

# Charles Mungoshi's Contribution to Our Understanding of Female Tragedy in a Zimbabwean Context

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(English Studies) in the School of Arts, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg  
Campus.

**Supervisor: Professor Mbongeni Z Malaba**

## **Dedication**

My interest in feminist studies has been greatly influenced by the heroines in my own life, my mother, Lorraine Low, and my grandmother, Dawn Ryall, both of whom were strengthened by adversity in their own lives. I dedicate this dissertation to these two formidable women, and to my husband and son, Garth and Roman, who have supported me by giving me the space and time I needed during this journey.

## **Acknowledgements**

My sincerest gratitude goes to my own personal mentor, Professor Mbongeni Malaba, who kindled my interest in Charles Mungoshi, and guided my steps with kindness and patience. Words cannot adequately express my appreciation and regard.

## **Declaration**

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Graduate Programme in English Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa.

I, **Bernice Cynthia Borain**, declare that:

1. The research reported in this thesis, except where otherwise indicated, is my original research.
2. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.
3. This thesis does not contain other persons' data, pictures, graphs or other information, unless specifically acknowledged as being sourced from other persons.
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  - a. Their words have been re-written but the general information attributed to them has been referenced
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**Bernice C Borain née Avery**

As the candidate's supervisor, I have approved this dissertation for submission.

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**Professor Mbongeni Z Malaba**

## Abstract

This dissertation is a literary analysis of Charles Mungoshi's narratives *Waiting for the Rain* (Mungoshi, 1975), "The Day the Bread Van Didn't Come" (Mungoshi, 1980), "The Little Wooden Hut in the Forest" (Mungoshi, 1997), and *Branching Streams Flow in the Dark* (Mungoshi, 2013), utilising aspects of Aristotelian classical and modern theories of tragedy as a lens to undertake a feminist reading of his books.

A chronological examination of the selected tragic heroines demonstrates that as the characters evolve so do Mungoshi's concerns with regard to Womanpower. The tragedy in each case is that his admirably strong, female protagonists are oppressed in patriarchal Zimbabwe. The "error" or flaw is their complicity with their oppressors in their subjugation, marginalising them further, when it is apparent to the reader that they are more capable than their male counterparts in many ways. This deliberate foregrounding demonstrates Mungoshi's unsentimental feminist concerns, which take into account the contemporary acceptance of realistic resolutions for the tragic heroines.

The introduction determines the parameters for Mungoshi's contemporary tragic heroines, and thereafter expands on the specific feminist concerns raised by Mungoshi for each of the character's journey to catharsis. The study also locates Mungoshi's characters within an appropriate social and historical context based on the Zimbabwean setting of the stories that are analysed.

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## Introduction: The Tragic Heroine in Mungoshi's Stories

Let us agree at the outset that the feminist cause is one that every right thinking person must embrace, regardless of gender. (Owomoyela, 1991, p. 67)

Traditionally, tragic heroes are always male. However, the predicament of female characters in Charles Mungoshi's fiction is portrayed as 'tragic' under patriarchal oppression because they are often complicit with their oppressors despite being depicted as strong as (and often stronger) than their male counterparts. For the female protagonists, Betty Mandengu in *Waiting for the Rain* (Mungoshi, 1975), Mrs Pfende in "The Day the Bread Van Didn't Come" (Mungoshi, 1980), Kerina Mashamba in "The Little Wooden Hut in the Forest" (Mungoshi, 1997a), and Serina Maseko in *Branching Streams Flow in the Dark*, the "error" or flaw is their complicity with their oppressors in their subjugation which renders them the "other" or "the second sex" (De Beauvoir translated by Borde & Malovany-Chevallier, 2009, p. 11). A woman is seen as the "second", according to Simone De Beauvoir, who states that "If I want to define myself, I first have to say, 'I am a woman'; all other assertions will arise from this basic truth. A man never begins by positing himself as an individual of a certain sex: that he is a man is obvious" (ibid, p. 25).

The major theoretical positions and approaches to tragedy utilised in this dissertation are drawn from *Poetics* (Aristotle translated by Butcher, 2008), and Arthur Miller's statements on modern tragedy (Miller, 1996). Key elements of Aristotle's seminal definition of tragedy inform this study, particularly his definitions of plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle, and song, with special emphasis on plot as "the first principle, and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy; Character holds the second place" (Aristotle translated by Butcher, 2008, p. 26). It is self-evident that without an arresting plot and character(s), the narrative would flounder. These requirements resonate within Mungoshi's depiction of the selected protagonists or characters being examined, as their tales are indeed arresting, and credible, within the context that they are set.

In order to consider contemporary tragedies from a feminist perspective, it is imperative that one challenges Aristotle's view that a tragic hero must exclude women who are considered as "inferior", in whom "unscrupulous cleverness is inappropriate" (Aristotle translated by Butcher, 2008, p. 53). Aristotle excludes women, but this archaic misogyny simply serves to foreground Mungoshi's avant-garde feminist tragic heroine. In *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy*, the plight of tragic heroines is more usefully outlined as follows:

Women in tragedy can nevertheless take ethical stances that either prove to be superior to those of men in particular instances or appropriate but different from those of men due to the constraints of their social role or status. Unlike philosophy, which aims at establishing standards for virtuous behaviour, tragedy remains fascinated with flawed, mistaken, and partially appropriate ethical behaviour,<sup>1</sup> and with the issues that the cultural system and dominant morality sacrifice or devalue. Female characters can serve to represent such positions. (Foley, 2001, p. 118)

Aristotle also outlines the prerequisite that a "perfect tragedy should... imitate actions which excite pity and fear, this being a distinctive mark of tragic imitation", and pity is aroused by "unmerited misfortune" and fear "by the misfortune of a man like ourselves" (Aristotle translated by Butcher, 2008, p. 45). For each of Mungoshi's female protagonists, pity is aroused because their predicaments certainly are "unmerited", and empathetic fear is aroused as the reader recognises that the patriarchal climate in each narrative cannot allow for any other outcome. The plot facilitates catharsis, which Aristotle defines as the "proper purgation of these emotions" (Aristotle translated by Butcher, 2008, p. 22) with the inevitability of the denouement culminating in the suppression of the female protagonists, but not without first emphasising their inner strength and potential, thus compounding the tragedy in each case:

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<sup>1</sup> Fate and divine influences may play a role in these errors as well.

For the plot ought to be so constructed that, even without the aid of the eye, he who hears the tale told will thrill with horror and melt to pity at what takes Place [sic]. (Aristotle translated by Butcher, 2008, p. 48)

Aristotle's analysis of Greek tragedy focusing on the plot and character is a useful starting point for our modern tragic heroine depicted in Mungoshi's fiction. He likens these two pivotal aspects to a painting which gives "as much pleasure as the chalk outline of a portrait" if the colours are "laid on confusedly", thus likening a poorly implemented plot and character combination to a chalk outline, as opposed to a masterfully completed oil painting. Plot concerns the entire narrative, requiring the "imitation of an action that is complete, and whole,<sup>2</sup> and of a certain magnitude" (Aristotle translated by Butcher, 2008, p. 41) and this is indispensable. It falls to the reversal of the situation (*peripeteia*<sup>3</sup>) and the recognition scenes (*anagnorisis*<sup>4</sup>) to elevate the plot, and thus the entire tragedy, as these are the "most powerful elements of emotional interest in Tragedy" as they turn upon "surprises" (ibid, p. 41). This is why plot is the "soul of a tragedy", and outlines the action by which the characters "are happy or the reverse" (ibid, p. 41). The characters are nothing without plot, even if animated with impressive diction and thought. "Character is that which reveals moral purpose, showing what kind of things a man chooses or avoids" and is linked to thought "where something is proved to be or not to be, or a general maxim is enunciated" (Aristotle translated by Butcher, 2008, p. 27). Therefore, thought is linked to plot and character, because it deals with realism and how believable the situation and characters are. Diction is self-explanatory as it concerns the characters' word choice and meaning, which are essential.

Song and spectacle are less relevant in this contemporary reading of Mungoshi's narratives, as these have more relevance on stage, and in fact, Aristotle himself believed spectacle to hold the least important place as it is "the least artistic, and

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<sup>2</sup> "A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end" (Aristotle translated by Butcher, 2008, p. 29).

<sup>3</sup> *Peripeteia* is the Greek word.

<sup>4</sup> The point in the plot especially of a tragedy at which the protagonist recognizes his or her or some other character's true identity or discovers the true nature of his or her own situation (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, 2015).



connected least with the art of poetry” (Aristotle translated by Butcher, 2008, p. 28). In *Tragedy Reconsidered*, George Steiner asserts that “As our literatures evolve, the concept of tragedy extends far beyond the dramatic genre” (Steiner, 2004, p. 1), which is a viewpoint that resonates with Mungoshi’s interpretation of tragedy in his narratives, as this is an indication that a modern reading of tragedy can (and does) exist beyond plays. It also corroborates the fact that tragedy is constantly evolving. Steiner aims for a “nucleus of supposition” as opposed to a theory of tragedy, to determine an “indispensable core shared by ‘tragedies’” and states that:

This nucleus (*Ur-grund*) is that of “original sin.” Because of that fall or “disgrace,” in the emphatic and etymological sense, the human condition is tragic. It is ontologically tragic, which is to say in essence. Fallen man is made an unwelcome guest of life or, at best, a threatened stranger on this hostile or indifferent earth (Sophocles’ damning word, dwelt on by Heidegger, is *apolis*). Thus the necessary and sufficient premise, the axiomatic constant in tragedy is that of ontological homelessness – witness this motif in Beckett, in Pinter – of alienation or ostracism from the safeguard of licensed being. There is no welcome to the self. This is what tragedy is about. (Steiner, 2004, pp. 2-3)

The classical Greek tragedies that Aristotle developed his theory of tragedy from grapple with contemporary Greek religious beliefs, rather than the Christian notion of original sin, but this definition suggests a broader definition of tragedy. This is necessary to understand Mungoshi’s more contemporary tragic heroines, incorporating both classical and Christian notions linked to tragedy, as well as Steiner’s discussion on “ontological homelessness” (ibid). Each of the women in the stories I explore is “homeless” in the metaphysical sense suggested by Steiner, arguably to a greater extent than that of a male tragic hero in classical tragedies because the situation of the women in the stories is that of the subordinate reliant on a patriarch, thus her homelessness is both figurative and literal as she relies on him for her identity and security. Betty never has her own home; Mrs Pfende is not 'at home' in hers; Kerina battles to establish one; and Serina is evicted from her mother's.

It is this fight for 'a room of one's own'<sup>5</sup> that makes them heroic. They are all trying to find a space to exist.

Arthur Miller's modern definition of tragedy recognises the prerequisite for the existence of a "tragic flaw" in any tragic hero. However, Miller diverges from Aristotle's tragic hero as he emphasises that this tragic flaw is "a failing that is not peculiar to grand or elevated characters" (Miller, 1949, pp. 3-7). Miller asserts that:

If rank or nobility of character was indispensable, then it would follow that the problems of those with rank were the particular problems of tragedy. But surely the right of one monarch to capture the domain from another no longer raises our passions, nor are our concepts of justice what they were to the mind of an Elizabethan king. (Miller, 1949, pp. 3-7)

Thus it stands to reason that if a contemporary audience is no longer primarily interested in the problems of someone of high birth; it can also be inferred that a modern interpretation should include female protagonists as tragic heroines, given that modern writers, like Mungoshi, foreground feminist concerns in aesthetically pleasing plots evoking "pity and fear", and culminating in catharsis. It seems to me that, in Mungoshi's fiction, the author accepts this viewpoint because the people he is dealing with are from the humblest strata of Zimbabwean society. Given Mungoshi's educational background in Rhodesia, he is sufficiently well read to draw upon classical and modern parameters of tragic heroes, and apply these aspects to a feminist portrayal.

Arthur Miller even goes so far as to assert that "the flaw, or crack in the character is really nothing – and needs to be nothing, but his [or her] inherent willingness to remain

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<sup>5</sup> Virginia Woolf wrote an essay entitled "A room of one's own" discussing literary and financial freedom for women. Essentially, it argues for literal and figurative space for women in a patriarchal climate, and although the women in Mungoshi's stories are not writers, they aspire to a space of their own:

... I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked in; and, thinking of the safety and prosperity of the one sex and of the poverty and insecurity of the other and of the effect of tradition and of the lack of tradition upon the mind of a writer, I thought at last that it was time to roll up the crumpled skin of the day, with its arguments and its impressions and its anger and its laughter, and cast it into the hedge (Woolf, 1929, pp. 14-15).

passive in the face of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity, his image of his rightful status” (Miller, 1949, pp. 3-7).

Another pertinent requirement of the classic and modern tragic hero is that:

As a general rule, to which there may be exceptions unknown to me, I think the tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing – his sense of personal dignity. From Orestes to Hamlet, Medea to Macbeth, the underlying struggle is that of the individual attempting to gain his “rightful” position in his society. (Ibid)

Each of the female protagonists to be examined in this dissertation attempts to “secure... a sense of personal dignity” in an oppressively patriarchal climate, but with limited success (if any), although none of them tries to gain their “rightful position” as they are unaware that they can aspire to this, given the cultural constraints that determine their socialisation in a traditional, patriarchal setting.

Curses are an aspect of the supernatural in Greek tragedies, however “[N]ot all tragedies involve a curse, and curses are not crucial in all the plays in which they do appear” (Sewell-Rutter, 2007, p. 1). Curses do play a crucial role in some tragedies, and certainly, in the texts explored in this dissertation, have relevance for the female protagonists under consideration. Defining curses is problematic too, but the supernatural element is the most noteworthy:

A curse has been defined as ‘a prayer that harm may befall someone’, and indeed to treat curses as a species of prayer is fruitful. A more nuanced definition of curses has been articulated by a New Testament scholar [Friedrich Büchsel], who defines a curse as:

a directly expressed or indicated utterance which in virtue of a supernatural nexus of operation brings harm by its very expression to

the one against whom it is directed... The curse can overlap with prayer if its fulfilment is thought to be so dependent on a deity that it must be committed to this deity, and it may even become a prayer if it is requested from the deity.

These two definitions have in common the notion that a curse must be expressed or performed, so that a mere unspoken sentiment of ill-will is excluded from the realm of the curse. The second definition has the additional advantage of recognizing that the supernatural element of cursing may be implicit: not everything that we or the Greeks would call a curse explicitly invokes a divine or supernatural power. (Sewell-Rutter, 2007, p. 3)

Curses do not belong exclusively to Greek tragedy. Fate and the supernatural are central to Shakespearean tragedies and are also pivotal to the plot development in each of Mungoshi's narratives. However, the Ndebele/Shona word for a curse is *ngozi*.<sup>6</sup> For Betty Mandengu, the family curse via her mother's antecedents impacts on her eligibility for marriage. Mrs Pfende's husband carries a curse as a consequence of bartering his ability to have children with supernatural forces for success in business; but it is also her beauty which is a burden to her because Shona society sees it as a curse, while simultaneously (and paradoxically), values it in women. For Kerina Mashamba the curse is similarly her beauty, which hinders her bridal merit in rural Zimbabwe circa 1997 when exquisite good looks were treated suspiciously. Serina Maseko's curse is more acute as she contracts HIV from her errant husband, and the reality for her in the 1990s when the book was started (it took twenty years to write according to the book's "Dedication", and Mungoshi was still perusing it in 2010 when he fell into a coma), meant that the character had little prospect of living a long life:

The story is drawn from the period of time before the advent of Anti Retro Viral Therapy use in the management of the Acquired Immuno-Deficiency Syndrome

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<sup>6</sup> "The restless and vengeful spirits of people who died aggrieved." (Owomoyela, 2002, p. 37)

(AIDS), when being diagnosed as having the infection was an automatic death sentence. (Mungoshi, 2013, Foreword by Oliver D Mtukudzi)

The critics who have discussed the position of women in Mungoshi's fiction have predominantly taken the stance that he represents women as stronger than their male counterparts. In his article discussing *Walking Still*, Mbongeni Z Malaba states that “[t]he female characters in his works are often far more admirable than the males, who are either weak, unprincipled or pathetic, as seen in the stories ‘Of Lovers and Wives’, ‘The Little Wooden Hut in the Forest’ and ‘The Singer at the Wedding’” (Malaba, 1997, p. 14). Florence Stratton states that:

Through his portrayal of Betty, Mungoshi focuses his concern on the plight of the women of this generation, a theme which he explores in several of his short stories... Betty does, however, in defiance of all traditions, take matters into her own hands... [by falling pregnant]. This is the only event in her life that has any meaning for her. (Stratton, 1986, p. 16)

Mrs Pfende is discussed critically by Rosemary Moyana, who believes that Mungoshi's portrayal of her is “a form of abuse because it is as if women are not capable of relating to their spouses normally without either being abused themselves or abusing others” (Vambe & Chirere, 2006, p. 159). However, she does agree that Mrs Pfende “belongs to a group of women that does not suffer in silence” (ibid). After discussing the female protagonists in *Walking Still*, Moyana surmises that:

The female characters in the stories discussed in this section try to fight the ‘system’ in one way or another, but they all fail to win their battles... Not only do women fail to achieve some kind of emancipation, but also two of them become physical sacrifices for crimes committed by men in the distant past. (Ibid, p. 162)

This emphasises the fact that their predicaments are foregrounded by Mungoshi through women who “fight the ‘system’”, but (tragically) fail to overcome the entrenched patriarchal order. However, Moyana concludes by arguing that “the

negative images of women in Mungoshi's works are indicative of the author's failure to produce images of alternative womanhood outside those stereotypes that men use to control women" (Vambe & Chirere, 2006, p. 164). This is a stance which I believe does not accord him sufficient credit for highlighting the tragic predicaments being deliberately foregrounded by Mungoshi. Malaba argues that Mungoshi deliberately undermines the stereotypical assumptions regarding women (Malaba, 2007b, p. 1).

In *Introduction to Zimbabwean Literature in English* Rino Zhuwarara discusses *Waiting for the Rain* and notes "the deep uncertainty and the confusion which has gripped African society that is caught between the African past and its demands and the colonial present with its new religion" and states that a "cultural synthesis has not yet emerged" (Zhuwarara, 2001, p. 64). Zhuwarara alludes to Mr Pfende's curse in "The Day the Bread Van Didn't Come" when she states:

Unlike the usual situation where the woman is blamed for failure to conceive, in Mrs Pfende's case it is the husband who is at fault and who feels insecure all the time [and that] [p]art of her misfortune then was that her beauty, which should be an asset, had been used by relatives and society against her. (Ibid p. 88)

When analysing "The Little Wooden Hut in the Forest" Zhuwarara details Kerina's predicament in a patriarchal Zimbabwe with "limited opportunities for women and, as such, like any other woman of her time, her ambition is to get married and have children. Paradoxically her beauty, which should be an asset, turns out to be her achilles [sic] heel" (ibid, p. 120). Fortunately, this collection of stories culminates in Kerina's story that ends optimistically according to Zhuwarara, who believes that it finally allows a "happy ending which in fact is also a new beginning for the family. (Ibid, p. 123)

In their article entitled "The Vulnerability of Mankind", Felix P Mapako and Rugare Mureva assert that:

[Mungoshi's] works generally portray the gloomy side of life, the life which existentialists view as instilling in each one of us, a sense of discomfort, anguish and anxiety. Indeed, both the city and the countryside expose the powerlessness and susceptibility of people, particularly in the Third World, who are part of a society whose own identity, value and beliefs are slowly being undermined and warped by globalisation in which Western culture is dominant. (Mapako & Mareva, 2013, p. 1570)

The concept of existentialism and its link to feminism is not a new concept, and in fact De Beauvoir (whose ideas on the *The Second Sex* have relevance when considering Mungoshi's tragic heroines) "explicitly positioned herself not as a woman or as a feminist, but as an existentialist" (Nye, 1988, p. 82). Her theory postulates the following:

Each human being is a subject reaching towards transcendence and there is no other justification for existence than this movement towards an empty future. The worse evil is to fall into objectness or to inflict such a fate on someone else. It is in these terms that De Beauvoir proposed to understand the situation of woman. Men have denied her transcendence, have made her a thing. (Ibid)

When "transcendence" is refused, "women are denied access to the highest human values – heroism, revolt, detachment, invention, creation" (ibid, p. 84). It becomes apparent that De Beauvoir believes that women accept this oppression for a number of reasons, the first of which being "the bad faith of men" who "want her as an object, an inferior, a will-less being" and "encourage her weakness, punish her self-assertion, make her dependent, tantalise her with the 'barbed hook' of courtesy and adoration" (ibid). The concept of transcendence is examined with Kerina and Serina in the final two chapters when we look at how Mungoshi's characters evolve from being trapped by their predicaments, like Betty and Mrs Pfende, to achieving a form of liberation or wholeness, albeit severely limited because the plot must be grounded in realism for it to be a credible social commentary. Mungoshi proposes that transcendence is possible, and his female protagonists reveal "heroism, revolt, detachment, invention, (and) creation" (Nye, 1988, pp. 82, 84).

*The Second Sex* (De Beauvoir, 1972) considers the status of women as the 'other' or 'the second sex', and De Beauvoir states:

The relation of the two sexes is not that of two electrical poles: the man represents both the positive and neuter to such an extent that in French *hommes* designates human beings, the particular meaning of the word *vir*<sup>7</sup> being assimilated into the general meaning of the word 'homo'. Woman is the negative, to such a point that any determination is imputed to her as a limitation, without reciprocity. (De Beauvoir translated by Borde & Malovany-Chevallier, 2009, p. 25)

Mungoshi exposes the fallacy of this apparent 'norm' by contrasting the women in his stories with men who are weak and shallow. With regard to men representing what is normal, De Beauvoir also refers to Aristotle in her introduction to her discussion on how man "grasps his body as a direct and normal link with the world" (ibid). Conversely, a woman's body is negative, "an obstacle, a prison, burdened by everything that particularises it" (ibid), which is sadly true for Betty (although she does manage to distort this imprisonment, albeit momentarily):

"The female is female by virtue of a certain *lack* of qualities," Aristotle said. "We should regard women's nature as suffering from natural defectiveness." And St Thomas in his turn decreed that woman was an 'incomplete man', and 'incidental' being. This is what the Genesis story symbolises, where Eve appears as if drawn from Adam's 'supernumerary' bone, in Bossuet's word. Humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being. (Ibid, p. 26)

Linked to Betty's rebellion against the stigma of the "second sex" in her family is the concept of "Womanpower" as outlined by Germaine Greer. Mrs Pfende, whose morality might be questionable, is still portrayed as indomitable, and Kerina is

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<sup>7</sup> *Harper's Latin Dictionary* (1879) defines the word *vir* as: "vir, a male person, a man."



“powerful” even if she accepts an abuser as a husband, because she succeeds in her quest to self-actualise as a mother and wife. However, the concept of Womanpower is most evident in Serina who completely redefines her own parameters in patriarchal Zimbabwe circa 1990. According to Greer, Womanpower is defined as follows:

Womanpower means the self-determination of women, and that means that all the baggage of paternalist society will have to be thrown overboard. Woman must have room and scope to devise a morality which does not disqualify her from excellence, and a psychology which does not condemn her to the status of a spiritual cripple. The penalties for such delinquency may be terrible for she must explore the dark without any guide. It may seem at first that she merely exchanges one mode of suffering for another, one neurosis for another. But she may at last claim to have made a definite choice which is the first prerequisite of moral action. She may never herself see the ultimate goal, for the fabric of society is not unravelled in a single lifetime, but she may state it as her belief and find hope in it. (Greer, 2006, p. 130)

If Womanpower is “the self-determination of women” (ibid), then a link can be made with Alice Walker’s first definition of a Womanist to describe the experience of the black feminist as: “Responsible. In charge. Serious” (Walker, 1984: xi-xii). Walker defines the concept of a Womanist in four parts. The first part of the definition of Womanist states:

Womanist 1. From *womanish*. (Opp. of “girlish”, i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “You acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or wilful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.” Responsible. In charge. *Serious*. (Walker, 1984: xi-xii)

What is striking is how Betty, Mrs Pfende, Kerina and Serina all embody the Womanist sense outlined in definition (1), as they refuse to be infantilised and want to be “grown”, by demonstrating “outrageous, audacious, courageous or wilful behavior” (ibid). The concept of Womanpower is patently related to Womanism, as both entail self-determination, and being “Responsible. In charge. *Serious*” (ibid).

