-up” exercise. In short, life loses dignity. Yet in this depressing and depraved condition, Chingono sees the funny side of life. The misery is “not without laughter”, to borrow from Langston Hughes. For example, the female toilet cleaner in the story *Shonongoro* waylays the male narrator and asks for a tip or “shonongoro”, gently at first (“She even looked down like a shy daughter-in-law”) and then most aggressively by blocking the doorway. Shonongoro is a term associated with marriage payments and the female toilet cleaner is now asking it from a stranger whom she calls her son-in-law, and in a toilet too! The moneyless narrator escapes through holding the woman’s waist in a sexually suggestive way, making her jump out of his way.

In buses, people make fun of their misery, as seen in *The Dread Gentleman* in which people joke about the “man-made tsunami” – Operation Murambatsvina – and how people may soon be deemed “illegal structures” and demolished just as the buildings that had been labelled as such! It is the “Dread Gentleman”, whose mind appears to have been unhinged by the tsunami, who nonetheless demonstrates the most optimism about the future by starting an outdoor electrical goods shop.

In *The Toilet Issue*, Chingono is at his best. Through self-levelled mockery, typical of the attitude that enabled most Zimbabweans to survive the “crisis”, he shows how overcrowding, itself an expression of a lack of decent and affordable accommodation, leads to the beating up of the narrator and someone called Patches by bigger and stronger lodgers. The narrator is clobbered by Marubber when the former unintentionally bumps into the latter’s wife in the dark toilet and she cries “out loud like she was to be raped”. Patches urinates on Saddam’s face in the poky dark toilet and the incident nearly costs the former his life as he is pounded by the latter. In the midst of entrenched poverty and lack of basics, billboards that exhort people to buy are seen by Chingono as “harassment” as captured in the poem *This is Harassment*.

Irrespective of people’s ability to see the funny in their dire situations, one senses an underlying sadness threatening to suppress the humour. No piece in Chingono’s writing captures this as poignantly as the poem *A Caged Lion*. The metal number plate of a car that makes up part of a makeshift door in the poem *20-044L*, the jostling for space in a bus in *At the Bus Station*, and the emptiness of greetings occasioned by extreme deprivation in *Greetings* all suggest a deep-seated sadness from which one of the means of escape is excessive drinking of alcohol. In the story *Leave my Bible Alone*, Mudhara Gore, the lay preacher, does not only rely on potent illicit alcohol (even beer is in short supply) to get by but symbolically clings to his bible as well. High and frequent levels of drunkenness become almost a necessary respite for some. The persona in *Drunk* captures this:

In the photograph
I was so drunk
that I would stagger
out of the picture.

Thus, alongside Mudhara Gore who finds himself sprawled on the ground but still holding on to his bible, drunkenness is used by Chingono not for its own sake but to suggest a hankering for respite, for a better life.

Chingono suggests, in an indirect way, the causes of the “crisis/crises”. In *We Waited* he employs that archetypal trope of waiting in Zimbabwean literature as epitomised by Mungoshi’s *Waiting for the Rain*. The waiting in this context is symbolic not only of arrested development but decay, entrapment and destruction. The “povo” sit on the rubble of their houses demolished on the orders of the ruling party, whose officials keep even their party faithful waiting for a sham election. Empty songs and slogans cannot change the situation. The ruling party emerges as lacking in integrity, with hardly any functional structure of command. Its main driving force is personal greed and cheap slogans against the West.

John Eppel’s wit is more direct and acerbic. Most of his pieces speak of deprivation. The first, *Malnourished Sonnet*, epitomises Eppel’s keen sense of observation, especially the dearth of responsible leadership with a vision. The poem *Afrika* shows such vacuity. The spelling of Africa with a “k”, thought to be symbolic of a fresh start by some Africanists, is nothing but a false start. In his typical tongue-in-cheek style, Eppel challenges such empty absolutist rhetoric whose essentialism speaks of mediocrity and, in the worst case, downright duplicity aimed at duping, to borrow from Marechera, “the silent majority”. Similarly, Eppel in the poem *Culture* scoffs at people who attempt to lay a claim on a fundamentalist and warped conception of culture by writing, “When someone smugly says, ‘In our culture we do this!’/I recall a stink of carpets worse than Tom cat piss.”

It is not surprising then that Eppel deals with the ridiculous or absurd in Zimbabwean politics. In *The Debate*, the three candidates are battling to see who will be “allowed to dish out cabinet posts, including the newly established, and coveted one, of Minister of Rural Beauty Pageants.” The problem facing the country during the setting of the story is cash shortage and run-away hyper-inflation. One candidate, Mr Wynken, suggests that when the country runs out of bank notes “all transactions should be carried out in the country’s most stable commodity: empties.” Thus, soft drinks bottles, wine and beer ones too should be accepted as legal tender, with the opaque beer container popularly known as the “scud”, thrown in for good measure. The second contender, Professor Blynken, demonstrates the poverty of thought accruing from his high level education by proposing “a logical extension of the current system”, which essentially means photocopying banknotes for those with access to photocopiers and those without “access to modern technology” can sketch lower denominations on any surface including wood, stones and banana peels. The third candidate, Comrade Nod, sharply veers off at a tangent, completely avoiding the problem and launching instead, a diatribe against the West. Those familiar with Zimbabwe can clearly identify these candidates and the ridiculously essentialist stance that

those who claim to have fought for the liberation of the country have, as Eppel puts it in the poem *The Coming of the Rains*, the “freedom to make a mess” of the country.

