Introduction

In John Eppel's *Hatchings,* gone is the narrative of the Rhodesian nation of Eppel's first novel *The Great North Road.* Gone too is the distance that separated white 'Rhodies' from the 'natives'. More representative of the nation, the characters in this novel are from all races and walks of life. *Hatchings* is also different from *The Great North Road* in that Eppel presents to the reader a community divided along ethical lines, and occupying spaces that, for convenience, are referred to here as positive space and negative space. Consistent with this cleavage between good and evil, Zimbabwe is presented as functioning both as a site of regeneration and as a den of crime.

In *Hatchings,* the positive or 'sacred' space is associated with the Matopos National Park, with the children, the novel's heroine Elizabeth Fawkes, and with the Asil Khan egg. Appropriating ennobling mythic properties, these elements conjoin to create a timeless, classic space, the panoramic dimension of which serves to oust the narrowly historicized spatial 'scenery' of *The Great North Road.* Indeed, the connection of positive space and the Matopos is established early in the narrative of *Hatchings,* which appropriately unfolds with the Fawkes family on a campsite in the Matopos National Park. Presented as a place of extraordinary natural beauty, the Matopos National Park offers scenery that is experienced by the Fawkes family, and especially by Elizabeth, as refreshing both physically and psychologically, not least because of its mythic tradition.

It is significant that Eppel should set two major episodes of his novel at this locale. Indeed, the Matopos is the scene for both the negotiation on New Year's Day between Elizabeth Fawkes and her father for the hatching of the Asil Khan egg, and the site for the actual hatching of the egg. Thus, part of Eppel's strategy is to appropriate the holiness, the regenerative creativity and the fertility associated with this place and to impart it to the character of Elizabeth in her role of 'hatcher' of a new nation-building ethos.

The inscription of the Matopos as a symbol of regeneration is also achieved by reference to the water motif. The contrast between the Matopos and the rest of the country is figured in terms of the contrast between a place where water is available and where it is not. Repeatedly in the novel the importance of water in an otherwise drought-stricken country is emphasized. Just as Eppel's novel offers a dual representation of Zimbabwe so, too, it allegorizes water in a dual function: as a symbol of the rebirth of the new nation, but equally as a symbol of corruption. This duality in the symbolism

of water emerges throughout the novel. The effectiveness of the negative symbolism of water is brought home by its association with bodily waste and corruption. The smell that pervades Twots's house on New Year's Day is figured as symbolic of the degeneration associated with those Bulawayo residents who could afford water. The references to smell and faeces in the episode are reminiscent of Ayi Kwei Armah' s depiction, in his novel *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born,* of the smell that accompanies the minister Koomson as he escapes arrest through the latrine at the Man's house. In that episode Armah evokes the olfactory senses and uses images of 'shit' to suggest that the process of decay in Ghana has reached the point of no return. Similarly the Twots's house is figured as a place of decay.

The conversation between Elizabeth and her mother about the significance of water in religion sheds light on Eppel's reference to water in order to suggest the double image of the nation his text conveys. Statements from the mythologist Mircea Eliade, which permeate this conversation, validate the representation of water at the Matopos Dam as a symbol of regeneration, and that of water at the Twots's house as a symbol of degeneration and death. The notions of historicity and its double relation to sacredness and profanity, transposed into the context of Eppel's representation of the post-colonial Zimbabwean nation, also underscore his attempt to provide a meeting space for those forces of darkness and light which the novel presents as shaping the two spaces of the post-colonial Zimbabwean society in the novel.

In Eppel's text, the extreme of corruption is embodied by Sobantu 'The Butcher' Ikerhothi's crime syndicate and it is on Elizabeth Fawkes that the positive expectations are centred. Elizabeth's hatching of the Asil Khan egg is thus rationalized as the crossing over to a new moral order and a new culture.

While the space occupied by Elizabeth and the children is represented as positive, the 'nocturnal forces' occupy a space dominated by the underworld, which, as stated above, is presented as a negative space. Within the narrative discourse this latter space is inscribed as 'Other' in the sense that it disrupts the post-colonial economy of nation building. As one reads the novel, there is an inevitable impression that Eppel sides with the 'sacred' and invites the reader to witness the pollution emanating from the negative space and invading the positive space. The first manifestation of this invasion occurs when Nightingale Macimbi, one of the children, discovers a parcel containing the dead body of a baby. In the passage describing Nightingale's

discovery, there is a sense that the discovery is equated with the loss of innocence. Eppel's inscription of this invasion into the children's universe underscores the corruption that invades the national space, striking as it does in this instance the most vulnerable members of the society.

Two other incidents concerning the dumping of dead bodies emphasize the shock that accompanies the discoveries and reveal the extent to which corruption has eroded the fabric of society. When another dead baby is discovered in a dustbin outside the Prince Charming High School girls' toilets, police investigations reveal that fourteen other girls 'were either pregnant or had recently given birth'. As in the case of the incident involving Nightingale Macimbi, with the discovery of the dead baby's body in the school premises, the narrator locates another invasion of death at the heart of what should be regarded as a citadel of learning and culture, as well as of innocence. In this way the presence of dead bodies on the school premises also becomes a metaphor for the moral corruption that plagues the post-colonial nation.

In this regard, it can be argued that the school is used as a cameo of negativity which undermines the regeneration motif. All four schools referred to in the novel serve to illustrate that there is something 'rotten' in the nation-state of Zimbabwe. While Prince Charming is notorious for the high number of pregnant girls, another school, Kipling Primary, is depicted as a den of corruption. The reader learns that one of the teachers, Comrade Iyapipi, 'regarded fornication with his pupils as a perk and not as rape'. The headmaster too is found wanting; he is portrayed as incompetent and too politically oriented for the good of the school. But beneath the political face the headmaster wears is a corrupt individual. Cast in this light, the school appears to be the institution that corrupts or pollutes the innocence of youths instead of relaying the new moral ethos that, the novel posits, is so needed by the nation for its survival.