The second part of the definition of Womanist deals with sexuality and a woman’s strength, the latter evident in all four of the feminist heroines in the texts under discussion to some extent:

2. *Also*: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as a natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: “Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?” Ans.: “Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.” Traditionally capable, as in: “Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.” Reply: “It wouldn’t be the first time.” (Ibid)

The third part of the definition of a Womanist can be applied to the strong woman Serina becomes as she learns how to love herself and find her place in the world despite overwhelming opposition. Walker’s third part of the definition states that a Womanist:

3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless. (Ibid)

The essence of the fourth definition suggests that there certainly are aspects of feminism that relate to all of womankind (which she describes as “lavender”); however,

the nuances, or tones, for black women are part of their own, unique experience (a deeper “purple” hue):

4. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender. (Ibid)

This final definition seems to suggest that there are certain truths applicable to both feminists and Womanists, and that any variance is a question of hue. Thus, both Womanpower and Womanism are apt lenses for considering the black female characters in Mungoshi’s narratives, especially with regard to Serina, who most embodies the first definition of Womanism as she becomes “grown up” and “Responsible. In charge. *Serious*” (ibid) when she manages to thrive despite her circumstances.

Evaluating how applicable a classical feminist approach is to a Zimbabwean writer, generally classified as a feminist writer, is not without controversy. In African literary circles, there is a debate about the “tension” between classical feminism and Womanism when considering African writers. However, both of these designations, or labels, fit Mungoshi. Kirsten Holst Petersen discusses this tension:

One obvious and very important area of difference is this: whereas Western feminists discuss the relative importance of feminist versus class emancipation, the African discussion is between feminist emancipation versus the fight against neo-colonialism, particularly in its cultural aspect. In other words, which is the more important, which comes first, the fight for female equality or the fight against Western cultural imperialism? (Petersen, 1984, pp. 35-36)

This dissertation argues that second wave feminism is a useful starting point as these theories “interrogate [these] patriarchal assumptions” (Chakravarty, 2008, pp. 41-42). Furthermore “[t]hey challenge the stereotyping of women in art and literature, the traditional representations that use the female body to articulate the ideals of order and beauty and demonstrate the ways in which the male gaze has been internalized by women, who thus participate in the process of their own subjugation” (ibid).

Chikwenye Ogunyemi's discussion specifically considers the dynamics of feminism in writing by black women that focuses on black patriarchy as the oppressive force:

Black women are disadvantaged in several ways: as blacks they, with their men, are victims of a white patriarchal culture; as women they are victimized by black men; and as black women they are also victimized on racial, sexual, and class grounds by white men. In order to cope, Emecheta largely ignores such complexities and deals mainly with the black woman as victim of black patriarchy. (Ogunyemi, 1985, p. 67)

Parallels can be drawn between the concerns detailed above with the representation of women in the Mungoshi's fiction. The focus of this dissertation is Mungoshi's concern with the "black woman as victim of black patriarchy" (ibid) in the narratives discussed, and not with white patriarchal structures. This means that even if he is concerned with the plight of black women under patriarchal rule in Zimbabwe, and Womanism is relevant, there are specific foundational feminist texts, which one might argue, are relevant for all women. One cannot underestimate Mungoshi's engaging openness to the "the Other" (De Beauvoir translated by Borde & Malovany-Chevallier, 2009, p. 29) in broader contexts too, as is reflected in the manner in which he draws upon aspects of traditional African beliefs, Christianity and Islam in his works. This concern with "the Other" (ibid) is further demonstrated when one considers the emphasis Mungoshi place on his female characters' oppression in their patriarchal environments. Malaba asserts that Mungoshi "foregrounds the misogyny that lies at the heart of the men's attitude to women" (Malaba, 2007a, p. 5). This misogyny features prominently in the attitudes of the principal male figures in the lives of these characters. Betty's father treats her like a child, and her lover treats her as a receptacle, Mrs Pfende belongs to her husband and is excluded from her children's lives, Kerina is also a receptacle and is treated abominably by Gavi, and Serina is abandoned after being infected with HIV by Michael. Each woman is a "victim of black patriarchy" (Ogunyemi, 1985, p. 67).

In Lindsay Aegerter's essay "Southern Africa, Womanism, and Postcoloniality: A Dialectic Approach", she discusses how "colonized peoples do not live their lives only

in response to oppression; they live in spite of it” (Gover, Conteh-Morgan, & Bryce, 2000, p. 67), which is a viewpoint which resonates with Mungoshi’s strong female protagonists who do not buckle under patriarchy. Aegerter also states that to “ignore Western influence and look for some ‘authentic’ original precolonial ‘African’ identity, and to try to negate the horrors of colonisation, however, is naïve and unrealistic, and equally reductive”. However, the question of colonial influence is not the central concern of the stories under examination in this dissertation, nor for that matter, in Mungoshi’s works written in English.<sup>8</sup> Whilst acknowledging the usefulness of Womanism, Aegerter appears to oppose a “one or the other” approach to an interpretation that excludes Western influences when she states:

Womanism, a philosophy that has “wholeness” and “healing” for all Black peoples as its aim, offers a helpful dialectical paradigm that might allow us a vision of postcoloniality that does not dichotomize southern African experience into pre- and post-colonial periods, Western and African cultures, oppressor and oppressed, colonizer and colonized, Black and White, men and women. (Gover et al., 2000, p. 67)

This is demonstrated by the fact that Mungoshi’s stories range from the colonial era, in *Waiting for the Rain* (1975), to the postcolonial era, in *Walking Still* (1997), and by the fact that *Branching Streams Flow in the Dark* (2013) straddles the pre- and post-colonial periods, given the length of time it took to complete. Mungoshi foregrounds the experience of women oppressed by patriarchal structures where the emphasis is not on the oppression by the “colonizer” on the “colonized” (ibid), but rather on the oppression of Zimbabwean women by black patriarchy.

Attempting to apply the most apt lens to a discussion on feminism in any African text is problematic. The debate on defining feminism in Zimbabwe specifically was addressed by Emmanuel Ngaru who was criticised by Ama Ata Aidoo during a

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<sup>8</sup> Whilst the impoverishment of the black protagonists in *Waiting for the Rain* is directly linked to land alienation by the settlers; only one of the ten stories in *Coming of the Dry Season* features a white character. In *Some Kind of Wounds* one in nine stories has a prominent white character. In *Walking Still* two of the nine stories deal in race relations in independent Zimbabwe.

discussion on Buchi Emecheta's paper titled "Feminism with a small 'f'!" A record of their discussion follows:

Emmanual Ngara: I would like to suggest that we must distinguish between feminism and what our women are fighting for. I may be mistaken, but from what I know of the women of Zimbabwe, the idea of feminism is something which they don't entertain. They are interested in creating a more humane society, where the question of equity is addressed. (Petersen, 1988, p. 184)

Aidoo responded by saying:

A.A.A.: I think we are in danger of being misunderstood and misinterpreted. One man says: 'Oh, don't talk about feminism, because that is a Western influence.' Then when we say that as a matter of fact when we voice our problems we are not necessarily just parroting somebody's notion of feminism, then you say: 'Why are you afraid of doing that?' It is becoming a fairly slippery area for us. It seems as if we cannot say anything right, at this juncture of the discussion. (Ibid)

Earlier in the discussion, Aidoo had said that:

A.A.A: ... Anytime it is suggested that somehow one is important we hear that feminism is something that has been imported into Africa to ruin nice relationships between African women and African men. To try to remind ourselves and our brothers and lovers and husbands and colleagues that we also exist should not be taken as something foreign, as something bad. African women struggling both on behalf of themselves and on behalf of the wider community is very much a part of our heritage. It is not new and I really refuse to be told I am learning feminism from abroad, from Lapland... (Ibid, p. 183)

One might argue that defining African feminism for the whole of Africa might be reductive because every country faces different challenges. The question of a

women's movement in Zimbabwe was discussed in a paper by Everjoice Win in 2004 who asked:

How can we manage diversity and difference among us, particularly if we have different values and core principles? How can we maintain a level of cohesion, but at the same time address the real political issues at stake for Zimbabwean women? And what is the price to be paid for confronting diversity? (Win, 2004, pp. 19-20)

Win makes a case for a coalition, which will be successful if it recognises "the diversity of values and principles which exists within them" (ibid, p. 26):

Women's networks and coalitions can be one of the most potent forces for claiming women's rights. If they are based on commonly agreed values and principles, coalitions can manage their own diversity in changing political circumstances. But if they merely work on common issues and do not recognise the diversity of values and principles which exists within them, coalitions will immobilise themselves. (Ibid)

Mungoshi locates his female tragic heroes as central to Zimbabwean life and its stories and offers his own critique of African and, to a lesser extent, in the narratives under discussion colonial patriarchies. This dissertation often utilises second wave feminist lenses to analyse the plight of the feminist heroines under discussion. There is tension between the four waves of feminism because the concerns of women in different settings, periods and cultures vary greatly. First wave feminism is accused of being concerned with the white middle class; it is generally felt that second and third wave feminism, including Womanism, broadened the issues addressed; but it is still difficult to determine the parameters for *African* Feminism because of vastly different cultural settings women face. For example, the experience of an African American woman and a Shona woman in Zimbabwe will be impossible to standardise under one school of thought. With regard to third wave feminism, Ruvimbo Goredema argues that "[t]here is an understandable misinterpretation which regards African feminism as a part of Third Wave feminism, however, it is within the realm of the Third Wave feminist

interpretation that the tensions between race and culture begin to appear” (Goredema, 2010, p. 34). Despite this separation from the feminist “waves” that preceded African feminism, Goredema agrees that feminist perspectives emanating from Europe and the West are a relevant starting point to understanding feminist studies:

Within Africa, in both social and most academic environments, there seems to be an agreement about what feminism is, and that its source originates from European and American (hereafter referred to as Western) definitions. This is because traditionally and geographically the West has provided the disposition and the strategies associated with this movement. (Ibid)

This viewpoint is not in opposition to any other schools of thought regarding feminist discourse, but rather recognises Western definitions as a useful starting point, albeit with different experiences which need to be contextualised in any analysis.

In *Placing Women in History: Definitions and Challenges* Gerda Lerner discussed how women “have a different experience with respect to consciousness, depending on whether their work, their expression, their activity is male-defined or woman-orientated. Women, like men, are indoctrinated in a male-defined value system and conduct their lives accordingly” (Lerner, 1975, p. 5). She goes on to say:

Essentially, treating women as victims of oppression once again places them in a male-defined conceptual framework: oppressed, victimized by standards and values established by men. The true history of women is the history of their ongoing functioning in the male-defined world, on their own terms. The question of oppression does not elicit that story, and is therefore a tool of limited usefulness to the historian. (Ibid, p. 6)

Mungoshi portrays women as living within male-defined parameters, but surviving oppression, and for Betty and Serina at least, setting their own parameters despite this hindrance. It is difficult to argue that the female characters in his narratives are not oppressed, but they are often portrayed as stronger than their male counterparts, and this reflects their “ongoing functioning in the male-defined world, on their own terms”



(ibid). This is certainly true for each of the female protagonists discussed in this dissertation.

In the first chapter of this dissertation, Betty Mandengu's quandary is considered as she takes matters into her own hands as death is preferable to a lifetime as a 'child'. She uses her womanly attributes to explore her womanhood. There is a sense that her lack is not physical and that she might be considered attractive were it not for the family curse. She is taught that her virginity is more important than anything else she might have to offer, and yet she fails to get married and the text suggests she will lose the child she is carrying. Naomi Wolf discusses the fallacy of this apparent, and changeable, feminine power in *The Beauty Myth*:

The beauty myth tells a story: The quality called 'beauty' objectively and universally exists. Women must want to embody it and men must want to possess women who embody it. This embodiment is an imperative for women and not for men, which situation is necessary and natural because it is biological, sexual, and evolutionary: Strong men battle for beautiful women, and beautiful women are more reproductively successful. Women's beauty must correlate to their fertility, and since this system is based on sexual selection, it is inevitable and changeless... None of this is true. 'Beauty' is a currency system like the gold standard. (Wolf, 2002, p. 12)

Beautiful women are the typical heroines in writing, and Naomi Wolf cites the example of Tess of the D'Urbervilles (amongst others) to whom interesting things happen because of her beauty, unlike her friends who, not being "blessed or cursed with her beauty, stayed in the muddy provinces to carry on the agricultural drudgery that is not the stuff of novels" (ibid, p. 61). The beautiful women in stories are those to whom things happen, but nothing happens to Betty until she makes it happen, and she is saved from "agricultural drudgery" (ibid). Naomi Wolf asserts:

Women's writing, on the other hand, turn the myth on its head. Female culture's greatest writers share the search for radiance, a beauty that has meaning. The battle between the overvalued beauty and the undervalued,

unglamorous but animated heroine forms the spine of the women's novel.  
(Wolf, 2002, p. 60)

Mungoshi is not a woman, but the fact that he turns the myth "on its head" (ibid) in each of his stories suggests that he is concerned with the oppression of women. His heroines are not the subject of his fiction because of their beauty, but rather in spite of it. Each of them has to seek change and subvert cultural norms to challenge the status quo, despite enormous pressure to follow custom.

In the second chapter of this research project, Mrs Pfende is similarly 'cursed' for being attractive. However, in her case, it is her husband's 'deal with the devil' that ultimately gilds her cage, and denies her the chance to have children to replace those she lost to her late husband's family. Mrs Pfende is the least sympathetic of the four women examined because her predicament taints and twists her. Mrs Pfende embodies a warped version of Womanpower that mocks and scorns her spineless husband, and attempts to embark on an extramarital affair with very little regard for his feelings.

In the third chapter of this study, Kerina Mashamba is also regarded with suspicion by members of her community because of her beauty. For Kerina this beauty is a curse as she is suspected of being a witch. This accusation is unfounded; however, her story does have supernatural elements woven throughout. Malaba corroborates the view that beauty is a curse for Kerina, and other beautiful women:

Kerina is good enough to have a fling with, but not good enough to marry. The men seem to project their sense of inadequacy onto beautiful women – it is rumoured that she is cursed and she ends up believing this. No concrete evidence emerges to confirm this view, but the destructive powers of rumours and innuendo seriously undermine her social standing. (Malaba, 2007a, p. 5)

Kerina is able to subvert her curse and secure a marriage, but the reader knows her life will be difficult because her husband is crude and cruel. A contemporary audience is impressed by her tenacity, but also realises that her fairy tale is ominous, and this not only embodies the elements of a tragedy, but is also tragic in a more literal sense.

She cannot self-actualise without being married, and for this ideal, she compromises to the point of mortal peril.

In the fourth chapter of this dissertation, Serina Maseko achieves all the accolades of married life and the privileges attached to her union, only to have these subverted by the HIV curse. Serina is a true heroine as her fall from grace seems comprehensive, but she ekes out an existence, and in time, flourishes. A completely happy ending is not possible as her HIV status was a death sentence when Mungoshi began writing the book, however, the denouement satisfactorily unravels her situation, and in a sense, a “happily ever after” seems palpable for this tragic heroine.

## Chapter 1: Betty Mandengu and the Family Curse

### 'Prayer'

It would be very convenient now  
to kneel down in the gritty sand  
and beat my chest  
and rend my garments  
and cry out: "Why me, O Lord?"  
It would be an admirable thing to do  
if it weren't for the refrain  
running beneath it all:  
"Do you see me now, Lord?  
Aren't I just wonderful!"  
Until, just like the worst  
of all the best of us  
I, too, am ambushed  
before I have made  
my last prayer. (Mungoshi, 2002)

When considering the setting of *Waiting for the Rain* (1975) during the War of Liberation, Kizito Muchemwa's discussion in *Charles Mungoshi, A Critical Reader* is helpful, as he expounds that "to go beyond colonialism in search of symbols, myths and discourse that articulate a common past and a common destiny has posed challenges" and therefore "the writer quarries to find myths that validate and interpret the modern experience" (Vambe & Chirere, 2006, p. 37). In *Waiting for the Rain*, Muchemwa explains that this "myth... relies on the principles of exclusion, ethnic purity, tribal<sup>9</sup> navel gazing, and fear of the other" (ibid, p. 38). In other words, Mungoshi has written a novel which explores the experience of a disaffected family in tribal lands (a technical term in this instance as black areas were described as 'Tribal Trust Lands' by the Rhodesian government), which mirrors the status quo for many such families at the time, who battled to find their place in a changing landscape. This is an important consideration as this is the world that Betty Mandengu (and her family) inhabits, with a "warrior ethic" that "demands that the clan adopt violence against the

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<sup>9</sup> He states that "tribalism is an unreflecting adherence to belief systems that are dated and inconsistent with the judicial and ethical norms of the modern nation state as shown in the choice of the victim to be used for human sacrifice by Tongoono's family" (Vambe & Chirere, 2006, p. 38).

other as a strategy in ethnic survival” (ibid). This is not to say that the novel completely disparages Rhodesian culture circa 1975, which would have been in a state of flux during the hardships of war, but rather that it was “[w]ritten in the days of stringent colonial censorship of nationalist discourse, during the War of Liberation and at the height of colonial propaganda, [and so] *Waiting for the Rain* can be read as the articulation of the politics of resistance” (Muchemwa & Muponde, 2007, p. 43). Even though *Waiting for the Rain* is set around the time of the War of Liberation, Neil ten Kortenaar states that it “ignores politics almost altogether in order to focus on a single and singularly dysfunctional family” (ibid, p. 31). This demonstrates that the focus is the familial stress; however, the climate at the time must have a direct bearing on the circumstances of the Mandengu family, and on Betty’s quandary, because it sets the scene for disillusionment and estrangement of the Mandengu family from the wider community. This disaffection has an impact on patriarchal structures at the time and place the novel is set – Rhodesia 1975 in a remote tribal area – which resonates throughout the novel. Betty Mandengu is a victim of the prevalent patriarchal apathy towards the position of women in society, but in contrast to her male counterparts, actively seeks to subvert it without running away (as both of her brothers, Garabha and Lucifer do, in different ways).

Ezra Chitando and Pauline Mateveke agree that “publications focusing on Zimbabwean women during the colonial period (see, for example, Schmidt 1992; Jeater 1993; Barnes 1999) and during the liberation struggle... have indicated that the status of women in Zimbabwe is shaped by the patriarchal ideology that informs the indigenous culture” (Chitando & Mateveke, 2012, p. 41). They go on to state that:

Although in indigenous cultures women could play important roles in rituals and as spirit mediums and healers, the ancestral cult was (and remains) based on the ‘rule by the fathers’. Women remain(ed) as outsiders (vatorwa) to the families they would have married into. It is the male child who is treasured as he ensures that the lineage and homestead avoid the greatest existential threat: extinction (dongo). The boy child is therefore socialized to command, while the girl child is taught the value of obedience. (Ibid, p. 43)

This certainly is the case for Betty Mandengu, whose brothers carry the family's hope for the future, specifically Lucifer for whom some doors appear to be open, whilst Betty is expected to be meek and subservient as noted by Muchemwa:

Betty's plight is the unspoken plight of the girl child in colonial Rhodesia who is deliberately excluded from the emancipatory discourse of modernity associated with modern education. (Vambe & Chirere, 2006, p. 52)

Betty Mandengu is regarded as a perpetual minor by her father, and is overlooked as a potential wife by the eligible bachelors in her neighbourhood. She is the obstinate teenager on the cusp of womanhood, who is taunted by her father, but has no home of her own to go to, and it is this predicament that elicits feelings of pity and fear from the reader. This is not to say that the novel proposes that the only ideal for any women to aspire to is marriage and the status this brings, but rather the recognition that for Betty, in rural Rhodesia, there is little else she can hope for without any means to find meaning in her life any other way. She has not been educated like her brother Lucifer, nor can she find gainful employment in her remote tribal land. Betty is, to all intents and purposes, the 'woman on the shelf', or the derided spinster, given that a woman her age might already have been married, or at least be betrothed to be married. Betty's problem is not uncommon in Africa and is discussed by Petersen who states:

If the discussion of women's role in traditional societies is fraught with difficulties, the discussion of women's role in urban African society (both transitional and modern) is no simpler. There seems to be a general consensus among sociologists that the position of women deteriorated during the colonial period. This was mainly due to the large-scale movement from rural areas into the extended slums of the new colonial centres like Nairobi and Lagos. The traditional tribal extended family mode of production clashed with the competitive individualism of the capitalist mode of production, and initially this left no or very little room for women. They lost their vital economic role as food producers, and their strict adherence to ascribed roles in a family hierarchy (they could be wives, mothers, sisters or daughters) puts an attempt at individual achievement outside their scope. According to Kenneth Little, they

had a choice of three basic possibilities: they could be wives, thus remaining completely within the traditional sphere; they could become petty traders and thereby regain some of their importance to the economy; or they could become prostitutes (Little, 1973). The last option was obviously disreputable, but it was the only opportunity for women to decide their own destiny and improve their economic position as it was outside the jurisdiction of traditional society. (Petersen, 1984, pp. 39-40)

Betty's status as the "second sex" is evident throughout the novel, but never more so than when Tongoona reminds her that not even her blankets are her own: "Since when have you ever owned a blanket in this place? Was it your money that bought those blankets?" (Mungoshi, 1975, p. 57.) Despite being treated like a child under the absolute authority of her father, our suspicions about her sexual maturity are aroused early on when she is unable to fit into her sister's dress and she speaks of "jumping a period" (ibid, p. 38). It might appear at first glance that her flaw is that she fails to seek an alternative to her predicament, and remains within a family that does nothing to support her, but there is no alternative. Instead, Betty does not capitulate to patriarchy and chooses to rebel against these structures in the only way that has any meaning for her, which points to a deeper consciousness of how she can validate an independent identity.

Her rebellion stems from a sense of deep disappointment over her predicament, and her family members. They also hear the gossip about her status as a spinster, but choose not to act, presumably because the *ngozi's* power has paralysed them, as even Matandangoma concedes that her previous attempts to lift the curse have been unsuccessful. For modern tragedy to include women, the term "flaw" needs to be broadened to include circumstances beyond their control. A woman's juvenile status in a patriarchal Rhodesia circa 1975 rendered women in rural areas, like Betty, perpetually poor, as the patriarch always holds all of the wealth, if any. These women often had inadequate education, and might also have been trapped in a barren wasteland, with few rights within the confines of their families. This is Betty's predicament, which elicits feelings of pity and fear, fulfilling Aristotle's requirement that "he who hears the tale told will thrill with horror and melt to pity at what takes Place"

(Aristotle translated by Butcher, 2008, p. 48) as just noted, because one recognises that there is very little Betty can do to change her circumstances. What makes Betty so remarkable is that she still tries.

Early on in the novel, John asks Betty about her plans to go to Salisbury<sup>10</sup>, and she “winces at John’s thoughtlessness” because she told him this “as a secret... because she was bored sick with her life at home” (Mungoshi, 1975, p. 28). If Betty had any intention of actually running away, her first obstacle would be finding the bus fare. The fact is she does not have the means to escape the hostile environment that she is imprisoned in, and his indiscretion embarrasses her. Suicide does not cross her mind either, which also indicates tenacity in Betty that earns the admiration of readers. She will not admit defeat, and her rebellion foregrounds her personal and moral courage in taking on her society that disparages women. Despite Betty’s untenable situation, it is noteworthy at the outset that her “ongoing functioning in the male-defined world” (Lerner, 1975, p. 6) on her own terms is evident. The idea of a pregnancy sustains and satisfies Betty. The reversal of her situation is alluded to when she speaks of a “storm when this comes to light” (Mungoshi, 1975, p. 38), which links ironically to the book’s title *Waiting for the Rain*. The inference is that this is part of the rain that will come, and not the rain they are hoping for. They hope for a plentiful rain leading to the family’s success and endurance, but instead they experience a storm of emotion with no one’s thirst quenched at the end of the book, apart from Lucifer’s longing to escape from his own family.