Eppel also addresses Zimbabwe’s troubled past, raising the issue of Gukurahundi in *Democracy at Work and at Play*, *Floating Straw Hat*, *Shards* and *Bhalagwe Blues*. The writer is pointing at the hypocrisy of the country’s leadership in attempting to erase large scale state perpetrated murder that was ethnically motivated. In a sense, Eppel shows how fractured Zimbabwe is along tribal lines because Gukurahundi has never been genuinely addressed. The polarity of the Ndebele and Shona is typified through *Democracy at Work and at Play*. The constitution making outreach team that visits a part of Matabeleland hard hit by Gukurahundi comprises Shona speaking people who have been “instructed to speak in English”. At best, one of them, the Reverend Jojova can speak “halting Ndebele”. A further travesty in this process is the presence of ruling party thugs roaming in the crowd, carrying sticks and machetes. Not surprisingly, the exercise deteriorates to hate speech against gays, the youth and so on. The outreach team itself is threatened by party thugs, is accused of supporting the opposition and told to leave for all that the people want is “a president for life”. Fear and coercion rule. Matters are made worse by the fact that, like Reverend Jojova, the members of the outreach team only have either an extremely remote or academic interest in the history and fate of the Ndebele. Witness that Reverend Jojova is more interested in Yvonne Vera’s fiction than the actual people. After thinking of a title for his PhD thesis, “The Reverend Benate Jojova MA, smiled happily, closed his book, blew out the candle, snuggled against the warm expansive body of his good wife, and fell into a deep, untroubled sleep.”

Aware that in Zimbabwe, ZANU PF aims at excluding whites from the nation and further, to vilify them, in *Yet Another Flower Poem*, Eppel exposes the shallowness of such mentality. He writes,

“...For I have neither wit, nor words, nor worth”,
as politicians have, and academics (a white poet
should restrict his content to the flora of Bulawayo),
'to stir men’s (sic) blood’. My settler friends and me, our destiny
is obscure. We measure out our lives in platitudes, clichés,
watching the sun set on Zimbabwe, as it set on empire.”

Thus, the definition of the nation echoes Eppel’s sentiment in the story *The CWM* that “When governance breaks down, anarchy looms, and nations revert to tribes, some dominant, many subordinate.”

John Eppel also explores the fate of elderly whites in Zimbabwe through the stories *The CWM* and *The Pact*. *The CWM* starts with a quintessential John Eppel opening: "Somalia has its warlords, Zimbabwe has its CWMs or cheeky white madams." It is the "cheeky" Valery MacSnatch who restores a bit of order to a neighbourhood that had become comfortable with disorder and decay in the form of noisy parties, overcrowding, crumbling and ill-built structures. Again, Eppel is hinting at the lack of both personal responsibility as well as progressive political leadership when he writes:

"Nobody complained when we had noisy parties, which went on all night and well into the next day; or when we built huge, threatening bonfires; or when we felled trees; or when we extended our houses using building materials that even the most tolerant of city councils would condemn. Nobody complained when our roosters began issuing challenges at one another, continually, from midnight onwards...."

When Valery MacSnatch complains about some of the disorder, decay and neglect, it is only then that some of the backward habits are curbed.

In *The Pact*, four elderly and lonely white women amuse themselves through writing. Eppel explodes the myth that white Zimbabweans are rich colonialists with no interest in the country other than selfish motives geared at self-aggrandisement. The four old women run a shelter (the house was donated by one of them, Mavis) for the elderly that doubles up as a soup-kitchen for streetkids. Harriet is on a pension "that barely sustained her pets". Thus, both Chingono and Eppel show that, irrespective of race and political affiliation, all Zimbabweans have been reduced to unprecedented levels of penury in a country whose ruling elite always mouth phrases about sovereignty. The loneliness felt by the four old women is typified by Dorothy, whose husband had died of lung cancer, her youngest child in an accident and "four of her five children (and seven grandchildren) were in the Diaspora."

Through *The Pact* Eppel raises two painful subjects that are the result of the "crisis". The first is the erosion of people's pensions to ridiculous levels. There is something very criminal about this situation, considering that it was caused by a clique bent on holding on to power, a clique that has not bothered to address such a crucial matter that continues to haunt citizens whose labour of many years dried up like dew under the sun. The second issue is the out-migration of Zimbabweans which resulted in the fragmentation and breaking down of families because of a need to escape "home". There is an element of criminality in that as well if one considers the emotional and other forms of turmoil that obtained from forced migration.

As expected, the charity work of the four old white women is disturbed by ruling party thugs who accuse them of theft in the same language used to dispossess and discredit white Zimbabweans: "You whites are thieves. That soup comes from the land, which you stole from our people." Mavis, the old white woman who donated the house, is near death from hot soup that pours on her when the leader of the thugs upsets the table on which is the big pot of soup. Her friends, following the pact that, if one of them was in unbearable pain, all four would die together, commit suicide by taking poison.

Chingono and Eppel not only remind us of a hard time in Zimbabwe's history but also remind us that the bond of suffering that Zimbabweans share has a common source of misery – a corrupt self-serving oligarchy. The bond of suffering also suggests a wider conception of nation beyond race, ethnicity and political affiliation. We laugh at the humorous handling of incidents that both writers employ, but we do so uneasily. We see ourselves as wretched individuals and as a wretched nation, and at the same time see what we could become if we avoid some of our divisive follies. Above all, in showing us the ridiculous and absurd, Chingono and Eppel remind us that indeed both leadership and life in Zimbabwe did sink to ridiculously low levels and seem to suggest that it is up to every Zimbabwean to either slide back there or laugh with a shake of the head and say "never that again".

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