Another school, Black Rhino High, is depicted as a metaphor for retrograde conservatism. The narrator describes it as 'a school which would ensure that the high standards of Rhodesian education - the highest in Africa, if not in the entire world - would be maintained'. Ironically, the description of the activities of the school's sponsors - some of them are identified in the novel as 'sleeping partners' of Sobantu 'The Butcher' Ikherothi's crime syndicate - and the close link the school maintains with the notorious Blood of Jesus Temple - provide another window for the reader to glance at the corruption this school also embodies. Thus, through Black Rhino, education

per se is exposed in Eppel's text as an evil legacy of the past. Here, there is a clear relation between the history of colonialism, dead bodies, the physical locality of the school, predatory teachers, corrupt parents and imagining the nation in *Hatchings.* All these elements conjoin to reinforce the image of Zimbabwe as a nation in need of moral salvation, so much so that its very foundations (the family and the school) are presented as reeking of decadence.

The most prominent occupant of the negative space is Sobantu 'The Butcher' Ikherothi. A member of an anarchistic ('Jogskyite') movement, he is supposed to have coined the slogan 'One settler, one bullet'. It is significant that his crime syndicate enjoys the service of prominent members of the settler group, ranging from radical leftists to bourgeois capitalists. The novel points to drug smuggling as one of his syndicate's main activities, thus suggesting the extent of the physical and mental pains it inflicts on the Zimbabwean people.

Perhaps most significant is the suggestion that the syndicate's activities are facilitated by the willingness of the larger population to use its services, which, in turn, reinforces the view that the nation is rotten to the core. What can be seen in the underworld ruled by Sobantu 'The Butcher' Ikherothi is its power to wreak havoc on the nation. Indeed, one can evaluate the power of this mafia-style underworld through the way he controls political and economic power. He holds in his power most of the influential members of the community.

The portrayal of Moral MacBraggert as equally corrupt, despite being a church leader, and his Blood of Jesus Temple as a site of corruption and a bastion of conservatism in Zimbabwe, is a further instrument in Eppel's construction of the corrupt community of the nation. Under the façade of religion, the church operates as a business venture. In *The Great North Road,* where Moral MacBraggert and his church are introduced for the first time to Eppel's readers, he is seen as using tricks, blackmail and his eloquence to persuade disillusioned 'Rhodies' to join his church. In *Hatchings,* the church is described as having conservative political as well as capitalist leanings. It is right-wing, with an exclusively white congregation, materialistic, and modelled on the most conservative American churches.

There is a parallel between Moral MacBraggert and Sobantu Ikherothi in regard to the hold they have on their followers. Eppel portrays MacBraggert's congregation as loyal if naive. These sheeplike followers would do anything to please their spiritual leader for, in their eyes, he stands

as a go-between between God and material possessions. Thus, by casting The Blood of Jesus Temple in the role of spiritual refuge for the rich and corrupt, Eppel has created another symbol that allows him to highlight the tension between the two components of the nation.

It is telling that the crime syndicate is presented as the offspring of a South African refugee and that some of its main operatives and sympathizers are immigrants who have joined forces with a section of the local population from the public and business sectors as well as from the Church. With the inclusion in the text of these migrant intellectuals, Eppel seems to have constructed Zimbabwe in the image of the modern nation expounded by the likes of Homi Bhabha and Salman Rushdie, without necessarily subscribing to all its characteristics. Although the border zone the novel depicts is certainly a space of encounter between different cultures, it is clear that the characters involved in this encounter represent the worst of their communities of origin so that the end result of this confluence of aberrant 'cultures', sanctioned as it is in this text by the apparent blurring of boundaries between the immigrant and the local community that is involved in the crime syndicate's activities, becomes the antithesis of the cultural hybridity, which Bhabha posits takes life at 'the borderline community of migration'.

Not only the usefulness of the immigrant community in promoting progress and development in Zimbabwe is sharply interrogated, and the research conducted by the foreign researchers is sarcastically reported, but Eppel unequivocally indicts the contribution of immigrant intellectuals to the re-vitalization of the Zimbabwean national culture to the point of pathos. The mention in the novel of the generous financial assistance allocated to these projects indicates that Eppel considers as problematic the willingness of Western governments and aid organizations to fund such projects, which ultimately not only perpetuates an obsolete image of the African and encourages the exploitation of the African continent but also guarantees the survival of those doing 'research' in the field. Thus Eppel's novel is critical of the discourses of assistance to development. The alert reader would also see in it the terms of his subversion of the so-called Third-Worldism of leftist political and educational institutions from the West.

Thus, *Hatchings* highlights the danger to the nation of a culture of crime and proposes to the reader a choice between the moral dimension of a national vision and its opposite. Although clearly concerned with the corruption that characterizes modern Zimbabwe, the novel is ultimately

optimistic as it suggests that a real conversion to moral national politics is possible and that, despite the rampant corruption, the new society bears in itself the seeds of its own regeneration.

Eppel's work exudes a deep love for his country, and particularly his native Matabeleland, and also a deep concern for its postcolonial situation. His satire is directed not at individual characters *per se* but at representatives of colonial or postcolonial national culture. Part of his novelty thus has to do with his representation of Zimbabwe as a space wherein the various cultures of the nation interact with one another and, particularly, with his attempt at undermining difference. His work introduces a new perspective in Zimbabwean literature as it blends images of the past with concerns about dislocation in a society marked by the new power relations between racial groups. He adopts stances that mirror the divided soul of white Zimbabwe and the relation of settler history to the present and future of Zimbabwe.

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