Betty, as a tragic heroine, fits the requirements for the “common (wo)man”, at the same time as she challenges Arthur Miller’s modern tragic hero whose “flaw, or crack in the character is... his inherent willingness to remain passive in the face of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity, his image of his rightful status” (Miller, 1949, pp. 3-7). She certainly is “common” in that she is ordinary and unremarkable when one considers her status as a Rhodesian woman in a rural area under the protection of her father. However, she is remarkable as she refuses to “remain passive”, and takes the “challenge to her dignity” encapsulated by society’s ridicule, and her family’s failure to help her, as motivation for the path she chooses. The fact that she might be

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<sup>10</sup> Harare before independence.



pregnant “cheers her up” and “knowing that even now it may be already too late to hide anything from the prying eyes of the bush and the sharp ears of the rocks” (Mungoshi, 1975, p. 38) should terrify her, but is instead a satisfying thought to Betty. The depiction of the bush as having “prying eyes” and the rocks as having “sharp ears”, starkly depicts Betty’s alienation from the landscape she inhabits, as well as the society which watches and mocks her. On a literal level, as an unmarried woman her movements certainly are ‘policed’ by anyone lurking in the bushes and rocks. Yet despite this, she is strong enough to challenge tradition and “prove” that she is a desirable, fertile woman, in line with the patriarchal norm that she has been socialised to accept. Her determination in the face of this imminent danger increases the tension, and intensifies the “thrill” and “horror” (Aristotle translated by Butcher, 2008, p. 48) of her story, and supports a reading of Mungoshi’s portrayal of “Womanpower” in her character. Greer discusses “Womanpower”, which is not a call for equality, but rather for liberation, in *The Female Eunuch* (2006). This then is what Betty is trying to achieve, but it is a metaphorical liberation because she cannot hope for a complete and literal liberation from her circumstances in the environment she lives in. As Greer puts it:

She may never herself see the ultimate goal, for the fabric of society is not unravelled in a single lifetime, but she may state it as her belief and find hope in it. (Greer, 2006, p. 130)

Betty is aware that she may face death as she is pregnant, but when Matandangoma divines her condition, Betty believes that “a rope around her neck wouldn’t have been wise either” (Mungoshi, 1975, p. 38). This does not mean that Betty is suicidal, but rather that life has no meaning without a child, marriage and her own family, and so she is prepared to risk everything in her rebellion. A pregnancy will give her life meaning, and when she dies, “there will be that satisfaction (touching her belly). She *is* a woman. And isn’t that the only difference between dead and alive? She *is* a mother” (ibid, p. 38). Pregnancy is a form of self-affirmation, redemption in her own eyes, and a challenge to societal norms. Betty transgresses the societal value that frowns upon pre-marital sex, which can be seen as “flawed, mistaken and partially appropriate ethical behaviour and with issues that the cultural system and dominant

morality sacrifice or devalue” (Foley, 2001, p. 118). In fact, it amounts to much more than this as it is a rebellion against the yardstick of judgement for her specific situation, and so her “flaw” can be seen as a brave assertion of her rights. Betty understands that to be emancipated she needs to find fulfilment in her position in society, which is inextricably linked to womanhood, and this demonstrates Mungoshi’s intuitive concern with Womanism because she is represented as, in Alice Walker’s idiom: “Wanting to know more and in great depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: ‘You trying to be grown’” (Walker, 1984: xi-xii). Betty cannot see any other way to become emancipated, and achieve the prime status as a mother as there are no other avenues available to her, besides the “hammer and anvil”, “sodomasochistic hook-up” that Greer derides:

If women understand by emancipation the adoption of the masculine role then we are lost indeed. If women can supply no counterbalance to the blindness of the male drive the aggressive society will run to its lunatic extremes at ever-escalating speed. Who will safeguard the despised animal faculties of compassion, empathy, innocence and sensuality? ... Most women who have arrived at positions of power in a man’s world have done so by adopting masculine methods which are not incompatible with the masquerade of femininity. They still exploit the sodomasochistic hook-up of the sexes, in which ‘we have only the choice of being hammer or anvil’. (Greer, 2006, p. 130)

Betty might lose the pregnancy, but her fearless attempt to find meaning in her life means that she is (briefly) empowered despite the hammering she has been promised by her father once the missionary has left with Lucifer. There are no other choices available to Betty.

The lack of choice for women in *Waiting for the Rain* is exposed in the portrayal of the marriage union, which is a place of ridicule and familiar abuse. This is evident in the relationships of Tongoona and Raina and Sekuru and Japi, where the husband is often emasculated through ridicule, as is the case in the former; or seen in his impotent

verbal abuse of his wife, as in the latter. Lucifer recognizes it when he thinks back to his mother's attitude towards men:

And even then, Lucifer doesn't fail to notice a kind of female resentment or malice – just a slight hint of scornful laughter mixed with anxiety and fear, against men – in his mother's voice. He feels his father has been unfairly cruel to her. (Mungoshi, 1975, p. 75)

Raina ridicules and supports her husband, derides and obeys him. This is a relationship of contrasts, where, conversely, Tongoona subjugates, but also fears Raina. Women are verbally and (sometimes) physically abused, as they are the Other, subservient, but not powerless. Tongoona understands Raina's power in death and explains this to Lucifer. The fear of *ngozi* is apparent in the relationship between Raina and Tongoona, who tells Lucifer to be careful of his grandmother's and mother's displeasure as they could seek retribution after death:

That's why I don't talk to your grandmother Mandisa without thinking first. Even to your mother. They belong to another family and if we wrong them, God help us. And you should be careful too whenever you talk to either of them because, Lucifer, make one single mistake and you have dug your own and your children's grave. Make one slight mistake and you have started another cycle of blood and unremembered graves. (Ibid, p. 160)

This statement cannot be taken at face value because Tongoona often derides Raina, but it does acknowledge the only named power a woman has in the family. Despite his comment, the reality is that Tongoona and Raina have "worn each other out" (Mungoshi, 1975, p. 105). This feeds Lucifer's apparent fear of the women in his family as he dreams of witches (ibid, p. 52) and is unable to relate normally to Betty who "makes him feel blackmailed. She has got something against him which she won't reveal" (ibid, p. 50). It is evident, therefore, that the women do hold "power", particularly after death, but Raina's worth as a living person is only as a mother:

“What do you want, Mother of Lucifer? This is the man’s room, this. Your place is in the kitchen.” (Ibid, p. 77)

Raina’s name is supplanted and she is named after her child, “Mother of Lucifer”. Motherhood is a badge of honour in black Rhodesian society, but Tongoona’s tone is derisive, and his scathing jibe banishing her to the kitchen is an immature and ineffective cliché. Tongoona banishes her to the kitchen but does not follow through when she disobeys, and his inertia and weakness are simply foregrounded by these feeble digs.

On the other hand, Old Mandisa is strong and respected, and even though she is displaced and has lost all of her children through the family curse, her opinions still carry weight as she is a staunch proponent of traditional values. Her resilience makes her a role model, and her pro-active role in the conference with Matandangoma lifts her from her structurally weak role as a resident in her son-in-law’s home, as she has no other male relative to provide a home for her. Her essential decency and compassion are much admired, and even Betty is ashamed by her outburst when she blames her for the family curse, as the jibe is unfair. Old Mandisa astutely asks Betty where she is headed when she leaves to meet with her lover, as the wisdom that comes with age has made her deservedly venerable and shrewd. Even though Old Mandisa’s other senses – her sight and hearing – cruelly begin to fail, her intuitive powers are preternatural and unscathed by the ravages of time. Betty retaliates as she craves redemption from the curse that Old Mandisa brought into the family (which has rendered Betty untouchable):

“Who told you I am going to the township? Is that why you dragged your dirty curse to this place to drag me into the mud with you? Well, I *will* get some man to marry me if it’s the last thing I ever do – if you thought I wouldn’t get married.” (Ibid, p. 34)

This verbal attack is unfair, and Betty is ashamed of herself later because Old Mandisa is a noble character whom she admires. The family’s curse has cost her all of her children, yet despite this excruciating loss, Old Mandisa is a staunch advocate of

cultural mores, and, as Muchemwa notes, her “definition of womanhood depends on sexuality and maternity that are subservient to patriarchy” (Vambe & Chirere, 2006, p. 52). Betty’s strength is apparent as she fights against this family curse, as well as her predicament, and her solution is to take the problem of her womanhood (sexuality and maternity) into her own hands:

She has waited long enough for them to do something. And nothing has been done. She has heard the village laughing behind her back. She will shame them. (Mungoshi, 1975, p. 38)

The lowly status of women in Shona society is revealed in the fact that, despite Old Mandisa’s status as a strong, respected elder, even she states that Raina is “only a woman. You have no mouth” (ibid, p. 16). This is the case for all of the women in the family, except for the venerable Old Mandisa who has earned the right to advise because of her wisdom, yet even she waits to be consulted or invited to speak. Thus, strong women exist and are respected, but they internalise oppression and perpetuate it. Mungoshi foregrounds these discrepancies in *Waiting for the Rain* demonstrating his concern over the oppression of women in Zimbabwean society at the time the book was written.

Another issue for young women like Betty is that beautiful women are seen as witches or mistrusted. Betty’s curse is not that she is exceedingly beautiful like the other characters examined in this dissertation, but it is clear that her desirability as a woman is what she uses to try to change her position in the family, and to some extent, the external community. Thus beauty, or at least feminine appeal, play a prominent role in her story. Naomi Wolf notes that “[a] girl learns that stories happen to ‘beautiful’ women, whether they are interesting or not” (Wolf, 2002, p. 61), and Betty is aware that the only power she wields is her sexuality and her reproductive capacity. These traits are easily separated from any others she might possess, like intelligence, in a community where women are commodified in terms of their usefulness in the home and their role as child-bearers and not for their intellect (inasmuch as it does not contribute to the prosperity of the family).

One might be forgiven for assuming that the transaction between Betty and her married partner appears to be no more than fornication in return for impregnation because he does not leave his wife for Betty. Both parties are left satisfied and satiated, and so the transaction is, ostensibly, successful. Betty is the subordinate party, as the outcome means everything to her, given that she is competing for recognition as a woman and mother:

In assigning value to women in a vertical hierarchy according to a culturally imposed physical standard, it is an expression of power relations in which women must unnaturally compete for resources that men have appropriated for themselves. (Wolf, 2002, p. 12)

Imelda Whelehan discusses *The Beauty Myth* by Naomi Wolf in her book entitled *Modern Feminist Thought: From the Second Wave to Post-Feminism* when she states:

...women's mental capacities have no value if they are not accompanied by the correct physical attributes; they profit from being masculine and 'whole' as opposed to feminine and 'partial' or pathological. To exonerate men from blame is to blame women totally for their current material and ideological position – in fact, it is to make them responsible for the historical conditions of possibility of their subjection. Such a construction casts woman as too weak to resist the blandishments and shallow prizes of the beauty myth; yet as Wolf herself demonstrates in her survey of the means by which the myth is perpetuated, resistance might mean the loss of employment, and in many cases it certainly means enduring the antagonism of one's peers, partners and family. (Whelehan, 1995, p. 219)

The prizes of the "beauty myth" are bestowed upon women who look the way society dictates they should, and this is different for different cultures. These prizes are anything but shallow if one considers the cost, and for Betty, this is her sense of self and her place in the world as she is not able to attract a husband. Betty makes a "definite choice" (Greer, 2006, p. 130) and uses what beauty she has (or feminine charms) to attain the most obvious evidence of Womanpower: a pregnancy. It is a

fallacy that “beautiful women are more reproductively successful” (Wolf, 2002, p. 12) and that all women’s “beauty must correlate to their fertility, and since this system is based on sexual selection, it is inevitable and changeless....” (ibid). For Betty, however, her ability to have a child is not about her flagrant misuse of her beauty, but rather that her youth and beauty help her to achieve her goal, because they enable her to have an affair with a married man in the neighbourhood, and thus, hopefully, become a mother and prove her childbearing capacity, and worth.

Betty is, according to tradition, doomed to spinsterhood and barrenness. As no man will, in the circumstances, marry her, she is unable to achieve through the roles of wife and mother the only acceptable forms of self-definition that her society affords to women. As it is, she remains at home, the drudge of the family and the butt of jokes. (Stratton, 1986, p. 16)

The exchange, therefore, is a successful one for Betty and has nothing to do with love. She understands that in order to find meaning in her life outside of wifedom, which the family curse scuttles, the only other avenue available to her is motherhood. This is an avenue she explores despite the danger it poses outside marriage, as she believes that it is the only course of action that will bring meaning to her life. Wolf discusses beauty as a commercial exchange, where “[b]eauty’ is a currency system like the gold standard” (Wolf, 2002, p. 12), and for Betty the commercial transaction is not a paltry exchange of money for goods or services, but far more valuable for her as the exchange is tantamount to sex for self-actualization<sup>11</sup> because Betty wants to be what she is “fitted for”. The dilemma for women is explored in *Waiting for the Rain* as “Mungoshi shows, although the fate of the men of this generation may be uncertain, the young women clearly have no future at all” (Stratton, 1986, p. 17).

The curse, which Betty accuses Old Mandisa of blighting her with, is linked to the prerequisite for the tragic hero(ine) to suffer “unmerited misfortune”. As discussed in

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<sup>11</sup> In Abraham Maslow’s ‘Hierarchy of Needs’ one notes that: “The need for self-actualization. -- Even if all these needs are satisfied, we may still often (if not always) expect that a new discontent and restlessness will soon develop, unless the individual is doing what he is fitted for. A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately happy. What a man can be, he must be. This need we may call self-actualization” (Green, 2000).

the Introduction, the Shona word for curses afflicted upon the living is *ngozi*, which “are the restless and vengeful spirits of people who died aggrieved” (Owomoyela, 2002, p. 37). When Matandangoma tells the family that in order to rid the family of the curse, its only paths to recourse are to banish Betty or find a scapegoat, a virgin sacrifice (Mungoshi, 1975, p. 148), the latter is the course the family unanimously opt for. This is the moment of both reversal of fortune, and recognition, for Betty, as this is the point at which everyone realises the true nature of her situation, and her pregnancy is revealed. Before the meeting with Matandangoma, her pregnancy is her quiet rebellion, her secret, which she believes could lead to death once exposed:

She is quite aware that her chances of coming out of it alive are – as Matandangoma said – bleak, but a rope around her neck wouldn't have been wise either. (Ibid, p. 38)

This is corroborated in *Manning the Nation* when ten Kortenaar asserts that her pregnancy is “a form of suicide” (Muchemwa & Muponde, 2007, p. 32). However, suicide suggests capitulation, which does not do justice to Betty's brave rebellion to find meaning in her life. In fact, she ultimately does avoid a death sentence with the family's decision to find a scapegoat to save Betty and to avoid her banishment, but this means that she is still trapped. Her baby will be stillborn, and her position as a juvenile under Tongoon's patriarchy will remain unchallenged, although ostensibly, once the curse is lifted, her prospects of finding a husband ought to improve. This then is the tragedy - her brave defiance will not result in a live birth, and Betty's search for meaning will have to continue beyond the covers of the book.

Betty's story is one thread running through the tapestry of the novel, which culminates in this tragic scene with Matandangoma, where the recognition and reversal scene occurs. Up until this point, Betty has a secret, but here she is undone and her fortune potentially reverses as her child will be stillborn, as already stated. If she is guilty of *hubris* (excessive pride), then it is only because of the patriarchal backdrop to her predicament which forbids that she find her own place in the world, which she does try to do. This is where the “audience” thrills at the horror of what takes place when she is undone, and melts to pity at the prediction that she will lose all hope with the death



of her foetus, yet she must face condemnation by her family, with the exception of Garabha, after the consultation with Matandangoma is over.

The foregrounding of her dilemma during the recognition and reversal scene under the family's wrathful gaze is the inevitable culmination of the choices Betty has made up to this point and is deliberate as Mungoshi highlights the quandary women like Betty face[d] in patriarchal Rhodesia. This foregrounding is carefully considered, and this subplot is the "soul" of her "tragedy", as it outlines the action by which the characters "are happy or the reverse" (Aristotle translated by Butcher, 2008, p. 25). This is where Betty's "moral purpose" is revealed, showing "what kind of things a (wo)man chooses or avoids" and is linked to thought "where something is proved to be or not to be, or a general maxim is enunciated" (ibid, p. 27). Betty's subplot cannot end with a "happily ever after" ending, as it would be incongruent and disingenuous when the requirements for "Thought", as linked to plot and character, are considered. These aspects of plot and character have to be believable, and the outcome is inevitably tragic for Betty as her child will be stillborn, and there will be very real consequences for Betty to face. Matandangoma verbalises the two options, which she believes are available to Betty:

Prepare the girl and let her go, which leaves one. Or find a scapegoat... Your decision should be unanimous. (Mungoshi, 1975, p. 148)

Betty will lose her baby and either be banished or they must find a scapegoat. Death might be preferable considering the pregnancy is the only thing sustaining Betty.

Betty's dilemma proves Mungoshi's concern with highlighting the oppression of the common (wo)man in patriarchal Rhodesia: Mungoshi looks at gender roles from a common woman's point of view, and portrays her affair as more significant in terms of self-actualisation, than the transgression of a cultural norm. In other words, his concern is the foregrounding of Betty's oppression, and the inevitable loss of her child, I believe bolsters Mungoshi's sensitivity towards Betty. Mungoshi's portrayal of Betty elicits feelings of "fear" and "pity" because of his sensitive treatment of her situation. This foregrounding rebels against "society's attitudes toward women and toward

gender role indoctrination”, and shows how Mungoshi places Betty within “a shifting value system and of tensions within patriarchal society” (Lerner, 1975, p. 7), and even if the sacrifice of the scapegoat arguably entrenches current values, the fact that Mungoshi foregrounds the injustice of this once again proves his condemnation of the oppression of women in Rhodesia. Mungoshi rejects the view that women are unworthy of consideration in their own right, or that their concerns are marginal to his male characters, as is revealed in the respect and affection she receives from Garabha, who Mungoshi portrays as being genuinely affected by her suffering. When he gives her a necklace “[s]omething “stabs at Garabha’s heart at seeing his sister’s calloused hands” (Mungoshi, 1975, p. 88). Betty is a “liberating example” through a significant act of “heroism” in trying to define herself in a patriarchal climate:

The myth that women are marginal to the creation of history and civilization has profoundly affected the psychology of women and men. It has given men a skewed and essentially erroneous view of their place in human society and in the universe. For women, as shown in the case of Simone de Beauvoir, who surely is one of the best-educated women of her generation, history seemed for millennia to offer only negative lessons and no precedent for significant action heroism, or liberating example. Most difficult of all was the seeming absence of a tradition which would reaffirm the independence and autonomy of women. It seemed that there had never been any woman or group of women who had lived without male protection. It is significant that all the important examples to the contrary were expressed in myth and fable: amazons, dragon-slayers, women with magic powers. But in real life, women had no history – so they were told and so they believed. And because they had no history they had no future alternatives. (Lerner, 1986, p. 221)

Betty is thus remarkable as she believes she does have alternatives and sets about trying to obtain these. Unfortunately, in spite of the sensitive handling of her predicament, it culminates in the inevitable unravelling of her subplot, which in turn facilitates the catharsis which Aristotle defines as the “proper purgation of these emotions” (Aristotle translated by Butcher, 2008, p. 22) of pity and fear. Mungoshi places Betty in ‘history’ as a “common” woman, whose predicament is untenable, and

manages to foreground this in a manner that does her justice, whilst remaining credible (linked to Aristotle's "Thought" requirement in tragedy). Mungoshi understands that there can be no happy ending for Betty, but she bravely attempts to change the course of her life, and this is her victory.

## Chapter 2: Mrs Pfende and her Husband's Curse

### 'Property'

Since the time I learned that  
property can be both  
a blessing and a curse  
I have been trying very hard  
to hide this realisation  
from the people closest to me –  
those people – kith and next of kin  
who are likely to prosper or suffer  
through the impoverishment  
of my circumstances. (Mungoshi, 2002)

Mrs Pfende is introduced in third person omniscient narration, which allows the readers to distance themselves from her perspective, whilst at the same time gaining valuable insight into her context. Her eyes “shifted from the whimpering dog on the chain making circles round and round the solitary tree in the duty yard, to the single dry bun in the wire-cage” (Mungoshi, 1980, p. 141). From the outset, the setting is desolate, and the reader immediately suspects that the dog on the chain metaphorically represents Mrs Pfende, making circles unheeded in the dust. The fact that Mrs Pfende’s eyes “shifted<sup>12</sup>”, instead of say, “settled” or “moved”, suggests furtiveness about the manner of her observation, and the reader suspects that she is looking for something or someone. Because of this, there is an element of cunning about her right from the first line, but also a sense of the pitiable state of her life in a dusty corner of Zimbabwe where she is chained to her life in a dusty outback.

Mr Pfende is similarly introduced through revealing descriptions of his “irritating snuffles” and the fact that he is “reading a weekold paper” (ibid, p. 141). The snuffles convey the idea of a weak man, and the old paper suggests that he is as irrelevant as the week old news, and Mrs Pfende “paid as much attention to him as to the close, stifling little shop that reeked with the stink of dry salted fish, dust and cheap soap”

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<sup>12</sup> shifty eyes

(ibid). Mr Pfende is metaphorically represented by the shop as explicitly as Mrs Pfende is by the dog on the chain, as stinking of fish, dust and “cheap” soap. The encounter that follows with the little girl where he sells her the mouldy bun only serves to confirm our suspicions that he is indeed as “cheap” as the soap he sells. However ineffectual he appears to be, Mr Pfende is still the man, and this forces Mrs Pfende into the position of the “Other”, like the dog on the chain:

She determines and differentiates herself in relation to man, and he does not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other. (De Beauvoir translated by Borde & Malovany-Chevallier, 2009, p. 29)

The dog begins to lose hope of ever being freed, and perhaps this is why Mrs Pfende, who recognises her affinity with the chained animal, asks Mr Pfende to free it. Again her eyes convey her attitude (in this case, simmering anger) as she is described as “glaring” at him, and again he is ineffectual and weak as he “withdrew into himself from her violence” (Mungoshi, 1980, p. 141). Thus the exposition introduces a married couple worn out by each other: a discontented wife, angry, shifty, but with no real power, and an emasculated husband, weak, ineffective, but with all of the power. Mr Pfende is the Absolute, but in his irrelevance appears to be oblivious of (or wilfully ignores) her interest in the world beyond their shop, because whatever she is fantasising about cannot manifest itself, as he is her husband and the insurmountable patriarchal authority. Mr Pfende accepts the view that “woman has always been, if not man’s slave, at least his vassal; the two have never divided the world up equally; and still today, even though her condition is changing, woman is heavily handicapped” (De Beauvoir translated by Borde & Malovany-Chevallier, 2009, p. 29). Mr Pfende acknowledges Mrs Pfende’s violent emotions but knows that she cannot do anything to change her circumstances and is thus complacent.

Whilst they wait for the bread van, we also learn that she does not speak to him, but rather wilfully ignores him. There is no one else in the shop when she says, “I hope nothing serious has happened,” but she is not speaking to him as “[t]here were many things that his wife said that were not meant for him now” (Mungoshi, 1980, p. 142).

The fact that she is clearly worried about whether “[h]e might have had an accident” alerts the reader to the possibility of a clandestine liaison between Mrs Pfende and the bread delivery man, but Mr Pfende refuses to face the logical inference her state of agitation ought to elicit. Once again, this indicates that he is out of touch and quite enfeebled when it comes to his wife, or feels confident that his role as her husband is absolute and so chooses not to care. Mr Pfende’s lack of confidence may be related to his alleged curse, but instead of being able to attribute this to the spirits of the deceased (*ngozi*), he is accused of having “sold his power to make children for medicine to be successful in business” (ibid, p. 148). Mr Pfende’s infertility compounds his sense of emasculation because motherhood is what Mrs Pfende misses, and she has proof of her fertility as she is a mother, but is denied her rights as one by her previous husband’s family. She is devalued by Mr Pfende who blames her anger on menses, and by the patriarchal authority that robbed her of her children, and motherhood, relegating her role as a woman and mother to the “nontranscendent” (Lerner, 1986, p. 4) and insignificant. Lerner discusses the position of the devalued woman in her discussion on patriarchy where she says:

Women have always experienced the reality of self and community, known it, and shared it with each other. Yet, living in a world in which they are devalued, their experience bears the stigma of insignificance. Thus they have learned to mistrust their own experience and devalue it. What wisdom can there be in menses? What source of knowledge in the milk-filled breast? What food for abstraction in the daily routine of feeding and cleaning? Patriarchal thought has relegated such gender-defined experiences to the realm of the “natural,” the nontranscendent. Women's knowledge becomes mere “intuition,” women's talk becomes “gossip.” Women deal with the irredeemably particular: they experience reality daily, hourly, in their service function (taking care of food and dirt); in their constantly interruptible time; their splintered attention. Can one generalize while the particular tugs at one's sleeve? He who makes symbols and explains the world and she who takes care of his bodily and psychic needs and of his children – the gulf between them is enormous. (Ibid)

This extract captures the root causes of Mrs Pfende's seething frustration. The gulf is evident between Mrs Pfende and Mr Pfende, especially when she berates him for selling a mouldy bun to a child. She compares herself to the dried up old bun that Mr Pfende eagerly sells to the little girl who comes into the shop because it is "old and dry and so mouldy like me! ha ha ha!" (Mungoshi, 1980, p. 144). This self-deprecating laughter is not amusement, although the child does offer a small distraction and comfort to her as Mrs Pfende is unwilling to let go of her hand. When Mr Pfende's demonstrates his eagerness to sell the girl the mouldy bun is repellent; however, "[t]he sight of money momentarily making him forget his wife's time of month" (ibid, p. 144). Mrs Pfende rebukes him for his avariciousness, with a "slow-rising hatred for her husband" (ibid, p. 144). The girl wants her hand to be released, but Mrs Pfende's desperate loneliness and longing make it hard for her to read the signals of resistance from the girl. At the same time, Mr Pfende "rubbed his hands together – the first sale of the day", completely missing the anguish presented by his wife's inability to release the girl. All that matters to Mr Pfende is money, which explains why it was possible for him to trade his fertility for it.

Like Betty, Mrs Pfende is a tragic heroine one immediately recognises as a "common (wo)man" in the Zimbabwean outback. She is trapped in a loveless marriage and deprived of her role as a mother to her children by her in-laws' callousness, and thus she also challenges Arthur Miller's definition of a modern tragic hero whose "flaw, or crack in the character is... his inherent willingness to remain passive in the face of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity, his image of his rightful status" (Miller, 1949, pp. 3-7) because she tries to imagine a life beyond her dusty cage. Unlike Betty, Mrs Pfende is married, and not under the "protection" of her father, but this simply amounts to exchanging one patriarchal authority for another. The manner in which Mrs Pfende also refuses to "remain passive" in her predicament, and her clandestine love interest in the driver of the bread van, whether fabricated or not, is all that sustains her in the face of challenges to her "dignity". Her frustration relates to more than just motherhood, but also to accusations of witchcraft (because of her beauty):

She had every self-respecting house-wife's sympathy, and was therefore a tragic figure, someone special, unlike them. Her husband who had died had given her two boys but, being a woman, the children had been taken by her husband's people and she would never see them again because her husband's people had branded her a witch and said that it had been she who had killed their brother, son, relative or whatever each of them called the deceased. Also her beauty had been reason enough from them to believe it. (Mungoshi, 1980, p. 148)

It is especially noteworthy that Mungoshi refers to Mrs Pfende as a "tragic figure" in the excerpt above, as it authenticates a tragic reading and analysis of her narrative. The fact that she cannot bear more children in her new marriage to Mr Pfende, which is a mark of a true woman in the eyes of Zimbabwean society circa 1980, infuriates her further as she knows that she is fertile. Mrs Pfende is able to infer therefore that it is her husband's deal with the devil that scuppers her chances of motherhood again, and she is unable to come to terms with this situation, which manifests in two ways. First, she becomes bitter and twisted, and engages in verbal assaults upon her husband, who still demands his conjugal rights, because "damn it, a man had his rights over a woman he had paid lobola for" (Mungoshi, 1980, p. 147). Second, she tries to find an outlet in the bread delivery man who is horrified by her attempted transgression (in thought, if not in deed), because of the general expectation of fidelity.

In this loveless marriage, Mr Pfende enjoys the privileges of marriage, albeit a fruitless one (both futile and producing no fruit), whilst Mrs Pfende's appetites, wants and needs are inconsequential. Women have traditionally been seen as castrated in the sense that libido is ostensibly a masculine concept:

In traditional psychological theory, which is after all only another way of describing and rationalizing the status quo, the desexualisation of women is illustrated in the Freudian theory of the female sex as lacking a sexual organ... If we are to insist on the contingency of feminine characteristics as the product of conditioning, we will have to argue that the masculine-feminine polarity is actual enough, but not necessary. We will have to reject the polarity of definite



terms, which are always artificial, and strive for the freedom to move within indefinite terms. On these grounds we can, indeed we must reject femininity as meaning *without libido*, and therefore incomplete, subhuman, a cultural reduction of human possibilities, and rely upon the indefinite term female, which retains the possibility of female libido. (Greer, 2006, p. 79)

If Mrs Pfende is the “female eunuch” because she lacks the power to determine her role as a result of society’s belief in a perceived biological castration, she also demonstrates impressive Womanpower when she tries to challenge this view, as she reaches out to a virile young man evincing the female libido. Even if it is not clear whether her interest in the young bread man is sexual, he certainly seems to think so as he recoils in horror at her suggestion of “friendship”. If she is the female eunuch protagonist, then Mr Pfende is a male eunuch antagonist, having emasculated himself and rendered himself impotent both in terms of fertility and in his role as her husband. Mrs Pfende does not respect his traditional patriarchal authority, although she also cannot escape from it. His only comfort is to tell himself that it is “[h]er time of month, of course” (Mungoshi, 1980, p. 142). This petty jibe ironically serves to further highlight his weakness, because he is unable or unwilling to question his own part in her discontent and also serves to foreground his sexist attitude. To assume that she is moody because she may be menstruating is a common misogynistic putdown, and historically women were seen as unclean and irrational during this period. Greer put it succinctly when she said that “[m]enstruation does not turn us [women] into raving maniacs or complete invalids” (Greer, 2006, p. 59), but Mr Pfende’s only satisfaction comes from putting her down by telling himself that this is why Mrs Pfende is irascible, and thus avoids considering the real cause of her misery.

As aforementioned, if Mr Pfende’s curse is his bungled deal with the devil, then Mrs Pfende’s curse is her beauty. Notably, her curse is not self-inflicted as his is, but rather one which society ascribes to her, and for which she has no remedy. If the beauty myth is to be believed, then “[w]omen’s beauty must correlate to their fertility, and since this system is based on sexual selection, it is inevitable and changeless...” (Wolf, 2002, p. 12) and even though this is not true, for Mrs Pfende, her beauty and fertility

are evident. However, her beauty does gild her cage, as she has no way of escaping her loveless, childless marriage because of her beauty, and in spite of it:

The rise of the beauty myth was just one of several emerging social fictions that masqueraded as natural components of the feminine sphere, the better to enclose those women inside it. (Ibid, p. 15)

The concept of women trapped by their beauty because of society's edicts is reminiscent of the Iron Maiden, which is a metaphor for women trapped within a beautiful case, which the beauty industry promotes as it dictates how women should live their lives. It is thus also an apt metaphor for the plight of beautiful women like Mrs Pfende in Zimbabwe, who is judged a witch based on her exterior, with no thought to her personal quest for meaning or her inner workings:

The original Iron Maiden was a medieval German instrument of torture, a body-shaped casket painted with the limbs and features of a lovely, smiling young woman. The unlucky victim was slowly enclosed inside her; the lid fell shut to immobilize the victim, who died either of starvation or, less cruelly, of the metal spikes embedded in her interior. The modern hallucination in which women are trapped or trap themselves is similarly rigid, cruel and euphemistically painted. (Ibid, p. 17)

Mungoshi portrays her as the Iron Maiden, starved of her rights as a mother by a society that relegates her to the position of the Second Sex, and she is impaled by the metal spikes of her loveless marriage. She is represented as the Iron Maiden, not virginal in the usual sense, but deprived of motherhood and a husband she can respect, and essentially is virginal in the sense that she is infantilised. She is literally and figuratively boxed in by her beauty, knowing that her role has been undermined by her late husband's family, and by her current husband's curse. Her frustration is understandable when one considers that "[t]he purpose of marriage in traditional African society is to help the husband's family grow. The most celebrated possession of an African woman is to give birth to a male child" (Bedana & Laishram, 2014, p. 70). Mrs Pfende is the mother of two boys who have been torn from her, and Mr Pfende is,

for all intents and purposes, a eunuch. Mrs Pfende effortlessly emasculates Mr Pfende further with deceptive softness when she cuts him in two with this coup de grace when speaking out in defence of the late bread delivery man: “Better a son of a bitch than a father of nothing” (Mungoshi, 1980, p. 147). She laughs derisively and continues her assault with, “I wonder what kind of bread you would make – all doughy and watery, I suppose?” (ibid). This image serves to bolster the idea that he is a feeble man, the male eunuch, infertile and useless.

Even though Mrs Pfende’s affection for the bread delivery man is displaced, and may not even be related to feelings of lust, it is ironic that whilst Betty pines for a husband, Mrs Pfende has a “useless” husband in terms of her own particular needs. Both suffer deeply from anguish and stigma because of their failures as wives and mothers. When the bread van eventually appears, it is without the object of Mrs Pfende’s affection, but the man who comes in his place immediately supplants the dead man, and he rebukes Mr Pfende for laughing about his friend’s death: “And I won’t have any castrated thoughtless sonofabitch laugh at him, d’ya hear me?” (ibid, p. 151). The fact that he calls Mr Pfende “castrated” indicates that he may have heard the rumours about his infertility, but is also apt as Mr Pfende is effectively emasculated by his deal and by his wife. This is the point in the story when Mrs Pfende offers the new delivery man the jersey she has knitted for Moses. Moyana believes that portraying her as fickle and (potentially) promiscuous “is unacceptable”. She says:

Portraying women in this manner is a form of abuse because it is as if women are not capable of relating to their spouses normally without either being abused themselves or abusing others. The portrayal subscribes to the ‘earlier syntheses of Genesis with Greek philosophical concept [that] tended to associate women’s inferior origins and subordination with her lesser rationality.’ The thinking [is] that woman was subordinated to Adam at creation where his rib was used to create her, thereby subordinating her to him and making her inferior with less rational thought than man... [However,] she does protest in the most vulgar way possible. (Vambe & Chirere, 2006, p. 159)

Moyana's interpretation of this story is not the only possible interpretation, and in fact, she states in her concluding paragraph that "in Mungoshi's stories some women, however, attempt to assert their humanity" (ibid, p. 164). It is difficult to disagree with the assertion that Mrs Pfende abuses Mr Pfende, but it is also difficult to understand how Mungoshi should shoulder the blame for the abuse his character receives when Moyana says, "women are not capable of relating to their spouses normally without being abused themselves or abusing others". The suggestion is an accusation that Mungoshi only portrays the abused or the abuser in his stories, and in this case, Mrs Pfende is both the abused and the abuser who cannot relate normally to Mr Pfende, but does she have any other choice? She is under enormous strain, stranded in the dusty, secluded shop, and evidence of this psychological pressure is congruent with Aristotle's thought requirement "where something is proved to be or not to be, or a general maxim is enunciated" (Aristotle translated by Butcher, 2008, p. 27). In other words, the portrayal of Mrs Pfende's predicament is a portrait of a shrewd woman, trapped in an unhappy marriage with a man who is complacent, unethical and spineless. If anyone is being abused through an unflattering portrayal, it might be easier to suggest that it is, in fact, the castrated Mr Pfende, but there is no way of knowing if this was Mungoshi's explicit intention. The foregrounding of the abuse that Mrs Pfende is subject to by society, her late husband's family, and her husband's selfishness, highlights Mungoshi's concern with feminist issues through a tragic portrayal of Mrs Pfende's predicament, and Mrs Pfende's abuse of her husband demonstrates Womanpower by trying to initiate change, albeit clouded by abusive vitriol.

The story reaches a climax when the new bread delivery man realises what Mrs Pfende is offering with the gift of the jersey, and her *hamartia*<sup>13</sup> becomes evident to the reader:

You see, I was too slow with Moses and now he has gone and got himself....

The young man stepped back a bit and stared at her, horrified, then he spat on the floor, spun around and fled. (Mungoshi, 1980, p. 152)

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<sup>13</sup> Error of frailty

Mrs Pfende simply supplants Moses with the new delivery man before her, and this is the true point of recognition and reversal of fortune because he recoils in horror at the suggestion of a liaison so soon after discussing the death of his good friend. It is difficult not to feel appalled and fascinated by Mrs Pfende's behaviour and the resulting fear and pity, as Mrs Pfende's attempt to reimagine her predicament, is what leads to the internal collapse of this tragic heroine. This is intertwined with a measure of revulsion at the speed at which she substitutes one man with the other. Mrs Pfende's accusation that he had "gone and got himself [killed]" is indicative of her shallow feelings for Moses (the bread delivery man who died), as it suggests that he was selfish for dying and removing himself from her "world". This is corroborated by the fact that she immediately tries to replace him with this new delivery man, without so much as shedding a tear. It would appear that Mrs Pfende is simply in need of a man to satisfy her yearning for children to ensure her "redemption" in the eyes of the community, which renders her position both pitiful and fearful. Mrs Pfende's tragedy is encapsulated decisively when she loses both delivery men in that instant, but catharsis is evident in her defiant final lines as she rails at the injustice of her lot, which shows how she has been failed by all of the men in the society that marginalises her:

'O damn you! Damn all of you damn damn damn all of you to neverending damnation!' (Mungoshi, 1980, p. 152)

This purging of emotion is climatic in itself, and even though the speed at which she replaces Moses might seem callous to the casual observer, it is hard not to admire her tenacity in this situation (even if knowledge of Moses' death could have been handled more sensitively). Mrs Pfende's version of Womanpower is tragically warped and unwholesome but is the result of her untenable situation. She does try to throw "all the baggage of paternalist society ... overboard", which indicates partial success, but fails to "devise a morality which does not disqualify her from excellence, and a psychology which does not condemn her to the status of a spiritual cripple" (Greer, 2006, p. 130). On the contrary, she is the epitome of the maligned woman who must pay the "penalties for ... delinquency" and must "explore the dark without any guide" as she "exchanges one mode of suffering for another, one neurosis for another" (ibid). For

every glimmer of hope (in the form of the bread delivery men), her attempts at conquest are overt and repulsive, as they are interchangeable and serve only to give meaning to her life, but that is the core of her tragedy. Mrs Pfende cannot find validation through marriage and motherhood and fails to find any other outlet.

Lerner discusses the problem of placing women within history that is dominated by a male-defined value system. She speaks of a “vaguely defined ‘domestic power’”, which expresses itself in lowered birth rates as a result of “increasing control of women over their reproductive lives” (Lerner, 1975, p. 8). Mrs Pfende tries to wield a form of domestic power of her own, as her life is as untenable as the mouldy bun on the shelf. Withholding sexual favours is a pointless course in her case, and the opposite appears to be true as Mr Pfende claims his “rights over a woman he had paid lobola for” (Mungoshi, 1980, p. 147), but a liaison with a virile young man certainly might remedy her childlessness. This is never an explicit goal, and perhaps all she longs for is self-definition through a genuine connection with a man other than her “doughy” husband:

Revolutionary thought has always been based on upgrading the experience of the oppressed. The peasant had to learn to trust in the significance of his life experience before he could dare to challenge the feudal lords. The industrial worker had to become “class-conscious”, the Black, “race-conscious” before liberating thought could develop into revolutionary theory. The oppressed have acted and learned simultaneously – the process of becoming the newly conscious person or group is in itself liberating. So with women. (Lerner, 1986, p. 2)

Thus, Mrs Pfende and Betty Mandengu do have more in common than at first meets the eye given their “revolutionary thought” (ibid). They both seek validation from society through motherhood, and both of them lose their child(ren) in tragic circumstances. Mrs Pfende’s children are snatched from her by in-laws and her husband figuratively “snatches” away her chances of having any more; whilst with Betty, the child will be stillborn because of the curse hanging over her family. Mrs Pfende’s situation pushes her to attempt an illicit love tryst with the bread delivery man, and although her moral compass is clearly not pointing towards true North, it is difficult

not to feel some sympathy for her when one considers her loveless marriage to her miserly, enfeebled husband, whose supernatural pact for business success is alleged to be the cause for their childlessness. Thus her bitterness is understandable when considered from her perspective as reflected in the stark image of an old dog chained to a dusty tree (or shop, in her case) with no hope of release. This tragic isolation warps her views and her existence is devoid of love and meaning as she is unable to meet society's expectations within marriage or motherhood.

Moses might not have been much older than her children, so another more innocent interpretation is possible. It is quite possible that all she was looking for was a mother-son connection, but sadly this comes across as overtly suggestive. When one considers that one might knit for children classically, the innocence of her proposal and pathos in the rejection is tangible. Of course, the alternative reading might also be true as one might also knit for a spouse, and Mr Pfende suddenly realises what is going on, but dismisses it, even with the iconic image of the wedding certificate and photograph being ripped up. What might seem a pointless revolt has a deeper significance because the photograph is a concrete sign of her perception of her marriage, which is made more poignant by her attempt to jigsaw it back together like a puzzle. Figuratively, this ripped up jigsaw represents her marriage, which is also difficult to piece back together. Mrs Pfende remains trapped by patriarchy, and miserable, because the only way she can validate herself is by having a child (whether surrogate or otherwise). Once again there is a great deal of pathos in this scene and all that matters to Mr Pfende is the money clinking in the till as he smiles with "satisfaction" and is soothed by it. He side-lines her and decides not to understand what she is going through, so they remain stuck in their little corners with only the business holding them together because their happiness is gone. The harsh strict societal norms and values in Zimbabwe have essentially killed their marriage.

Once again, Mungoshi has created another impressive female character like Betty who tries to find alternatives to her predicament, despite the odds being stacked against her, and this is her triumph. Even more remarkable is the fact that, unlike Betty, Mrs Pfende is the protagonist. His feminist concerns can be seen to have progressed from Betty's subplot in *Waiting for the Rain* to this short story sympathising

with the flawed tragic heroine, Mrs Pfende. The denouement facilitates the “proper purgation of these emotions” (Aristotle translated by Butcher, 2008, p. 22) of pity and fear, as there can be no happy ending for Mrs Pfende in the Zimbabwean context. However, a sensitive and three-dimensional exploration of these issues is at least an attempt at giving the oppressed women of Zimbabwe a voice by speaking out on behalf of an oppressed woman, specifically one “guilty” of simply being beautiful, and thus cursed – like Kerina Mashamba whose tragic position is explored in the following chapter.



### Chapter 3: Kerina Mashamba and Eve's Curse

'Portrait of a Woman'

You should have remained  
hidden in the shadow of the tree  
your hand raised at half-mast  
(undecided whether to cover or not  
your face from the glare of the sun?)

You should have remained  
behind the half-opened door  
your face half-hidden  
in the darkness beyond  
and your torn dress  
the colour of dirty earth  
and through the glaring holes –  
You: dirty torn, forlorn.  
The moment you stepped out  
into the faithfulness of the light  
I turned and walked away. (Mungoshi, 2002)

In "The Little Wooden Hut in the Forest" Kerina Mashamba is introduced using her first name, and her family's surname, whilst Gavi is only that – Gavi – indicating a peculiar respect given to her by Mungoshi from the outset, considering she is a modest spinster in a remote forestry station in Zimbabwe. The date of publication is significant as Kerina emerges as more of a heroine than Betty or Mrs Pfende, so one could argue that Mungoshi's feminist concerns appear to be evolving. Kerina is shown to be powerful because of her intelligence, albeit that it is shelved, and in contrast, Gavi is almost comical in his idiocy. However, Mungoshi's concern with realistic portrayals of feminist issues is also evident as Gavi is not only somewhat clownish but also a brutal misogynist. Malaba's article on *Walking Still* (the book this short story appears in) states that "[t]he role of women in Zimbabwean society is a major theme in Mungoshi's writing", and furthermore that "[h]e shows great sensitivity towards women who strive to create space for themselves despite the constraints of traditional beliefs and expectations" (Malaba, 1997). This is evident in Kerina who must create a space for herself in a society that marginalises her and shuns her because of her beauty:

She was, in fact, very beautiful. So beautiful that some elders considered that this was the reason why no man had ever taken her seriously. “You are not born that beautiful without some other secret deformity,” they said. (Mungoshi, 1997a, p. 152)

This view is corroborated by Annie Gagiano who states:

The stories that Charles Mungoshi put together in *Walking Still* (1997) encompass such a range of settings and types of character that they cannot be described as having any centralising theme. However, the subtle foregrounding of women’s experience, even where filtered through the perspective of a male protagonist, slowly dawns on the reader... and the stress of human relationships – and those institutions that attempt to enshrine them, such as marriage and the family – are carefully, compassionately, but inescapably laid bare. The stories are not comforting, not even when they end in a resolution of some sort, for something is always left hanging, or haunting the reader. (Vambe & Chirere, 2006, p. 132)

When proposing Mungoshi’s feminist slant in this short story, the most prominent evidence in support of this is how he attempts to subvert male authority through this clownish representation of Gavi. Conversely, in “The Little Wooden Hut in the Forest” the heroine, Kerina, appears to be endowed with magical powers, although one begins to suspect that most of what appears to be supernatural are simply Gavi’s own superstition and paranoia playing tricks on him. Gavi is paranoid and short-sighted, with “sunken, expressionless eyes” which the foreman at the forestry station had not liked, when they first met. And Gavi “felt threatened, hemmed in” (Mungoshi, 1997a, p. 151) when his relationship with Kerina began to take on a life of its own.

Because of Kerina’s beauty, the village believes that a “curse had been cast on Kerina Mashamba” (ibid, p. 152). The introduction of the curse so soon in the narrative supports a tragic reading of this short story, as it is a common element in Greek and Shakespearean tragedies. When Gavi first becomes aware of Kerina’s curse, he

decides not to let it worry him. He believes he is “protected by whatever powers had protected him for the past three years fighting in the bush – the powers that had led him to Damba after everyone else in his section had been blown to smithereens” (ibid, p. 152). This assertion underlines the extent of Gavi’s belief in ‘superstition’, and highlights the deliberate mobilisation of belief in the ancestors on the part of the guerrillas, as detailed in David Lan’s *Guns and Rain: Guerrillas and Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe*. A close reading of the text seems to suggest he could be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

Kerina’s mental state is also fragile at the beginning of the narrative as she feels like a waiting room “through which all passed – writing filth on the walls, pissing and shitting in the corners – but none staying long enough to claim occupation and ownership” (Mungoshi, 1997a, p. 153). The comparison to a room is problematic, as it indicates that Kerina’s has internalised her oppression and status as the Second Sex. She automatically associates her body with a room that must welcome occupation, and the connotation is graphically, and disturbingly, rendered with reference to “pissing and shitting in the corners” (ibid). Even without explicit details, it is clear that Kerina has been used and contemptuously abused by the men in her community, who urinate and defecate in her “corners” – usually a description relating to a person’s deepest recesses, like the heart or soul. This vulgar reference to excrement is deliberately emotive, and is also used by Greer to discuss excretions related to waste and ejaculation in the context of men hating women, and wanting them gone:

I don’t like women, I despise them. I no longer try to please women. I’m mad if they’re around for very long. I feel as though I could call them in and dismiss them. We are conceived somewhere between pissing and shitting, and as long as these excretory functions are regarded as intrinsically disgusting, the other one, ejaculation, will also be so regarded. (Greer, 2006, p. 284)

Ejaculation (in the context of sexual debasement) is related to excrement in the sense that these bodily fluids are wasted, or can be considered waste products because they do not lead to motherhood or wifehood, the badges of honour for women in Zimbabwean society, which Kerina longs for. These previous relationships where

Kerina has been treated like a receptacle for men's excrement have not dulled her longing for a partner, but have instead made her wonder "what's wrong with me?" (Mungoshi, 1997a, p. 153). When Gavi too tries to extricate himself from the relationship, Kerina is almost relieved, because this is the normal course of things for her. Greer discusses women who are regarded as "receptacles" as being subject to loathing, which is evident when we consider Gavi's abuse and feelings of loathing for Kerina:

The man regards her as a receptacle into which he has emptied his sperm, a kind of human spittoon, and turns from her in disgust. As long as man is at odds with his own sexuality and as long as he keeps woman as a solely sexual creature, he will hate her, at least some of the time. (Greer, 2006, p. 284)

Gavi responds to Kerina with anger, corroborating the view that he seems to hate her despite having sexual relations with her. This is in stark contrast to Kerina's decidedly depressed and fatalistic approach to her lot in life as she genuinely tries to appeal to him for reciprocation of her desire for love and wifeness, but believes (correctly) that he wants to leave her. When this happens, Gavi is described as out of his depth and full of hate:

Indeed he found it difficult to conduct a simple conversation with anyone at all. So, most of the time, he found himself at a disadvantage. He always got the worst of any conversation. So, now, even while he felt that he had been taken advantage of, he found himself unable to answer Kerina's questions: her large eyes wandering over his face, as if searching, grappling for a foothold, like a child lost in a swamp... He would panic, look away, pretend that he had other, more important matters to attend to. More often than not, he would become blindingly angry with her. (Mungoshi, 1997a, p. 153)

This passage also supports a feminist reading of this text as it portrays Gavi as foolish and unable to comprehend clear interpersonal relations. He feels out of his depth and tricked into staying with Kerina, and his only recourse is anger, confirming that he is

not only slow-witted, but brutish too. Kerina's desperate bid to hold on to this dangerous fool is worrying, but is clearly a statement about the status quo for women in Zimbabwe in the late 1990s. Mungoshi appears to be highlighting that not enough had changed for women in rural areas since independence, because they are still maligned for their beauty, and still forced into relationships where their bodies are their only tools for a very limited, unsatisfactory emancipation from the ridicule and derision of their communities, if they become wives and mothers. Otherwise, they just become "spittoon[s]" or "receptacle[s]" (Greer, 2006, p. 284) for the excrement of the men in their communities. Kerina may not seem to be that fortunate to have Gavi, but the story suggests that the alternative is worse. Her predicament is very similar to Chipo's<sup>14</sup> in Mungoshi's short story, "Coming of the Dry Season" (Mungoshi, 1972), who is also yearning for love. When Chipo returns to Moab after their love tryst the previous weekend, he is callous and rejects her outright. Chipo genuinely seems to care about Moab after their sexual encounter, and when he is cruel to her, Chipo seems to blame herself: "I have been alone too long" (*Coming of the Dry Season*, p. 48). Chipo may also be expressing her yearning for companionship here, which links her predicament to that of Kerina. Both men are sexually dependent on women, which ironically heightens their sense of weakness and they project their self-loathing onto women in order to compensate for their deep-rooted sense of inadequacy.

If the main reason for living is to have a husband, Kerina is so desperate that any husband will do, even a press-ganged one. Like Betty, she has little support within the family, and her aunt and brothers 'help' her to avoid familial embarrassment, but not out of love. Her aunt brings up marriage, but it is Kerina's brothers who close the deal by threatening Gavi with death if he does not follow through with marriage after sleeping with their sister. Once again, Gavi is out-manoeuvred, and his presentation as a cruel oaf is cemented when the foreman asks him to take her home for the birth of the child because "he was afraid Kerina might have a miscarriage or even die from the daily beating she received from Gavi" (Mungoshi, 1997a, p. 155). Gavi's abuse is even more shocking because Kerina is carrying his child, but Mungoshi foregrounds this further by presenting her brothers as indifferent because "Kerina was now

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<sup>14</sup> Chipo means "gift" in Shona.

someone else's husband and it would be wrong for them to interfere" (ibid). All the patriarchal authorities who might be able to render some assistance to Kerina are either indifferent (her brothers), or castrated by societal constraints (the foreman), which do not permit outside interference when a man is "disciplining" his spouse:

They believed that a beating now and again kept a woman in her place. They wouldn't even have raised a finger if Keri had had a rib or two broken after Gavi's beatings. And they would have laughed at Gavi if he had let Keri give him any shit. (Ibid)

The irony of referring to Kerina as "Keri", which is probably an affectionate term her brothers use for her, is incongruent. This nickname appears to be a term of endearment, but the brothers are not sympathetic regarding abuse at Gavi's hands, and this again foregrounds the misogynist view that all women, including sisters, need to know their place. Using her nickname here suggests this is done affectionately and for her own good. This infantilises Kerina and makes all of patriarchal society responsible for her discipline and subjugation. Even the foreman, who is clearly unhappy and uncomfortable about Kerina's situation, does nothing other than ensure she does not die on his watch by removing her from his station.

The real tragedy is not Kerina's abuse in isolation, but rather the patriarchal structures that allow it, and her own internalisation of her subjugation that renders her the Second Sex. Kerina is complicit inasmuch as her only desire is to stay in a relationship with her abuser. This is not a conventional case of Stockholm Syndrome<sup>15</sup> because her true abuser is actually the society which marginalises her, and not just the foolish Gavi who speaks with his fists and seems to blunder through the first part of the story in a

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<sup>15</sup> "The hostages experience a powerful, primitive positive feeling towards their captor. They are in denial that this is the person who put them in that situation. In their mind, they think this is the person who is going to let them live" (Westcott, 2016).

white, confused rage. Tragically, for Kerina, a bad marriage be better than not being married at all, because of the way women are socialised to accept patriarchal norms.

If the antagonist is patriarchal Zimbabwe, represented by Gavi, her brothers and the foreman, then the protagonist is clearly womankind in this patriarchal environment, embodied in Kerina. Mungoshi's feminist concerns have progressed from Betty's subplot, and Mrs Pfende's angry and bitter portrayal, to this much more tragic rendering of a subjugated woman desperate to stay joined to her abuser. There are simply no alternatives for Kerina, aside from the unimaginable "shitting and pissing" in her "corners" aforementioned by the men in her community, unwilling to marry her, but content to defile her. Nyota states:

Lack of a husband, was and regrettably still is, a serious social stigma to either an unmarried woman or a single mother, be it Betty in *Waiting for the Rain* or Kerina Mashamba in the short story *The Little Wooden Hut in the Forest*.... (Vambe & Chirere, 2006, p. 200)

Moreover, anecdotal evidence suggests that many women in abusive relations are 'content' with other aspects of the relationship, apart from the violence, alas. Kerina is depicted as savvy throughout, albeit without any alternatives, and so she is forced to choose between the derision and violation at the hands of her community, or the lesser violation as a mother in the abusive arms of Gavi. On the one hand, she is successful as motherhood is the principal badge of honour in Zimbabwean society for a woman, and married, thanks to the intervention of her brothers. On the other hand, Gavi hopes to finally be rid of Kerina by leaving her with her family after the birth, but Mungoshi once again seems to suggest that it is actually Kerina who is always one step ahead of his machinations. Kerina is prepared to fight for her place as a wife and mother, and we are told that "[f]or the second time in their life together, Kerina fought back" (Mungoshi, 1997a, p. 156):

She tried to reason with Gavi but Gavi had never been one to use reason if his fists could settle the whole thing faster. So, in self-defence, Kerina had picked up a piece of iron and hit Gavi hard on the head, hard enough for him to fall unconscious – which might have allowed her just a few hours rest... Instead, she worried that she had killed him. And she vowed that she would never ever argue with him again. (Ibid)

This scene of spousal abuse is all the more tragic when Kerina panics because she thinks she may have killed Gavi. Kerina's fear of losing Gavi is greater than her fear of being alone, and "[s]he refused – absolutely – to think of what she would have done if he had died" (ibid, p. 157). Kerina's status as a potential mother and wife is more important to her than her life, and she is prepared to risk everything. This is the climax of the story and is the point at which Mungoshi elicits heightened feelings of fear and pity from the reader, who recognises that Kerina must choose the best path available to her, even if it is still abhorrent. Kerina demonstrates Womanpower when she makes "a definite choice" (Greer, 2006, p. 130) by choosing to stay with Gavi, and refusing to be the village's "spittoon" (ibid, p. 284). Even though it might seem "at first that she merely exchanges one mode of suffering for another, one neurosis for another... she may at last claim to have made a definite choice which is the first prerequisite of moral action" (ibid, p. 130). At this point in the story Kerina realises which course is the lesser of the two evils for her, and it is apt that the reversal of her situation<sup>16</sup> and the recognition scenes<sup>17</sup> occur here to elevate her tragedy when she recognises what her true position is at the "soul (of her) tragedy". This is the point which will determine whether Kerina will be "happy or the reverse" (Aristotle translated by Butcher, 2008, p. 25), but we are not optimistic that any outcome will lead to a "happy" one for Kerina. Malaba states that:

The tragedy lies in the way in which Keri finds validation only through marriage to a brutal, selfish man; and is willing to put up with recurrent physical abuse,

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<sup>16</sup> *Peripeteia*

<sup>17</sup> *anagnorisis*



because society deems it better to be married, than a single woman. (Malaba, 2007a, p. 7)

Kerina also best fits Arthur Miller's definition of a modern tragic hero(ine) whose "flaw, or crack in the character is really nothing – and needs to be nothing, but (her) inherent willingness to remain passive in the face of what (she) conceives to be a challenge to (her) dignity, (her) image of (her) rightful status" (Miller, 1949, pp. 3-7). Because of the manner in which she has been socialised, motherhood is more important to Kerina than her dignity within the relationship, and she decides to remain passive in the face of any future challenges at the hands of Gavi's dangerous abuse. However, this is not to say that she remains entirely passive in the face of these "challenges to her dignity" (ibid), but rather that she chooses which arena to appear dignified in, because like Betty, she is tired of being laughed at behind her back by the village. By staying with Gavi and accepting the abuse, she is also bolstering her image in the community as a strong woman, a mother. Therefore, Kerina does not have less backbone than Betty and Mrs Pfende, but rather perceives fewer choices to find her place in society, and so the risk that Gavi may one day beat her so badly that she may die (especially as she has vowed never to fight back) is in itself a kind of courage, considering the potential cost. Moreover, "[b]efore Gavi, Kerina was certain that she was doomed to die single, and probably alone, in a little thatched hut at the edge of the village" (Mungoshi, 1997a, p. 152). Despite the dangerous nature of her marriage, Kerina has moved from the periphery, towards the centre of her world.

On their way to her family's house, when the fog rises around Gavi, "he felt as if it was physically pushing against his eyeballs: and at other times he felt as if he were falling endlessly into a dark pit" (ibid, p. 157), he feels helpless and feels "silent panic". Kerina, in contrast, seems completely serene, and whilst he stumbles around in the fog, she follows behind complacently. The fog seems to symbolise their relationship and Gavi's cognisance of the existing state of affairs as he stumbles around blind - he is unable to abandon Kerina, but is desperate to do so. Gavi becomes "murderously angry" (ibid), which is par for the course when he feels outsmarted by Kerina, who he feels cannot be lost in the fog too as this is her home country. Gavi is once again portrayed as a Neanderthal, and he is almost rendered comical in his rage, except of

course that this rage might lead to another thrashing for Kerina. It does not help matters that “Kerina smiled and kept on smiling” (ibid), but before he completely loses his temper an old man appears from the fog like an angel, no doubt saving Kerina from another beating. Kerina seems almost suicidal in antagonising Gavi in this manner before the Old Man appears to ‘save’ her – we learn later that the Old Man had been following them, so one might even infer that he could tell she was infuriating her husband somehow and needed rescuing. Her behaviour can also be read as signalling a new balance of power emerging in the relationship.

The Old Man and Old Woman who take Gavi and Kerina in remain unnamed, and there is a fairy-tale ambience augmented by the mist and the magical appearance of the Old Man. They almost seem to represent a higher authority, and the preternatural air suggests that they represent guardian angels to the young, lost (both figuratively and literally) couple. It seems certain that had the Old Man not materialised out of thin air when he did, Kerina may have been in grave danger at the hands of an infuriated Gavi.

The Old Woman fuels the preternatural air when she tells Gavi that “Every woman goes through these labour pains. It’s the one thing men never experience. That’s why sometimes women can be terribly cruel, more cruel than men, if you cross them. And that’s why it’s taboo for a child to hit his or her own mother” (ibid, p. 160). There is no evidence of this cruelty in the story and, on the contrary, it is Gavi who is cruel. Perhaps this warning is the Old Woman’s innate intuition at work in an attempt to scare him off any further abuse of Kerina, and it bolsters the supernatural power at work attributable to women in the story. An otherworldly air certainly does permeate the story from the time they leave for Kerina’s mother’s house for the child’s birth. Nyota discusses how “[t]heir getting lost in the mist, going in circles from sunrise to sunset, crossing the same river more than once has intimations of witchcraft” (Vambe & Chirere, 2006, p. 201). Nyota suggests that witchcraft is actively employed by the women in Mungoshi’s stories. However, it seems more likely that accusations of witchcraft are unfairly attributed to these women by Zimbabwean society, and Mungoshi foregrounds this to focus attention on the absurdity of these accusations, and the plight of the maligned women. It is important to bear in mind the setting of this

story, the Eastern Highlands, which are popularly associated with mystery, magic and witchcraft. Looking back again at when Kerina seems to find the fact that they are lost in the forest amusing, Gavi attributes this to trickery being employed by her and the “[h]elplessness and weightlessness created a sense of silent panic” (Mungoshi, 1997a, p. 157). Gavi is shown as weak and easily outwitted by Kerina, highlighting Mungoshi’s portrayal of a strong woman surviving despite the odds being against her in patriarchal Zimbabwe.

Mungoshi’s portrayal of the Old Woman and Old Man serves as a foil to Kerina and Gavi. Where Gavi and Kerina have a volatile relationship, the old couple represents everything that is good about marriage. They have grown old together, and the Old Man treats the Old Woman’s senility tenderly. The Old Woman is clearly grief-stricken by the loss of her own son who never visits her, and in her senility, she believes that Gavi is her long-lost son. This is a view that the Old Man encourages, and in fact initiates by welcoming them as his “daughter” and “son”. The Old Man seems to think better of this later when he tells her that Gavi is not Tongo, their son, but she glosses over his assertions, and Gavi finally starts to redeem himself somewhat by playing along. This shift might indicate his awareness that civilians were also traumatised by the loss of their sons and daughters during the liberation war. The little wooden hut with the quaint and hospitable old couple in it seem to lull Gavi into complacency, and he is described as “smiling dreamily” (Mungoshi, 1997a, p. 159) lulled by the “air... heavy with the scent of river fern, mud, and pine needles” (ibid). The change in Gavi hints optimistically that a change is coming about, and in fact, Gagiano says “[t]his little journey and its outcome is beautifully deployed by Mungoshi to suggest Gavi’s rite of passage to maturity and responsibility” (Vambe & Chirere, 2006, p. 144).

Kerina’s beauty is scrutinised by the Old Woman, and we learn again how her curse embarrasses her:

She wouldn’t take her eyes off Kerina. The younger woman felt embarrassed and uncomfortable as only people who know they are beautiful react to close scrutiny. (Mungoshi, 1997a, p. 158)

Another curse that resonates with this narrative is the concept of the fallen woman, or Eve, who is cursed in the Garden of Eden for her dealings with the serpent, which caused man's fall:

To the woman he said,  
"I will make your pains in childbearing very severe,  
With painful labour you will give birth to children.  
Your desire will be for your husband,  
and he will rule over you."

Genesis 3 v16 (Barker, K.L., Burdick, D. and Burdick, D.W., 1985)

The biblical allusion resonates with Kerina giving birth in the strange hut in the forest, after which the story is named, and it is certainly described as agonising. If Kerina is Eve in the throes of painful labour, she is also the Madonna, as the birth is reminiscent of the Christ child's birth away from the comforts of home in the stable manger. Gagliano supports the view that the child is reminiscent of the Christ child:

Here, too, a Christian motif is used (the child is born on Christmas day and the beasts peep in on the baby), but Africanised and feminised by Mungoshi: the baby is named "Chenzira", she who was born on the road, she who will always be on the way. (Vambe & Chirere, 2006, p. 144)

The path this baby girl will follow will not be an easy one, as she is likely to grow up watching her father beat her mother. Nevertheless, the suggestion is that this small family may be on the way towards a better future. Chenzira's 'way', in her symbolic role of the Christ child, might optimistically represent possible redemption for misogynist mankind (represented by her father) from the sin of patriarchal cruelty. In fact, Gavi's view of Kerina seems to transform instantly when he sees her Madonna-like transcendence as she holds the baby out to him:

Gavi had never seen Kerina's face in that way before. And he did not think that he would ever see it like that again. Beside such a face, Gavi felt small... He

stepped forward, towards Keri, who, in the guttering firelight, now looked so painfully vulnerable, so mysteriously beautiful, and so all-knowingly powerful that he couldn't stop the tears rolling down his cheeks as he knelt in front of her, to receive from her outstretched arms her gift to him, their first, his child. (Mungoshi, 1997a, pp. 160-161)

Gavi's redemption seems complete at the end of the story when the Old Woman gently mocks him for crying at the wonder of his child's birth, and the supernatural ambience in the little wooden hut suggests an omniscience surrounding the hut and their presence there:

'Look at the fool,' the Old Woman nudged the Old Man, pointing at Gavi, 'Just look at him. He comes home and he's crying.' (Mungoshi, 1997a, p. 162)

Gavi is metaphorically 'home', and the fact that he is crying suggests he has learnt to respect Kerina, as all of womankind deserves to be respected. Kerina achieves this divine state through motherhood, but the portrayal of the old couple's affection for each other also suggests that marriage can, and should be, a place of peaceful cohesion. Catharsis is achieved in Kerina's tragic tale through the purging of emotion demonstrated tangibly by Gavi's tears. Gavi's tears suggest a dramatic change has come over him, and that there is hope for a more optimistic future for the young couple, and the patriarchal structures that subjugate women:

As long as both men and women regard the subordination of half the human race to the Other as "natural", it is impossible to envision a society in which differences do not connote either dominance or subordination. The feminist critique of the patriarchal edifice of knowledge is laying the groundwork for a correct analysis of reality, one which at the very least can distinguish the whole from a part. Women's History, the essential tool in creating feminist consciousness in women, is providing the body of experience against which new theory can be tested and the ground on which women of vision can stand.

A feminist world-view will enable women and men to free their minds from patriarchal thought and practice and at last to build a world free of dominance and hierarchy, a world that is truly human. (Lerner, 1986, p. 8)

Mungoshi tries to correct the imbalance occasioned by the disparity between the sexes in Zimbabwe, evident in the first half of the narrative, through an attempt to displace male dominance in the second part by allowing the pendulum to swing to the transcendence of women in this story. He does this by demonstrating Womanpower in both Kerina and the Old Woman (a symbol of 'Mother Africa') who are presented sensitively. Unlike the men that De Beauvoir berates for denying women "transcendence", Gavi witnesses it in Kerina who is no longer just "a thing", and thus not refused "the highest human values – heroism, revolt, detachment, invention, creation" (Nye, 1988, pp. 82, 84).

This transcendence indicates that Gavi finally respects her and understands the significance of her role as the mother of his child. This supports the view that Mungoshi is sympathetic to the plight of women in Zimbabwe, advanced by Malaba in his 2007 essay entitled: "Charles Mungoshi's Depiction of the Roles of Women in Zimbabwean Society":

Mungoshi does, however, portray women sympathetically and he exposes the Shona/Zimbabwean society's reluctance to evaluate women charitably or judiciously. (Malaba, 2007a, p. 14)

Mungoshi uses Kerina to explore the tragedy of a woman's lot in Zimbabwean society, emphasising the limited options available to her to eke out a dignified existence, and thus showing her (and Zimbabwean womankind in general) to be both tragic and heroic in the face of entrenched cultural attitudes or prejudices. Gavi represents the patriarchal oppression women suffer under, and is portrayed as a clownish oaf, mercifully outwitted by Kerina's intelligence and survival instincts. Once again, the denouement facilitates the "proper purgation of these emotions" (Aristotle translated by Butcher, 2008, p. 22) of pity and fear, but this time this sensitive rendering of a beautiful spinster's tragic fairy tale subverts the conventional "happily ever after", at

the same time as it provides one. The reader is left with the impression that Kerina and Gavi might in fact 'live happily (enough) ever after'. This ending may be more satisfying, and demonstrate how Mungoshi's feminist concerns appear to have evolved from Betty to Mrs Pfende, and from Mrs Pfende to Kerina, but it is in his final novel that his strongest tragic heroine explores her predicament under Zimbabwean patriarchal oppression, and thrives despite enormous adversity.

## Chapter 4: Serina Maseko and the HIV Curse

Michael Gwemende. An unshod heel, a slippery eel. A false alarm, really, not an angel. He is really Mike and I wouldn't put it past him to slip under your eyes and slink away under cover of the skin of some angel. And he seemed to have convinced everyone, my mother first and foremost, that I am a witch or vampire or something as infernally nocturnal and evil as such, *Akoma, Fungika*<sup>18</sup>! God forgive him. And the people here, you can't believe it. Behaving as if HIV/AIDS is my own invention, that I am the first ever to be affected by it. (Mungoshi, 2013 p.21)

Serina is the central protagonist in this novel, which was still being written when Mungoshi fell into a coma on 30 April 2010, and it took twenty years to write. It is thus necessary to clarify that the context and attitudes with regard to HIV/AIDS, as described in the book, are from twenty years ago. Nonetheless, it 'mirrors' the pervasive attitudes at the time and the stigma related to STDs persists to this day. For the purposes of this dissertation, it is especially interesting to note that Mungoshi's storytelling has evolved from stories about women on the outskirts of society, to a story primarily concerned with the experience of a Zimbabwean woman under patriarchal oppression in Zimbabwe. One can infer that his concerns with regard to the position of women in Zimbabwean society had progressed to the point that he felt compelled to locate this as the primary storyline, with a female protagonist at the forefront. The issue of women as the Second Sex, and his concerns with regard to how women might demonstrate their innate power (Womanpower), culminates in this novel. Lizzy Attree appears to concur with this assertion in her review of the book when she says that "Mungoshi walks alongside Serina, inside her heart and her mind, and does so with the storyteller's verve and passion that he is renowned for" (Mungoshi, 2013, Foreword).

In this story, Mungoshi has concerned himself with what Aidoo states is a principal requirement for a feminist above all else, including the gender of the writer. Aidoo

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<sup>18</sup> Dearest, Older sister Fungai (Shona).



believes that “exposing sexist **tragedy** or women’s history”, as well as “unfolding a revolutionary vision of the role [of women]” through the lenses of a foundational ideology on feminism and women’s experiences as the “second sex”, or the “other”, which is a shared experience of women regardless of race is paramount:

Ama Ata Aidoo dismisses the assumption that all material dealing with women is necessarily feminist: “I am not a feminist because I write about women. Are men writers male chauvinist pigs just because they write about men? Or is a writer an African nationalist just by writing about Africans? ... Obviously not... no writer, female or male, is a feminist just by writing about women. Unless a particular writer commits his or her energies, actively to exposing the sexist tragedy or women’s history; protesting the ongoing degradation of women; celebrating their physical and intellectual capabilities, and above all, unfolding a revolutionary vision of the role [of women]”, he or she cannot be pronounced a feminist. (Ogunyemi, 1985, p. 65)

Serina’s story exposes “the sexist tragedy” in a number of ways. First, she is treated like the perpetrator of a crime for being the passive recipient of HIV from a skiving partner, chosen for her by her mother. Serina has followed custom and obeyed a parent’s wishes regarding the choice of a husband, and her misfortune is unmerited in keeping with Aristotle’s prerequisite for a “perfect tragedy” that “should... imitate actions which excite pity and fear, this being a distinctive mark of tragic imitation”, and pity is aroused by “unmerited misfortune” and fear “by the misfortune of a man like ourselves” (Aristotle translated by Butcher, 2008, p. 45). Second, she is abandoned and made to feel like a pariah by the very same mother who arranged the union in the first place. Third, she loses both of her children, one to HIV, and the other to her treacherous mother. All of these events constitute “unmerited misfortune”, and evoke “pity and fear” in the reader. As outlined in the introduction to this dissertation, Foley proposes that tragic heroines can “nevertheless take ethical stances that either prove to be superior to those of men in particular instances or appropriate but different from those of men due to the constraints of their social role or status” (Foley, 2001, p. 118), which Serina demonstrates when she makes her own way in the world despite enormous adversity.

Attree believes that in the context of HIV/AIDS “it is possible to see the extent to which the depiction of the health of the individual male disrupts conceptions of a stable patriarchal masculinity that in turn upholds the hegemony of male power in the nation” (Muchemwa & Muponde, 2007, pp. 58-59). This is evident when one considers Michael’s rejection of Serina when he finds out that she carries the virus, meaning that he too must be a carrier, and in fact, is very likely to be the agent:

She was quite certain that Mike didn’t even know that he had the virus when he came back into her the second time. Because that’s when it had appeared and she hadn’t been with any other man in between Rita’s birth and Zanda’s conception. Unless she had taken it from Amos, but that was impossible, it would have appeared in Rita. (Mungoshi, 2013, p. 82)

Michael is unable to uphold the façade of a diligent father and head of his family in the face of this unmasking and shirks his responsibilities. His position of trust has been undermined as it appears likely that he must have infected his chaste wife. Thus Serina’s letter to her friend serves as a lament which Fungi is unlikely to ever read, and is employed to signify Serina’s isolation, as well as a tool to outline the exposition for the reader:

Anyway, did you finally get him? The dark hero of your day-mares? The bright one-and-only shining star in your zodiac? Did you get him, Fungi? Well, I did *Shamwari*<sup>19</sup>. I got him, or rather he got me – whichever way – back, front or crab-wise as you would probably say in your filthily graphic and inimitable way; whichever way, we got each other and he drove a BMW (Be My Wife, he said that’s what the letters meant) and he drove it right into me and I spewed out two brats (they were really lovely children, when they came out) into the world and then he left me at some dark junction in the middle of the night with nobody in sight, Fungi. (Ibid, p. 18)

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<sup>19</sup> Friend (Shona).

Serina is indomitable, and the reason for this is clarified early on in the novel when she speaks of Comrade Slim Gives Manda<sup>20</sup> to whom she is grateful for leading her to a more accepting worldview, and whose acceptance of his plight resonates with her: “I am now used to this, it is that affliction, *mukondozi*<sup>21</sup>, and the only way to treat it is to dance along with it” (ibid, p. 22). Their meeting is Serina’s first encounter with HIV, which she reminisces over in her epistle to her friend. Serina recounts Comrade Slim Gives Manda’s influence on her capacity for empathy as follows:

Before this, I hadn’t known how to respond to people like Slim, or even other disabled people or people who just seemed to be different from me in a, well, a kind of so-called inferior way. All of a sudden we were all the same and it didn’t matter. It was a freeing thought. (Ibid, p. 23)

Serina has very little choice in the matter of her husband, sex, and HIV status, and her fatalistic optimism is admirable in the face of what she initially views as her death sentence. Greer discusses the right to reject male advances in *The Female Eunuch* (which has sadly not dated as much as one would have hoped given that it was written in the ‘70s):

Twenty years ago [circa. 1970] it was important to stress the right to sexual expression and far less important to underline a woman’s right to reject male advances; now it is even more important to stress the right to reject penetration by the male member, the right to safe sex, the right to chastity, the right to defer physical intimacy until there is irrefutable evidence of commitment, because of the appearance on the earth of AIDS. (Greer, 2006, p. 10)

Serina has none of these rights. She cannot reject penetration by her husband<sup>22</sup>, and as she is conditioned to accept this status quo, this does not cross her mind:

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<sup>20</sup> Manda is Shona for “animal fat”, which is a euphemistic way of speaking of the weight loss associated with HIV contraction

<sup>21</sup> Shona slang for AIDS derived from *Mukondombera* which means a pandemic.

<sup>22</sup> Or betrothed – when Serina goes to Ruvajena and speaks to two bitter crones, “hooting like mad witches”, she tells them that “Mike had promised to marry her, had even paid the preliminary *lobola*” (Mungoshi, 2013, p. 79). In other places, he is referred to as her husband.

Some men have abused the practice of paying lobola by claiming that “marital rape” is a contradiction in terms. Such men argue that they have “bought” their wives and are therefore free to have sex on demand. (Chitando, 2004, p. 153)

Serina accepts her mother’s choice of husband and suffers for it – both her mother and Michael punish her for the HIV curse, regardless of where the blame ought to fall. Like Kerina, Serina is also comparable to Eve in Genesis in this sense as she represents the fallen woman, the (unwitting) temptress in the Garden of Eden, and she is also cast out of her comfort zone alone. The difference is that Serina had no choice when she took the proffered apple, and the weight of the HIV curse that she had to carry thereafter became her burden alone. Even her assumption of commitment and fidelity is moot as it seems likely that Michael brought the curse into their marriage bed as she only contracted the virus after Rita’s birth, but before Zanda was born (as Zanda contracted HIV, whereas Rita did not<sup>23</sup>). Concerning curses, which are linked to the concept of *ngozi*, the tension between Western and traditional religion is apparent in many places in the novel, serving again as a reminder of the problems of distorting scripture for one’s own ends. Unlike the mother and child scene in Kerina’s story that signals a panacea for the young couple, there is no such panacea to be had for Serina when she is cast out. The Eve allegory goes beyond being tainted as a fallen woman as she is also cast out of the Garden of Eden (relatively speaking). Serina more explicitly references scripture as a criticism of Christianity that has been perverted as she speaks of God’s Archangel Michael when discussing Michael’s deception:

Isn’t Michael the name of one of the top and God’s favorite angels in the Holy Scriptures? You can’t imagine an angel being called Mike, can you? I can’t. Unless of course they are at Borrowdale Race Course or in Katsanga Beer Hall among themselves. (Mungoshi, 2013, p. 20)

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<sup>23</sup> It is possible that one of them was an HIV carrier when Serina was pregnant with Rita, without passing HIV on to her, provided the viral load was extremely low or “undetectable” (N.H.S., 2016). However, this is quite unlikely without antiretroviral therapy.

An apt correlation, highlighting another biblical allusion employed by Mungoshi, can be drawn between Michael's cowardice and pride and that of Betty's brother, Lucifer, in *Waiting for the Rain*, which again highlights the complications of a commingling of traditional and Christian values, with limited success. Lucifer is also an Archangel, the "fallen angel" himself, which Malaba expands upon in his paper on the tensions between 'traditional' demands and 'modern' practices:

Christianity further compounds this complex situation, as the 'bringer of light', Lucifer, is a fallen angel. His arrival from Salisbury heightens the tension at home and his spiritual crisis hinges on his discovery of his inordinate pride. (Reckwitz, Vennarini, & Wegener, 1993, p. 122)

Regarding Christian values in Zimbabwe, Ezra Chitando discusses how patriarchy has "compounded the vulnerability of women" in Zimbabwe in a paper entitled 'The Good Wife': A Phenomenological Rereading of Proverbs 31:10-31 in the Context of HIV/AIDS in Zimbabwe:

Patriarchal values and norms have ensured that the laments by women remain muzzled and muffled. Notions of masculinity, where the man is a sexual predator, have compromised married women in particular. Fidelity in marriage is defined almost exclusively as relating to women, with society looking the other way when married men pursue multiple sexual partners. Sexual abuse, biological, economic and other factors leave women vulnerable to HIV infection. (Chitando, 2004, p. 152)

Chitando's paper examines the scripture, Proverbs 31:10-31, which is used to "call upon women to become 'the good wife' because it "outlines the qualities that are to be found in a 'good wife'" (ibid, p. 154):

10 Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies.

11 The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, so that he shall have no need of spoil.

12 She will do him good and not evil all the days of her life.

13 She seeketh wool, and flax, and worketh willingly with her hands.

14 She is like the merchants' ships; she bringeth her food from afar.

15 She riseth also while it is yet night, and giveth meat to her household, and a portion to her maidens.

16 She considereth a field, and buyeth it: with the fruit of her hands she planteth a vineyard.

17 She girdeth her loins with strength, and strengtheneth her arms.

18 She perceiveth that her merchandise is good: her candle goeth not out by night.

19 She layeth her hands to the spindle, and her hands hold the distaff.

20 She stretcheth out her hand to the poor; yea, she reacheth forth her hands to the needy.

21 She is not afraid of the snow for her household: for all her household are clothed with scarlet.

22 She maketh herself coverings of tapestry; her clothing is silk and purple.

23 Her husband is known in the gates, when he sitteth among the elders of the land.

24 She maketh fine linen, and selleth it; and delivereth girdles unto the merchant.

25 Strength and honour are her clothing; and she shall rejoice in time to come.

26 She openeth her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness.

27 She looketh well to the ways of her household, and eateth not the bread of idleness.

28 Her children arise up, and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praiseth her.

29 Many daughters have done virtuously, but thou excellest them all.

30 Favour is deceitful, and beauty is vain: but a woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised.

31 Give her of the fruit of her hands; and let her own works praise her in the gates.

*Proverbs 31:10-31 King James Version (KJV)*

Chitando believes that the distortion of this scripture in marriages “entrenches patriarchal values” (Chitando, 2004, p. 154) which compound women’s powerlessness in the marriage bed. Related to Serina’s choices with regard to her rights in the bedroom, as aforementioned, she has no voice regarding the choice of life partner either:

My mother recommended Michael Gwemende to me because he was older, therefore wiser; attended the local church and was one of the elders and leader and conductor of the church choir. He had good contacts internationally and he could fly you out of the country at the drop of a bra at any time. (Mungoshi, 2013, p. 20)

If one were to compare this narrative to a Shakespearean or Greek tragedy, the point of the disruption (when Michael disrupts the status quo, and his position in the family becomes untenable), is both part of the exposition, and an early complication. One might consider it “early”, because the complication usually takes place in Act II in Shakespearean and Greek drama according to Gustav Freytag’s Five Act Structure (Freytag, 1900<sup>24</sup>), and not in the exposition as it appears here. More specifically, for this and other Afrocentric books, “[D]isruptions caused by colonialism, war, feminism and AIDS have undermined traditional understandings of gender roles and re-positioned the male body at the centre of a number of their narratives” (Muchemwa & Muponde, 2007 p. 60). Indeed, this is the point at which Michael would traditionally be thrust into the centre of the narrative as the male protagonist, but Mungoshi chooses to focus on Serina’s experience instead, and this again demonstrates his concern with the plight of women in a patriarchal Zimbabwean society where women

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<sup>24</sup> As is the custom for tragic plays, it follows the exposition in this novel. If one considers the exposition as being Act I, this Act corresponds to Serina’s letter to her school friend, Fungisai, as it serves to set the scene for the reader:

It had to be got rid of off her breast if she were to stay sane at all, because at some point during this time, she had almost convinced herself that she was going out of her mind. (Mungoshi, 2013 p. 16)

are marginalised and (commonly) powerless against men. The men are derided by the teenage girls as “worse than both asses and hogs grunting and wallowing, hallowing in their own filth” (Mungoshi, 2013, p. 19). Mungoshi consolidates his feminist concerns even further when he not only focuses on Serina’s plight, but also tells the story of her overcoming oppression from all quarters: her husband, her mother, the challenge to her status as a mother, and her HIV status. This is a demonstration of his faith in Womanpower, and the book depicts this.

Serina’s tale is complex, and the climax of the first part of the novel appears here when her mother throws her out and takes her child from her. The fourth part involves the confrontation scenes, and for Serina, these involve a number of confrontations, and thus cover a large portion of the book. Serina confronts various family members, and finally her mother, but she also confronts herself and her new worldview as an HIV sufferer. Serina is not portrayed as a victim, even though she has every right to feel like one after the hardships she endures, and she comes to terms with her predicament in her own way. In fact, she not only comes to terms with her predicament but also triumphs over it (to the extent that this is possible at a time when contracting HIV was a death sentence) as she becomes independent. Mungoshi demonstrates that even with a death sentence hanging over her head, and her subordinate status as a woman, Serina is able to overcome her predicament. This is a novel with a moral and a “happy ending” in a sense because Mungoshi demonstrates that:

The individual does not become less human once he or she is infected with HIV. To advocate destruction of the other is to advocate the ultimate destruction of oneself. (Muchemwa & Muponde, 2007 p. 62)

Serina “transcends” societal expectations and enormous adversity. The guilt and shame that follows society’s condemnation become tangible, and Serina says that the “feeling was so thick around me, it was so real, you could cut it with a knife and cook it” (Mungoshi, 2013, p. 24). Serina describes society’s salacious slander putting her in the position of blame as follows:



*'Serina's husband has left her because she has got AIDS and she also infected her child with it and now the baby is going to die of it and the other baby may follow this one into the grave too.'* (Ibid)

What is most noteworthy is the fact that the blame is placed squarely on Serina's shoulders, which is ludicrous when considered in the context of her fidelity to her (suspiciously) absent husband. Furthermore, and as advanced by Chitando, a married woman in Zimbabwe, like Serina, would have very little say with regard to sexual consent:

In Zimbabwe, men generally occupy dominant positions in the various spheres of life. Powerlessness among women has translated to greater exposure to HIV infection. Married women, in particular, have little or no power to negotiate whether, when or how sex takes place. (Chitando, 2004, p. 152)

Serina is alienated by society at large and closer to home by her own mother. Serina recognises that her mother treats her like livestock in the marriage transaction, and if men are "worse than both asses and hogs" (Mungoshi, 2013, p. 19)", then she is the pig on the chopping block: "*Pig for sale! Cheap! Cheap! Pig for sale!*" And she complies: "Yes, Mother", I bobbed and curtsied (Mungoshi, 2013, p. 49).

Serina's mother (Laiza) is a multifaceted character whose outer persona is that of a Christian woman, but for whom traditional values also have their place. That she warps scripture is patent, but whether or not this is a criticism of Christianity is not clear. It appears to be an observation of the difficulty of melding traditional and Christian values, and the resulting tenets are perverted and unrecognisable as either Christian or traditional culture. Serina's values are both traditional and Christian values, and the effect is the "nervous condition" which Malaba discussed in his paper on "traditional" demands and "modern" practices in Mungoshi's *Waiting for the Rain* and *Nervous Conditions* by Tsitsi Dangarembga:

The 'nervous condition' that afflicts these protagonists foregrounds the pervasive, psychological pressures that assail the 'New Africans'. The fact that

these youths do not belong to either the 'traditional' or the 'modern' European milieu raises fundamental issues about personal and national identity in contemporary Zimbabwe. (Reckwitz, Vennarini, & Wegener, 1993, p. 119)

Serina's journey helps her to overcome this 'nervous condition' as she gains insight into her father's beliefs, which are similar to those of the Old Man in *Waiting for the Rain*, another staunch proponent of traditional values. As in *Waiting for the Rain* where "the erosion of 'tradition' is mirrored in the 'threat of the family's disintegration'" (ibid, p. 120), so too does the Maseko family face disintegration because of the "erosion of tradition" as its various streams branch off into the dark, which Kuruku blames on western education and Christianity:

Kuruku's drunken distillation of the ills of 'modern' Shona society stresses the fundamental breakdown of morality that is one of the unforeseen ripple effects of western education. Western education and Christianity, with their focus on the uniqueness of the individual and the quest for self-fulfilment challenge the communal base of 'traditional' African societies. (Ibid)

Chitando discusses how the gospel is used in the subordination of women when he says, "The 'gospel' [sic] of the subordination of women have [sic] found enthusiastic supporters in both African Traditional Religions and Christianity" (Chitando, 2004, p. 153). Mungoshi portrays this in the novel, not as a specific criticism of one system, but more uniformly as a criticism of all superstitious and limiting dogma. This is evident once again when Serina's previous suitor, Amos, accuses her of getting rid of their baby, and he indicts her mother for having a hand in it. Amos even suggests that Serina might have eaten it:

Or better still – you ate it? That's most likely – a foetus feast, that'd be more in your mother's line, wouldn't it? Gorging herself sick on three-month-old fetuses. Were you also there at this witches' banquet? (Mungoshi, 2013, pp. 57-58)

When Amos accuses Serina and her mother of witchcraft, his accusation conveys a supernatural element that is evident in many of Mungoshi's stories, including the stories under examination in this dissertation. Whilst Amos' accusations of witchcraft and cannibalism levelled at Serina and her mother are patently absurd, there is evidence of underhandedness in Serina's mother and her treatment of her family members when they fail to live up to her expectations. When Serina's child died her mother "took to her bed... because she couldn't handle that pariah dog atmosphere that had suddenly cocooned our home" (ibid, p. 24), alienating Serina further.

The injustice of Serina's situation propels the reader towards feelings of "pity and fear" (Aristotle translated by Butcher, 2008, p. 44) for her, as her mother suggested Michael as an eligible husband in the first place. One might also expect that Laiza's maternal affection might make her sympathetic towards her daughter's plight. Instead, Serina's mother is in her bedroom "licking her wounds, groaning over the 'imponderable damage' that had been done to her name and the irreparable harm and scandal that had been caused to her image and person as leader of the Mother's Union, mothers of our church and as one of the indispensable pillars of our community" (Mungoshi, 2013, pp. 25-26). At this point in the plot, Serina's predicament is indefensible, and overcoming these circumstances seems unlikely as she is disgraced. The concept of disgrace is outlined in Steiner's discussion on an "indispensable core shared by 'tragedies'". He states that "the human condition is tragic", and "ontologically tragic" because "[f]allen man is made an unwelcome guest of life or, at best, a threatened stranger on this hostile or indifferent earth" (Steiner, 2004, pp. 2-3).

Thus the necessary and sufficient premise, the axiomatic constant in tragedy is that of ontological homelessness – witness this motif in Beckett, in Pinter – of alienation or ostracism from the safeguard of licensed being. (Ibid)

Serina experiences this ontological concept of tragedy, which is linked to a literal and figurative "homelessness", when her mother makes her feel unwelcome in their home and Serina decides that she has to leave. The scene begins with Serina's mother in bed "reading her usual favourite book, the King James Version of the Christian Holy Bible" (Mungoshi, 2013, p. 30). The irony of her mother's reliance on her apparent

Christian values is mirrored in the passage about Michael's eligibility whose standing as a church choirmaster is undermined by sin as he infects his wife and child with HIV:

And what must have made her extra-thankful was that this time the man who was making her laugh was a true son of God, he was the new choir master in their church. (Mungoshi, 2013, p. 48)

Laiza's double standards are compounded by the irony of her confrontation with Serina, who is bitter because her mother blames her for contracting HIV, when it most likely resulted from Michael's promiscuity, and less directly, from Laiza choosing Michael as a husband for Serina in the first place. In fact, Serina's courtship is orchestrated almost entirely by her mother, and despite her father's previous attempts to secure Amos as a suitor when she was fifteen, her domineering mother ultimately decides what is best for her.

Another devastating irony is the parallel between Laiza's courtship by a musical rake, in her youth.

In short, after marrying and wedding Laiza Shananguro, daughter of Mr and Mrs Shananguro, Samuel Maseko had to stop playing the devil's kind of music. (Ibid, pp. 41-42)

After the confrontation between mother and daughter, Serina turns to leave, and her mother takes her child, Rita, from her and tells her, "You are not taking this baby anywhere with you, ghetto slut" (ibid, p. 31). That her mother blames Serina for her predicament becomes even clearer when she says, "I am not going to stand by here and call myself a true follower of Jesus Christ, and watch you drag this innocent child, this angel, through gutter muck and ghetto trash!" (ibid). This is followed by the epithet "Whore!" and other "bilge" from her mother, incongruent with the image of the Christian woman reading her King James Bible prior to the incident. This confrontation highlights the position of women in patriarchal Zimbabwe, even when the supposed 'patriarch' is absent, proving that the position of women as the Other is so ingrained that they perpetuate it to the detriment of themselves, and their own daughters.

Serina's own mother, whose culpability in the failure of Serina's marriage and the death of her child is apparent, treats her like a criminal.

After tickling her daughter, Serina bravely walks away, with no other choices available to her:

Then I left that place without saying goodbye or looking back. As I walked out the gate onto the street, a strange thought came to me – this was a place of going away from, not a place of coming home to. (Ibid, p. 34)

At this point, Serina is literally and metaphysically homeless. The concept of a traditional 'home' has lost significance for her, and she is now adrift, as she has left the only home she knows, and has no other home to go to. There is no comfort to be had anywhere, and she must make her own way now. Part of Serina longs for her absent father at this point, and she has a "vivid vision and sensation that my father was there, walking with me, my left hand firmly clasped in his right" (ibid). This childish daydream suggests a reliance on the patriarchal norm that a father is the protector of the home, when the reality is that single mothers play both the maternal and paternal roles. This patriarchal fallacy of a paternal protector being the norm is not true in Serina's father case, nor is it true for many fathers. Serina wants to be saved by her father, but he absconded during her childhood, and there is no relief to be had from that quarter at this point in the narrative. A parallel to Mungoshi's short story, "The Mount of Moriah", might be drawn here if one considers Robert Muponde's view when he states that:

The image of a father who intends to eviscerate his crippled son brings to ruination the ideological braces of patriarchy which conflate fatherhood with paternity. In this story, the father bankrupts the patriarchal idea that father is a provider, protector and giver of life. (Muchemwa & Muponde, 2007, p. 18)

Muponde appears to be advocating an uncoupling of fatherhood and paternity as a patriarchal concept, and this is apt in Serina's case as her father is an unlikely candidate for the role of saviour as "[t]here was something in him that anyone with an

eye for such things would call the look of the trapped rabbit – or rat?” (Mungoshi, 2013, p. 36). Serina idolises her father whom she thinks of as “Sam Maseko, Mystery Man” (ibid, p. 40). Sam Maseko works as *madhobhabhin*<sup>25</sup>, which shames her mother who “must have seen and felt the sight of her husband humiliating her and clowning away his life in filth towards his rubbishy destinations like this, twice or three times a week” (ibid, p. 39). He is also a talented musician and holds a teaching certificate that he has converted into a degree “somewhere along the road” (ibid, p. 40), but what Serina remembers most poignantly is his drunkenness:

My earliest and unforgettable memories of Father are of him coming home around eight in the evening, always from the local bottle store round the corner, singing *Chigwaya chinotamba mudziva macho*<sup>26</sup>, drunk to the gills like a mud-drugged fish, as Mother would say contemptuously. (Ibid, p. 43)

This drunken, dustbin man, not employed in the profession he trained for<sup>27</sup>, does not seem a likely candidate to save Serina, nor would this demonstrate Womanpower on her part. However, it is interesting to note that at the beginning of her journey into the unknown, Serina does ruminate on the childish fairy-tale of daddy swooping in to save his little girl. For her, patriarchal structures are so ingrained that a male saviour is her first hope. However, the likelihood of this is low considering that the reader is aware that her mother played the role of suitor negotiator by suggesting Michael as a husband (which is typically the father’s role), and was the de facto head of the household in place of Serina’s absent father. Consequently, Serina’s mother is portrayed as a very strong woman, but a flawed one. As a result, Serina’s fancifully hopes her father will rescue her after her mother’s betrayal, and she wonders if she is “already on the way to finding him”:

This nobody’s-advice decision of mine to come and live here in St Mary’s must be the dark promptings of my desire to be near him, to see him again, don’t you think, Fungisai? A dim but burning hope that one day, just one fine day, I will

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<sup>25</sup> Shona slang for a municipal worker who empties bins.

<sup>26</sup> Shona song: A fish plays in its domain, meaning one does well in familiar territory.

<sup>27</sup> Teaching certificate.

bump into him out there in the street, or at some bottle store or the market or at some corner shop or on some pool on Manyame River (he loved to go fishing, I remember) – somewhere, anywhere, somehow – I feel it, Fungisai. Who knows, Fungi, who knows? (Ibid, pp. 45-46)

Serina builds on this daydream incorporating her mother in the hope that their reunion will somehow bring the family together again:

... I anticipate the moment she will – suddenly see me, my left hand in Father's right, and both of us coming out of the rain and walking through the open door, across the family threshold into the home-again warmth of the living-room and she will just let it be and we will be together again for a day. Just for one day, Fungi. Don't you think that's how it's meant to be? Just one day in our life. One clear bright fine day for the sake of our life.... (Ibid, p. 56)

Serina is entrusting her father with superhuman power to redeem and rescue her. His imperfection seems to best qualify him, perhaps because she feels tainted by her infection and cannot find acceptance from the conventional (apparent) goodness of her mother. Serina yearns for her absent father to save her, but dramatic irony is at play as the reader is able to infer that a drunken, unambitious man is an unlikely candidate for a superhero in this narrative. Lerner discusses the position of women who are conditioned to believe that men are the liberators and the heroes (in her paper on positioning women in history):

This process of creating a history of women is still ongoing and will need to continue for a long time. We are only beginning to understand its implications. The myth that women are marginal to the creation of history and civilization has profoundly affected the psychology of women and men. It has given men a skewed and essentially erroneous view of their place in human society and in the universe. For women, as shown in the case of Simone De Beauvoir, who surely is one of the best-educated women of her generation, history seemed for millennia to offer only negative lessons and no precedent for significant action heroism, or liberating example. Most difficult of all was the seeming

absence of a tradition which would reaffirm the independence and autonomy of women. It seemed that there had never been any woman or group of women who had lived without male protection. (Lerner, 1975, p. 2)

Serina longs for the protection of her “prodigal father” (Mungoshi, 2013, p. 61), and cannot immediately see her way to providing solutions for herself. Mungoshi leads Serina into the wilderness and her heroism lies in her subsequently taking responsibility for her own life, and for her health, without a male hero to save her from her predicament.

The issue of her upkeep brings with it another issue for women in patriarchal Zimbabwe, as Serina cannot do without the maintenance that Michael pays. Serina feels obliged to maintain a collegial attitude towards Michael’s benevolence (guilt-funded, one assumes), and accepts the payments as her only means of income. To her credit, accepting these payments does leave her feeling conflicted, but she is pragmatic in her approach to her upkeep:

It was now only fair that they should spend their last days completing the final clause of the contract – in health or in disease – or how did it go? Anyway, she didn’t see herself as if she were sponging on Mike. It was his duty. (Ibid, p. 62)

Serina’s approach to her HIV status is also pragmatic, as she makes her way to the Ruvajena Home of Hope for voluntary HIV counselling. It is a familiar place as it is where she went for help when her son, Zanda, was sick and died. Meeting Saidi on the bus lightens the mood as he greets her by rolling his eyes in a “ridiculously lascivious manner” (ibid, p. 63) to indicate an empty space on the seat beside him. Saidi’s “lascivious” manner is not really sexual at all, but rather mockingly so. At this point in the narrative Serina does not realise that he is her half-brother, but it is worth noting that they connect immediately, even before she knows who he is. Thinking he is flirting with her, Serina naïvely calls men like him “semi-brave”, because they are able to initiate contact, but are never able to “maintain the courage to sustain a follow up” (ibid), and resigns herself to his scrutiny:



So she regrettably, uneasily resigned herself to the self-diminishing process of feeling oneself scrutinized, studied, even undressed and judged. Serina could feel her wattles rattling. (Ibid, p. 64)

When Saidi appraises her, Serina becomes subservient, which she regrets, but she allows the invasion as a subordinate to the dominant male gaze. At this point, Serina is only at the beginning of her journey, and has yet to build up the resilience necessary to manage the situation. However, her “wattles” rattle, and she feels herself “about to snap and snarl at him to keep his all-knowing piercing eyes and dirty thoughts to himself” (ibid, p. 65). Serina is displaying the first semblance of Womanpower as she pushes back under the strain of his gaze. She wants to challenge him, and redeem some semblance of self-esteem, but she does not yet have the weapons in her arsenal to manage the situation. Serina has misjudged Saidi, assuming his gaze is sexual, but he apologises and admits that he is not interested in her looks, and confesses, “I have got AIDS” (ibid, p. 66). Mungoshi describes Saidi’s next word using sibilance to describe the sibilant response, and the awkward tension resulting from his stare is diffused by his oddly personal confession:

“Yeees,” Saidi said, slowly, sibilantly sighing and raising his head and straightening his neck. (Ibid)

The reader must assume that he is either very intuitive (to assume that Serina needs to hear his confession), or that he knows her (which he does). In fact, their connection becomes apparent to everyone on the bus “who saw Serina and Saidi, [and] couldn’t doubt that these had known each other, very intimately, at a certain time in their life, but had then been separated for an even longer time and now this was the long overdue reunion” (ibid, p. 67). Once again, this is an example of dramatic irony as this is a reunion, but only Saidi knows it (and the reader suspects it):

*“Ukama hunonhuwirana<sup>28</sup>,”* Saidi said, sadly aware of the cruel irony of this old saying involving their condition but taking tremendous joy in the incongruent relevance.” (Ibid)

Saidi is reluctant to leave Serina after their reunion, and Serina starts to suspect that she knows him. His ears seem most familiar:

It was then that she noticed his ears. Too big for his head. She had seen these ears before. But where? (Ibid, p. 70).

Do Saidi’s ears resemble her father’s ears? Saidi is also a gifted musician, and so the size and shape of his ears is a breadcrumb for the reader who notes the genetic (size and shape) and musical (metaphorical) links. The descriptions of Saidi which follow are otherworldly as “he seemed to command a kind of mystic strength in him” and Serina notes that “most of these wasting-away diseases made even the most foolish and stupid people look very old and wise, clairvoyant or even saintly” (ibid, p. 71). As he is much closer to death, the wasting away of flesh has given Saidi an almost ethereal quality, which one often links to fasting and spirituality, and is another religious undertone.

When they meet again at Ruvajena, they hear Rose’s testimony, which is a useful comparison to Serina’s own experience. Rose’s husband takes no responsibility for his part in her HIV contraction. From his position as the dominant partner, he feels that Rose should have behaved as a minor and sought permission before being tested for HIV after their daughter, Laila, dies. His cowardice is revealing, as he does not behave as a ‘head’ ought to, and instead casts her adrift for bravely finding out her HIV status:

“My husband blew up steam and invoked his long-dead ancestors to come and bear witness to what I was saying when I told him that I had tested HIV positive. He wanted to know, first of all, to whom I thought I was married – myself, my

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<sup>28</sup> People of the same trails tend to instinctively attract.

parents or him. I told him I was married to him and he asked me, 'so who has given you permission to go and have this test,' and when I said that I had just thought by myself that I should go, he said 'then you are married to yourself, so why are you wasting my time telling me all this?'" (Ibid, p. 72)

Once again, Mungoshi has created a character in Rose who has shown greater resilience and courage than her husband as she bravely went to be tested, and then faced the consequence of the results by confronting her husband, and he absconds. Rose's husband becomes a villain, and she takes on the role of the heroine:

A new heroism lies in an individual taking responsibility for his own health, that of his wife and children and in doing so, the health of the nation. This would undoubtedly contribute to a form of women's liberation in Zimbabwe but which, while under the control of the reconstructed 'strong healthy man', has little room for survival. The 'staging of difference' in fiction is part of the essential beauty of literature to imagine other worlds, to bring possible and impossible worlds into existence. (Muchemwa & Muponde, 2007 p. 71)

Rose is similar to Kerina in "The Little Wooden Hut in the Forest" because she felt shelved, and married out of desperation. Similarly, Rose can be compared to Betty in *Waiting for the Rain*, because she takes matters into her own hands:

You see, I was getting on to twenty-five years old without getting married. You don't get any old-maidier than that. I looked at myself and thought that I had fallen victim to the myth: if you don't give the man what he wants, he will think you don't love him and he will walk out of the door. Up to now, I hadn't been quite generous with myself and so I decided to be a little bit more liberated – and liberating, one-good-turn-deserves-another, sort of, if you please. So when *he* finally showed – well, a bit late to the party, you might say, I fed him all the left-overs. (Mungoshi, 2013, pp. 73-74)

Rose is discarded by her gutless husband, but is also liberated by her abandonment as she says she "had suddenly come upon this terrible freedom, this loneliness – no,

not loneliness but aloneness and, although I didn't realize this at once, at first, with all this came an unconscious desire to talk" (ibid, p. 75). Rose wants to learn from other people to see what makes them carry on in the face of "uncontestable death", and in her abandonment and confrontation of her HIV status, her status as the Other is discarded, and she is empowered. This testimony is important, as the loss of her child, the rejection by her husband, and being shunned by her community, all mirror Serina's own experience. Rose's poignant description of being unable to touch anyone compounds the tragedy of her situation, but when she looks at each of them "touching them, as it were, with her eyes" (ibid, p. 77), this is reminiscent of Saidi's gaze which Serina misinterpreted. Caressing someone with his or her eyes is intimated to be the next best thing to the physical touch, which a social pariah is forbidden.

Serina admirably begins her journey towards "transcendence" which De Beauvoir proposed men have denied women (Nye, 1988, p.82), by becoming more mature in her condemnation of Michael and herself. She is truly heroic and refutes the status of a victim as she states that "She, Serina, could freely admit that she – her body – had done to Mike or Mike's body as Mike's body had done to her" (Mungoshi, 2013, p. 81). Serina goes on to lament her predicament saying that it is "unfortunate that this thing had happened to her" (ibid) when she could and should be angrier. By calling her HIV contraction "unfortunate" she downplays the seriousness of the situation when she could be forgiven for feeling more resentful, but instead she shows resilience and acceptance. Serina's resilience demonstrates that although bent, she does not break, and she is fighting to "secure ... (her) sense of personal dignity" and her struggle "is that of the individual attempting to gain (her) "rightful" position in his society" (Miller, 1949) in an oppressively patriarchal climate.

Saidi is a guide and a prophet on her journey to transcendence. His role is to link the various streams of the Maseko family together (relating to the metaphorical meaning of the book's title: "Branching Streams Flow in the Dark"). Saidi's HIV status is a useful foil to Serina's own, as it normalises their position in relation to each other, and removes the stigma which might otherwise have put them on unequal footing – where one needs the other more, or vice versa. However, Saidi's position is more dire, and quite soon after their reunion he has a coughing fit, "coughing beyond hearing ears"

(Mungoshi, 2013, p. 85) and she reaches out to try to touch him, because “Serina had the illusion that it was the tree coughing, being pulled out of the earth by the roots” (ibid, p. 86). Saidi has very quickly become an anchor for her, but this tree metaphor with its roots being pulled up foreshadows his death as his illness is at a fairly advanced stage as already stated. As with Rose, touch is once again a central motif in this novel about social outcasts, and Serina touches Saidi again when she asks him about her father: “Saidi seemed to sense the urgent plea in the touch” (ibid, p. 89). This is a story about touch, and about reaching out courageously.

Serina’s journey takes her deeper into her past when Saidi takes her to see Amos, who he cryptically names Albert, and she recognises him despite his advanced illness and the novel’s fluid attitude towards names. This is all part of her journey to redemption and transcendence. Serina must confront her demons, past and present, and Albert stares at her from his bed, awaiting death: “she suddenly found herself staring into the wildly glaring wide eyes of Albert” (ibid, p. 94):

Gathering herself together, Serina looked back at him. Albert’s head and face were covered in grey suppurating sores. (Ibid)

Serina has to confront what lies ahead as an HIV sufferer herself. The future looks very bleak when she is confronted with the horror of Albert’s condition, which she acknowledges, and then she accepts an apportionment of blame in a continuation of the recurrent theme of sin, acceptance, and redemption:

“He doesn’t seem to have long to go,” Serina said, wishing and hoping for a more positive prognosis from the more experienced Saidi. Now that she was here and he was here, she realized how deeply she was involved with him, in life and in death, she felt, and this made her, for a moment feel completely radar less, lost, and the thought that came into her mind was: *I have sinned worse than sin.* (Ibid, p. 95)

Serina seems to accept the view that you cannot touch someone else’s life without leaving an indelible impression on him or her, and she faces her complicity in the path

Amos took after the loss of their child when she was fifteen which is noble. Serina is unnerved by the encounter, and Saidi decides then to concede that he is family<sup>29</sup>. Saidi remains a literal and figurative guide and leads her away, “taking Serina’s hand like an elder helping a child to cross the road in heavy traffic” (ibid, p. 96). This “heavy traffic” refers to the cars racing through St Mary’s Katanga settlement (muGhetto<sup>30</sup>), but also the “heavy traffic” of revelations bombarding Serina from the moment she encounters Saidi on the bus.

Saidi’s accommodation mirrors his ethereal thinness and prophetic role, as it has an “ascetic keep-your-hands-off-me air about it” (ibid, p. 97), much like the bareness of a monk’s accommodation. The proximity to her own accommodation is startling, and when she takes him to her rooms she feels a thick fog lift and remembers Saidi’s name, “Rashid” (ibid, p. 100) and the revelation unlocks her past and brings her to a point of inexplicable enlightenment. Serina has an intense mystical experience at this point:

The most scandalous thing was that she felt convinced that she could pick up a pebble and throw it up and hit the moon, or the Rugunhe Hills to the south-west – this apparent proximity of everything, this unexpected breathing spaciousness, this transparency which hadn’t been there before – all this made Serina feel – and say – to herself: *I can explain everything now, Everything is quite clear now.* And if, in truth, anyone had asked her what she could explain of all that was before her, she would have just smiled, stumped. She might have – finally, lamely, said: *it’s just this feeling I have of coming back home.* (Ibid, p. 101)

With this flood of memories comes a cryptic passage about her father, but it is incoherent:

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<sup>29</sup> Saidi’s admission indicates that he has some idea as to his own parentage, which is one of the loose ends in the novel as MaDube never acknowledges him openly.

<sup>30</sup> Shona slang for a high density suburb.

“And then Father came in wearing a *chigure*<sup>31</sup> mask. He pretended to be a complete stranger but I could tell it was him and I was afraid, although I knew it was him and he looked so funny in his mask, not talking, but funny because of the mask and he too, started tickling me and I laughed harder but I was also afraid and I didn’t know if I was laughing because I felt funny or afraid, and at one point I didn’t know if I was crying or laughing – I am sure it was both because I felt a sharp pain and Father was there – going away, coming, going away, coming in and the mask began to whirl round and round and round and I heard a voice calling me, sharply and very loud and I knew it was Mother then I went blank”... “And when I woke up, Mother was crying.” (Ibid, pp. 103-104)

On the surface, the passage appears to relate an incestuous act, but Serina’s memory seems unreliable, and Saidi will not be drawn on the issue: “‘You were ill,’ Saidi said quickly” (ibid, p. 104). This incident remains an anomaly, as it is not developed further in the ensuing storyline. Saidi refuses to discuss the incident, and contradicts his apparent devotion to Allah by suggesting they go and find trotters for their meal. Significantly, when Serina raises the topic with her father, he is similarly evasive. Saidi’s devotion to the Islam faith is apparent in various ways besides his incantations to “Allah”, and he is often portrayed reading the Qu’uran. His devotion to these scriptures is cemented in his suicide when he is found with the Qu’uran on his chest. Saidi’s penchant for trotters and his suicide are incongruent with the scripture he purports to adhere to, as is his cremation, although it is likely that the decision to burn his body was out of his hands. Cremation is haram<sup>32</sup>, thus the decision to do so seems to disrespect him, but he was not strict and ate trotters, so perhaps this detail is irrelevant. It is interesting to note, however, that Mungoshi intermingles traditional, Christian and Islam faiths together, demonstrating the function of piety and faith in formulating morals, and when confronting death. Mungoshi’s interest in syncretism is evident in his works, so this might reflect an extension of this fascination beyond the earlier exploration of links between traditional African spiritual beliefs and Christianity.

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<sup>31</sup> A Malawian masked Traditional Dancer.

<sup>32</sup> adj. forbidden or proscribed by Islamic law (Pearsall, 2003).

Saidi is critical of Albert's resentful and accusatory death. There are a number of occasions that foreshadow the path Saidi will take with regard to his own passing, and it is apparent from the outset that he does not intend to go slowly and painfully as Albert does:

"You see Albert's way? That is the easiest, the cruellest, the most cowardly and loneliest, a most selfish and ignorant way. Not even an animal would want to go the way Albert is preparing himself to go. He wants to blame everybody for something which he has only himself to blame. He wants to drag everybody along with him when he goes. Why? It is too late now for him to see clearly, to see that nobody has been or is responsible for the condition he is in, that he has been his own master – and victim? – Right from the beginning. Now he cannot control anything, he cannot face himself. Now he wants witnesses. He wants victims. He wants a scapegoat. He thinks the world has done him wrong and he is seeking revenge." (Ibid, p. 107)

Mungoshi appears to be advancing the moral that one reaps what one sows, and Albert's deathbed recriminations are distasteful. Saidi's suicide is almost heroic in comparison, as he makes peace with his past and his own culpability in the matter, and passes without reproaches and theatrics. Saidi says that people like Albert are "first of all dangerous to themselves and finally they poison everybody and everything around them" (ibid), which he goes to great lengths to avoid. Serina balks at the accusation that there "was no need for him to exhaust himself like that, to go into the next world, to begin your new life there, struggling and kicking and howling as he had been doing in this one", but concedes that she senses "a kind of truth in what he was saying" (ibid, pp. 108-109). Albert's failure in death is further foregrounded when he fails to successfully commit suicide:

"He could not even kill himself. He could not help himself even in the last minute. Can you imagine it, Serina? To realize with your last – your – dying – breathe [sic] that you have failed. I mean, it is different from realizing that you are a failure and becoming reconciled with yourself just before your last breath,



like one of those thieves on the cross in the Christian Bible, I mean -" (Ibid, p. 109)

Albert's suffering unsettles Serina, and she punches Saidi for his glib callousness hard enough to floor him. She imagines that this is "what happens to people whom God has cursed with such a gentile disease" (ibid, p. 110), suggesting that God curses those who do not follow His moral laws. This concept of curses defined as "a prayer that harm may befall someone" and that a "curse can overlap with prayer if its fulfilment is thought to be so dependent on a deity that it must be committed to this deity, and it may even become a prayer if it is requested from the deity" (Sewell-Rutter, 2007, p. 3) is apparent in Serina's interpretation. The curse in this instance is the HIV/AIDS curse, and Albert's manifest struggle and pain are the consequence of the curse. As a cursed gentile and HIV carrier herself, Serina lashes out as she tries to process her own complicity in Albert's death, but also her own looming death. Serina's aggression is inexcusable, and out of character for her, but this reversal of the compliant woman and aggressive man stereotype is another break with traditional gender roles, albeit an abhorrent one. Serina's aggression stems from her fears about facing her own death, sooner than she had expected, and she wrestles with these fears as optimistically as she is able:

Looking at it this way, Serina felt death seemed like a surprise one could also look forward to! You could not plan in advance for it. Still, planned for or not, the pain involved in the process was the hardest thing to take! So, to be able to slide in and slip away in her sleep was Serina's unconscious dream. She found it hard to live by Saidi's slogan: *death is an adventure into a new country to be looked forward to with curiosity and expectation.* (Mungoshi, 2013, p. 110)

In his role as prophet guide, Saidi teaches her that you can plan for death, as he does with his elaborate suicide at the end. Saidi fulfils a number of visionary functions in the book, bringing Serina to a greater understanding of her predicament, her impending death, and her family, especially her father. Serina's complicated relationship with her father develops when Saidi reintroduces them, and she "threw

herself on him and hugged him with tears in her eyes” (ibid, p. 111). Sam Maseko explains that he found living with Serina’s mother too confining:

But, listen, there hasn’t been any divorce or anything as drastic and dramatic as that. I just gave myself a longer rope, as it were, so I could wander over a larger pasture. Mother was holding me on a very short leash and it was getting shorter and tighter all the time. (Ibid, p. 114)

Serina’s father is reluctant to tell her who Saidi is, and says, “Don’t shake the tree. Wait until the mangoes are ripe” (ibid, p. 115). Their conversation is enlightening, but Serina sees through his self-recrimination:

Playing the old alcoholic’s trick again – self-laceration, if he had been more drunk, tears would be falling now. (Ibid, p. 116)

Serina is once again portrayed as stronger than the male characters when her father shows the weakness she foresees as the “old alcoholic’s trick” as she “sensed that her father’s tears were very close and she quickly stood up to attend to the pot on the stove” (ibid). Serina berates him for not using willpower to give up drink, and her father claims he is bewitched and “no *n’anga*<sup>33</sup> could cure him of the habit” (ibid, p. 118). This abdication of responsibility for his weakness is a foil to Serina’s strength in the face of adversity. Unlike her father, her drinking is under control, and she never willingly abandons her family. Blaming witchcraft is a cop-out, and his assertion that “*Unoti zviru zvega here izvi Mwanangu, Serina iwe*<sup>34</sup>” is hollow. Serina’s mother, Laiza Maseko, might seem like the stronger character when compared to the alcoholic Sam Maseko, but she is also weak in comparison to Serina. Serina’s mother expects a man to fulfil her expectations in life, instead of making her own way like Serina does:

One day she revealed to Serina that she had been in love with a man who was now a government minister. Serina remembered how sad this made her feel.

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<sup>33</sup> Traditional healer.

<sup>34</sup> This is not a simple matter, my dear daughter, Serina (Mungoshi, 2013, p. 118).

Such were some of the moments that brought her closer to her mother, moments when she realized that her mother was in the wrong life, living a life that didn't belong to her, both in their home with their father and in her mind with her own self... There would always be another world where life was better. Serina found this thought unbearably oppressive. (Ibid, pp. 123-124)

Serina's father's failures are not entirely his own, in that he does not change from the man Laiza met and married, and so the expectation that he should is almost farcical:

Serina came to think that maybe her mother had fallen in love with her father in the same way that the electorate falls in love with a political candidate: *for the promises of progress and development*. (Ibid, p. 124)

Laiza would never divorce Sam, as she was "too dignified, too proud, too respectable (in her own eyes) to stoop that low" because "she, too, could carry her cross" (ibid, p. 124). Serina is very critical of her mother's attitude towards her marriage and her family, and refers to it as "evil committed in the guise of protecting the children" because "[t]here were women Serina knew, women who had had several husbands and one or two children with each of them but had made it... [and] dared to make that bold leap to joy – to life" (ibid, p. 125), insinuating that this is not something that her mother had done – her misery is of her own volition. It becomes even more difficult to reconcile their relationship when Serina begins to understand her father's more traditional ideas about love and marriage in a Zimbabwean context when he speaks of his other wife, or lover, MaDube, with whom he is joined in a traditional union:

"She has always been family," her father said one day. "I am just waiting for the day that I will introduce her to MaNdhlovu, your mother. There shouldn't be any ill-feelings or grounds for hatred. After all, we still observe the law of more than one wife in this country."

Strangely – once her father said that – Serina felt a great relief settling in her. Now she could see how it must be in her father's mind. He was the traditional man. He loved both his women. Period. (Ibid, p. 126)

Besides the traditional polygamous model, Mungoshi appears to be commenting on marriage in Zimbabwe by foregrounding the “superficiality of such a socially sanctioned role – deeper, primary position of ‘lover’ over ‘wife’ and thereby over ‘husband’ as he does in the short story: ‘Of Lovers and Wives’”<sup>35</sup> (Mungoshi, 1997b, pp. 105-111). Sam Maseko’s views might be regarded as distasteful to exponents of Christian values, like Serina who is “aghast” when he appears to advocate a more accepting view of Michael abandonment of his family:

“People don’t run away from each other. At least my own people, my family – they may be afraid and avoid each other for a few years but they don’t run away from each other.” (Mungoshi, 2013, p. 128)

This comment is patently outrageous given Serina’s father’s abdication of his responsibilities to the woman he formally married, and to his family. His claim to have been monitoring them from a distance and his proposal that Serina ought to be more accepting of Michael’s desertion compound his outrageous stance regarding marriage (and family), considering that Serina most probably contracted HIV from Michael, which then killed her baby. It is also an indication of her more erudite values, which in a perfect world ought to have protected her from the transmission of an STD; it also indicates her sense of self-worth in her unwillingness to share her partner despite traditional pressures, and shows her once again to be an indomitable character unwilling to buckle to patriarchal pressures, despite her unenviable position as a woman alone in the ghetto. Serina’s father’s claim that families stay together when he ran away, foregrounds how inadequate he is as a rescuer as his assertions are seldom backed up by concrete actions or reality.

Saidi’s swansong is poignant and expected. That Serina is unaware of what he is planning, despite frequent clues and foreshadowing, heightens the anticipation for the reader who foresees the theatrical revelation at the end when Serina finds him after his suicide. In one of the many clues Saidi leaves for her, he quotes Louis Armstrong and speaks cryptically of a Big Conference<sup>36</sup>:

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<sup>35</sup> An important difference, however, is that the lovers in this story are homosexual men.

<sup>36</sup> Ostensibly a conference, but in fact this turns out to be his appointment with his Creator.

*"I am gonna lay down my heavy load  
Down by the Riverside  
Yeah  
I am gonna lay down my sword and shield"* (Ibid, p. 128)

At the party Saidi organises before he dies, he facilitates a family reunion which almost fulfils Serina's longing for a fairy-tale closure to her *Bildungsroman*, especially when she is finally allowed to see her daughter, Rita, again which kindles "[a] long-forgotten-familiar-smell of milk, sweetish-sweet-peanut-butter-oil" (ibid, p. 136). At this point MaDube sings a visionary song, her own composition, which is apt because of what it represents:

It was a sad *Sungura*<sup>37</sup> on the tragedy of a home which is no longer a home because the owners of the home have gone on a long, O, so long journey and no one really knows when or if they will ever come back, she tells about how the fire has now gone out on the hearth of this home and there isn't even any one to scoop up and gather and buy the cold, O, so cold, cold lifeless ashes. (Ibid, p. 137)

The home is a metaphor for their interlocked families, and the death represents their schism and failure to reconnect, resulting in "lifeless ashes". MaDube is clearly a proponent of the traditional values (although we are not privy to her reasons for failing to acknowledge Saidi as her son) that Sam Maseko subscribes to, and is more accepting of a polygamous norm, and she sings of the dismal situation which the family finds itself in, "lifeless ashes".

Saidi's poem is also prophetic and ominous, and Serina senses this as she "felt something big and filling rising in her bosom". Before he recites it for the second time after he fails to summon up enough air to blow his horn, she feels "something snapping in her and a terrible aching in her temples when he croons":

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<sup>37</sup> A Zimbabwean version of Rhumba.

“Today I am in blue.”

“Saidi,” the crowd answered.

“Tomorrow I’ll be in white!”

“Saidi!”

“And you will be in black.”

“Saidi.”

“Be good to each other. I’ll miss you all.” (Ibid, p. 141)

This is clearly a farewell, and when she reads his note to meet at his place the next morning at 10 a.m. before he leaves for the “Big Conference”, she ponders over the moniker “Sis”, and wonders if he had ever called her that before. Reading it on the page like that it “acquired meaning, power” (ibid, p. 150). Serina accepts that he must know that he is her brother, and notes how much power words have. The discussions that take place over the course of this defining evening, orchestrated by Saidi as his final curtain call, redirect all of the branching streams, pooling them together and holding them in a moment of cohesiveness that is reminiscent of surface tension between water molecules. This appears to emphasise once again what an inadequate rescuer Serina’s father seems to be as Saidi is the family member who does the rescuing. The various branches of the Maseko family have pooled together and there is a fragile peace and a hint of a promising forecast for the future. Serina’s father’s plea for forgiveness from her mother resonates with the whole family, for whom forgiveness is required in every interpersonal relationship encountered in the narrative:

“Nothing can equal the five years you have been on your own with the children, but, hell, we fall down and we rise up, don’t we?” (Ibid, p. 151)

Regarding polygamous marriage, which Serina’s mother still balks at, in Serina’s attempt to initiate a truce between her parents, she says, “And before the church, Mother,” Serina said emotionally, “before the church, didn’t our people have wives and husbands?” Serina’s mother will take some time to complete her journey, but it is noteworthy that Serina is now in the position of advisor and go between, despite her

own horror at having to share Michael, or at least take Michael back into her bed. When her father asks what he did wrong with her mother, Serina feels empathy for his predicament, and recalls what Rose<sup>38</sup> said about touch at Rujavena Home of Hope:

“Do you know what it feels like to know that you will never ever be able to touch the one you love, forever?” (Ibid, p. 155)

Despite this empathy, Serina is once again irritated by her father’s “self-pity” which “could be so cloyingly oppressive at times” when he asks if she thinks he will be able to visit her mother again, which is another example of Mungoshi depicting the man as weaker than the woman in a given scenario:

“I just don’t know – but I suppose you have to try it and find out. Begin from there.” (Ibid, p. 155)

Saidi’s journey ends at the beginning of the final chapter when Serina finds him lying in his bed with “[h]is arms folded and fingers interlocked on top of the Qu-uran on his chest” (ibid, p. 156), and from the ashes of Saidi the Maseko family can rise up like the metaphorical phoenix on newly drawn terms, and with an independent Serina vastly different from the naïve girl we met at the beginning of the story. Saidi has completed his journey as he wanted to go before he became a burden like Amos did. Serina’s laughter is incongruous as she establishes that he is indeed dead, presumably because the signs she ignored become clearer then:

The cunning fox! *Don’t come before 10 o’clock. I have a surprise for you.* Serina giggled to herself. She felt like slapping him in the face – then she quickly crossed herself for the thought, but still giggling. (Ibid, pp. 156-157)

Serina is unable to stop laughing, and unlike Kerina’s tale when Gavi’s tears indicate the point of catharsis and the purging of emotion, catharsis is achieved as Serina’s laughter purges emotion over the body of Saidi. This cathartic laughter represents a

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<sup>38</sup> The book erroneously refers to her as Cecilia, at this point.

new optimism and a potential point of departure for the family and for Serina, as she has become the family streams' catchment area. Serina's impulse is to cross herself (make the sign of the cross by touching her forehead, breast, left shoulder and right shoulder, to represent the cross Jesus was nailed to), which indicates that her fall-back position is still Christian, but she has embraced a broader worldview through the family reunion and melding of values. Saidi's final note offers her some relief as it reads:

We have had an extraordinary life  
We shall have a peaceful crossing over.  
I have blown my last note here  
But I have taken my horn with me. (Ibid, p. 157)

Saidi and Serina had had many conversations about death, and the phoenix metaphor is apt once again as it resonates with Saidi's paradoxical view that death is an integral part of living:

As on talking about death, extracting death out of life and isolating it for discussion – well. All you were looking for there is endless vexation of the soul. He had once given Serina an obscene analogy – it's like taking shit out of your life and making a song and dance of it as if it's on its own – where are the rest of its partners in the process? If you look at death like this, as part of the process, in which everything that ever goes into making what we all so love to call I – in which all this under the I-umbrella – is *alive*, is *living*. (Ibid, p. 158)

There is no "vexation of the soul" (ibid) for Serina, who has not only transcended social norms and her position as the Second Sex, but at this moment seems to have adopted Saidi's philosophy and has also transcended conventional concepts of death. Serina finds peace in his death and is able to accept it, unlike her violent response to Albert's death, earlier. This is apparent when she tells herself that this is an everyday occurrence, like asking: "*has he left yet for the bus?*" (ibid, p. 158). MaDube's reaction



is completely different and she “howls” despite Serina’s assertion that “[h]e said there’s to be no tears” (ibid, p. 159). MaDube is full of angst and recriminations:

“You fool. I told you to leave those sluts alone. Now, you tell me which one has done this to you? Do you remember?” (ibid)

For reasons which are never made clear, MaDube does not let Saidi know that she is his mother, but she does tell Serina before he dies that “God gave us only Saidi – but don’t let him know that, it’s our secret, your father and I, now it’s yours too” (ibid, p. 147). MaDube’s anguish is in keeping with that of a grieving mother, and Serina has to take charge when her father and MaDube are unable to cope with the death of their unacknowledged son. Serina is strong and “they seemed to obey her instantly, as if in this moment a transaction, a transfer of power had been agreed upon and now she was in charge” (ibid, p. 161). This moment is the culmination of her journey to emancipation. Serina has made her own way in the world and is now in a position to move forward tenaciously without her prophet and guide; and roles reverse as Serina, the daughter, counsels her father and stepmother in their grief. MaDube has accepted Serina but clarifies that they will not be living together as it is “healthier and more family than having too many cooks in the same kitchen or too many worms in the same bottle” (ibid, p. 162). This can be read as curiously at odds with her professed adherence to traditional values and is indicative of Mungoshi’s uncharacteristic loss of firm artistic control of the narrative, as noted earlier in the confusion of Cecilia and Rose.

Saidi’s death is reminiscent of African American Spiritualism, and apt considering the links to Blues music and jazz, which is associated with Saidi, and also because the movement is linked to African American slavery and the hope of redemption. Saidi is released from a “slavery” of sorts when death releases him from his illness, and redemption is tangible as Serina says that “Saidi said that he doesn’t need any tears to sail on where he is going – there is plenty of calm on the sea and the breeze is cool and just right for his crossing over” (ibid, p. 164). African American Spiritualism is defined by Daniel Smith-Christopher as follows:

The American theologian James Cone suggests that there are two basic meanings of the Jordan River as a symbol in African American spirituals. First, the Jordan represented death – a death that was typically seen as liberation from the harsh realities of slave life. Thus, “crossing Jordan” was a theme of going home to restore a community lost in oppression and slavery.

Second, the Jordan could also represent the border between slavery and freedom – and so the “other side of the Jordan” could just as often suggest the Northern states, even Canada, and thus freedom:

I'll meet you in the morning  
when you reach the promised land  
on the other side of the Jordan  
for I'm bound for the promised land. (Smith-Christopher, 2016)

Saidi crosses the Jordan between this world and the next, and the link to African American Spiritualism is continued when Saidi's father and MaDube sing, “Crossing the River Jordan”. Whilst they sing, Serina “had the strong illusion that at the centre of the song was a vast silence except for the sougning of the ship's sails and the lulling slap-lap-slapping of the sea in the cool breeze of the calm cross” (Mungoshi, 2013, p. 164), which further corroborates a reading of Saidi's metaphorical spirit journey in a boat across the River Jordan to the next life. The soft “lulling” and “s” and “sh” sibilance create a soothing ambience at the closure of the novel as her brother-guide crosses over, and is reminiscent of the spiritual folk song by Joan Baez:

*We are Cross the River Jordan (with chords)*

[D] We are crossing that [D7] Jordan River  
[G] I want my [D] crown, [G] I want my [D] crown  
[G] We are crossing that Jordan River  
[A7] I want my crown, my golden crown  
[D] Jordan River deep and [D7] wide

[G] Got my home on the [Gm] other side  
[D] We are crossing [B7] that Jordan [E] River [A]  
[D] I want my crown  
We are climbing Jacob's ladder  
I want to sit down, I want to sit down  
We are climbing Jacob's ladder  
I want to sit down, on my golden throne  
Jordan River chilly and cold  
Chills the body, not the soul  
We are crossing that Jordan River  
I want my crown

Now when I get to Heaven  
I'm going to sit down, I'm going to sit down  
Now when I get to Heaven  
I'm going to sit down, on my golden throne  
Jordan River deep and wide  
I got my home on the other side  
We are crossing that Jordan River  
I want my crown

Jordan River chilly and cold  
Chills the body, not the soul  
We are crossing that Jordan River  
I want my crown (Baez)

The spiritual undercurrents suggest to the reader that Serina faces a more positive outlook because the family streams are pooling together in strength and in spite of her HIV status, which Saidi, in a sense, handled on his own terms. This strength indicates that Serina is finally self-defining and redefining herself:

Women at long last are demanding, as men did in the Renaissance, the right to explain, the right to define. Women, in thinking themselves out of patriarchy add transforming insights to the process of redefinition... A feminist world-view will enable women and men to free their minds from patriarchal thought and practice and at last to build a world free of dominance and hierarchy, a world that is truly human. (Lerner, 1986, p. 8)

As Mungoshi did with his portrayal of Kerina, he tries to correct the imbalance occasioned by the disparity between the sexes in Zimbabwe by presenting Serina at the denouement as an independent woman who is, in many ways, stronger than the men in her family, and certainly stronger than the other heroines under discussion. Her father's weakness and self-loathing as an alcoholic irritates her; her wayward husband Michael's abandonment has become a blessing as it set her on her journey to self-discovery; and even Saidi cannot stay with her to the end. Despite this, his release and redemption seem to usher in a more positive outlook for the completion of Serina's redemptive journey too.

## Conclusion

### 'Observation'

There is a young green shoot  
pushing out and through  
the rotting olden trunk  
of the dead parent papaya tree  
in a public square  
in Maputo. (Mungoshi, 2002)

This dissertation has undertaken to examine specific narratives written by Mungoshi to demonstrate that his feminist concerns have evolved over time predominantly using foundational second wave feminist writings, as well as Aristotle's seminal work on the tragedy genre, amongst other modern theories on tragedy. In seeking to define the feminist tragic heroine in these texts, the question of which feminist approach is the most apt lens for a reading of black feminist heroines was engaged. Ogunyemi puts this question as follows:

Many black female novelists writing in English have understandably not allied themselves with radical white feminists; rather, they have explored the gamut of other positions and produced an exciting, fluid corpus that defies rigid categorization. More often than not, where a white woman writer may be a feminist, a black woman writer is likely to be a "womanist". That is, she will recognize that, along with her consciousness of sexual issues, she must incorporate racial, cultural, national, economic, and political considerations into her philosophy. (Ogunyemi, 1985, p. 64)

I have argued that generally, the same can be said of Mungoshi, in this study. Mungoshi's concerns in the narratives under discussion relate to a consciousness of gender issues, but racial issues, or at least racism, are not explicitly explored. This is not to say that these issues are not important, but rather that the subjugation of black Zimbabweans by Western society is not the focus of these four narratives. In fact,

except for *Waiting for the Rain*, the narratives were all written after independence<sup>39</sup>. What separates African women writers from white feminists is that “they have experienced past and present subjugation of the black population along with present-day subtle (or not so subtle) control exercised over them by the alien, Western culture” (ibid). It is true that second wave feminism does not exclude black women, but it also does not address every facet of the experiences particular to black women that Womanism aims to do. Nevertheless, Ogunyemi posits that what is definitive in feminist literature is the ideological issues that challenge patriarchy, which all feminist movements attempt to do:

Since the feminist novel is still evolving, the following descriptive statements are tentative and hypothetical but serve as a working base: the feminist novel is a form of protest literature directed at both men and women. Protesting against sexism and the patriarchal power structure, it is unapologetically propagandist or strident or both. It demands that its readers, whether the male oppressors or the female oppressed, be aware of ideological issues in order that it may change their attitudes about patriarchy. For a novel to be identified as feminist, therefore, it must not just deal with women and women’s issues but should also posit some aspects of a feminist ideology. (Ibid)

Certainly, this is what Mungoshi strives to do by contrasting strong female characters in subordinate roles, with weak and shallow men in dominant roles. There is no scope to doubt Mungoshi’s intention was to write feminist texts when one considers Aidoo’s discussion on intention being a prerequisite in feminist texts. This dissertation has undertaken to show that Mungoshi is concerned with exactly what Aidoo states is a requirement: “exposing sexist **tragedy** or women’s history”, as well as “unfolding a revolutionary vision of the role [of women]” (ibid, p. 65), using foundational ideology on feminism. These texts explore women’s experiences as the “second sex”, or the “other”, which is a shared experience of women regardless of race.

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<sup>39</sup> Mungoshi’s works suggest a greater fascination with the psychological (broadly speaking) outlook of black characters in Rhodesia in *Coming of the Dry Season* and *Waiting for the Rain*. In the former only two of the ten stories focus on racial issues, and in *Walking Still*, two of the nine stories foreground race relations.

The question of the differences between first world and third world feminism is also examined by Mohanty, who recognises a “sameness” and value to Western feminist writers, but argues that cognisance of the different contexts (histories) is crucial:

Western feminist scholarship cannot avoid the challenge of situating itself and examining its role in such a global economical and political framework. To do any less would be to ignore the complex interconnections between first and third world economies and the profound effect of this on the lives of women in these countries. I do not question the descriptive and informative value of most Western feminist writings on women in the third world. I also do not question the existence of excellent work which does not fall into the analytic traps I am concerned with... The homogeneity of women as a group is produced not on the basis of biological essentials, but rather on the basis of secondary sociological and anthropological universals. Thus, for instance, in any given piece of feminist analysis, women are characterized as a singular group on the basis of a shared oppression. What binds women together is a sociological notion of the "sameness" of their oppression. It is at this point that an elision takes place between “women” as a discursively constructed group and “women” as material subjects of their own history. (Mohanty, 1984, pp. 336-337)

There is a “sociological sameness” to the oppression of women in that women across cultures have historically been positioned as subordinates, binding women together in their shared oppression, and thus rendering a feminist lens pertinent. However, this does not exclude the possibility that other interpretations are also applicable. Certainly, we cannot ignore the different histories or contexts of women, nor can we emphatically state that there are no similarities either.

Mungoshi’s stories contribute to a reimagining of women in Shona culture, to show that despite patriarchal attitudes in Zimbabwean culture (which is itself a microcosm of African culture), women are able (and should) challenge these, as his strong protagonists do. In doing so, he expands on Aristotle’s narrow definition of heroism as pertaining to men, so that the women emerge as heroic, and in some cases, transcend expectations in an oppressively patriarchal Zimbabwe. The tragedy is that

they cannot completely overcome their predicaments because of the oppressive climate in which they live. Thus, Mungoshi's portrayal of his tragic heroines (and other female characters) embraces varying degrees of success for the women he examines, like Raina who nags her husband out of the idea of taking a second wife; and Betty who succeeds in placing her vision of what it means to be a woman (motherhood), if not marriage, centre stage, despite the impending reckoning with her father as patriarch. Kerina escapes spinsterhood, even if the 'victory' is dubious, and in so doing, she escapes the stigma of being 'left on the shelf', a plight that looms large for other feminist characters in formative feminist novels foregrounding women's powerlessness like Jane Austen's Charlotte Lucas, in *Pride and Prejudice*; and as exemplified by Miss Bates in *Emma*. Mrs Pfende regains 'social status' through remarrying, only to find additional stigma, as she is 'childless' once more, having been victimised by patriarchal norms, after her late husband's relatives denied her access to her children and Serina who loses her child to her own mother, highlighting the ascendancy of patriarchal values in the socialisation of women.

These might be Pyrrhic victories, but they are significant in the context of (African) women emerging from the periphery, onto the centre stage. The protagonists are largely drawn from rural environments, with the exception of Mrs Pfende and Serina. They have limited education, which relegates them to dependant status. Mrs Pfende destroys the wedding photograph and marriage certificate, but is stuck in an unsatisfactory marriage, which explains why she is trying to piece them together again when her husband walks into the bedroom. Her plight provides the link with Raina and Kerina. For their part, their steely determination is admirable as they face nihilism if they accept the status quo:

Emergent woman faces a challenge to her very definition of self. How can her daring thought – naming the hitherto unnamed, asking the questions defined by all authorities as “non-existent” – how can such thought coexist with her life as woman? In stepping out of the constructs of patriarchal thought, she faces, as Mary Daly put it, “existential nothingness”. (Lerner, 1986, p. 6)



This existential anxiety and vulnerability is present in many of Mungoshi's narratives, and is explored in his portrayal of both male and female characters:

[T]he general theme that pervades Mungoshi's literary works is that of vulnerability of mankind caught up in a situation where they have very little control over their lives... The works generally portray the gloomy side of life, the life which existentialists view as instilling in each one of us, a sense of discomfort, anguish and anxiety. (Mapako & Mareva, 2013, p. 1570)

It is this "discomfort" which challenges the reader to consider the comments Mungoshi is making, not just about women, but also about the state of Zimbabwean culture and society at the time of writing each narrative. Malaba, discussing *Waiting for the Rain* and *Nervous Conditions*, states "[t]he fact that the patriarchy symbolizes stasis in both novels can be read as an implicit challenge levelled at the Zimbabwean society by both writers, in an attempt to trigger debates on the essentially dynamic nature of culture." Mungoshi is thus a revolutionary proponent for the ideals of feminism in Zimbabwean culture, which are ideals explored throughout this dissertation, as he levels criticism at the patriarchal structures that subjugate the women in his stories. He is a revolutionary thinker because the plights of the women under discussion are presented in a "woman-centred" manner:

Revolutionary thought has always been based on upgrading the experience of the oppressed. The peasant had to learn to trust in the significance of his life experience before he could dare to challenge the feudal lords. The industrial worker had to become "class-conscious," the Black, race-conscious" before liberating thought could develop into revolutionary theory. The oppressed have acted and learned simultaneously – the process of becoming the newly conscious person or group is in itself liberating. So with women... TO BE WOMAN-CENTERED MEANS: asking if women were central to this argument, how would it be defined? It means ignoring all evidence of women's marginality, because, even where women appear to be marginal, this is the result of patriarchal intervention; frequently also it is merely an appearance. The basic assumption should be that it is inconceivable for anything ever to have taken

place in the world in which women were not involved, except if they were prevented from participation through coercion and repression... When using methods and concepts from traditional systems of thought, it means using them from the vantage point of the centrality of women. Women cannot be put into the empty spaces of patriarchal thought and systems – in moving to the centre, they transform the system. (Lerner, 1986, pp. 7-8)

Mungoshi's feminist concerns have been demonstrated to have evolved over time as his most recent book puts his protagonist, Serina, at the centre of the story. Furthermore, Serina does "transform the system" (ibid) as she rejects patriarchal repression and makes her own way in the world. She steps "outside of patriarchal thought" which means:

Being skeptical toward every known system of thought; being critical of all assumptions, ordering values and definitions. (ibid)

Besides his exquisite craftsmanship, another major contribution Mungoshi has made to the development of African writing, is his "woman-centred" perspective that challenges stereotypical representations of women. Mrs Pfende, Kerina and Serina are all centrally located, instead of being placed in the "empty spaces of patriarchal thought and systems" (ibid), and there is a sense of transformation coming about as Mungoshi's feminist concerns advance over time. This is most evident in the portrayal of Serina (although the stories of Betty, Mrs Pfende and Kerina are all stories that are, at their core, sceptical of patriarchal attitudes). This is apparent even nineteen years after the publication of *Waiting for the Rain* when Mungoshi published the short story "Sacrifice" in *Walking Still* in 1997, in which Tayeva is offered up as a sacrifice to placate the aggrieved spirit in the Mutunga family and courageously accepts this, in the end.

There can be no fairy-tale endings for the tragic heroines in Mungoshi's stories, represented by Betty Mandengu and Mrs Pfende, as these would not be credible reflections of Zimbabwean society in the time they were written, but in each tale, the tenacity of women is foregrounded, and optimism for change grows. The strength and

sanctity of womanhood are foregrounded in Kerina's story of oppression and deliverance from spinsterhood, but without any guarantees for her safety, the reader is left to debate whether this is, in fact, a happy ending after all. Like Kerina, Serina is the focal point in *Branching Streams Flow in the Dark*, these protagonists encapsulate Mungoshi's foregrounding of woman-centred narratives, in his later works.

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