Imagining a **Peaceful Society**

A VISION OF CHILDREN’S LITERATURE IN A POST-CONFLICT ZIMBABWE

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This discussion paper explores the theme of conflict and peace, by tapping into the rich corpus of Zimbabwean children’s literature. As such it presents a unique perspective to how writers of children’s literature, and children themselves understand, grapple with, and envision peace in a post-conflict Zimbabwean society. In some regard, it is about the creative, imaginative and the intellectual activities constructed around the world of children, their sensibilities, and ways of speaking to the future.

*Imagining a Peaceful Society: A Vision of Children’s Literature in Post-Conflict Zimbabwe* poses a critical question that is reminiscent of that posed by the distinguished Kenyan writer, Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, in his book, *Writers in Politics*: “What’s the relevance of literature to life?” Bringing this closer to the subject of this monograph, it proposes that we should ask, what’s the relevance of the writer and literature to peace building? This is a question that should be increasingly asked as social science, peace and strategic studies perspectives tend to dominate the discourse in post-conflict transition, reconstruction and peace building. Beyond this lies the challenge of how those that take decisions and fight wars, can be confronted by the writers’ words and the dreams of the children.

In the pages that follow, Anna Chitando explores the metaphor of the “eyes of children”, in telling their stories of conflict, pain, HIV/Aids, poverty, intolerance, and yes, their dreams and hopes for peace, development, and prosperity in Zimbabwe. Through the voices of Zimbabwe’s children, the complex roots of conflict, the narratives of war and peace, and the imaginations of peace in the country assume new meanings and significance. In the words of Tatenda Musha, one of the children interviewed during the study, “there can be no progress when the girls are crying”. Perhaps, the challenge lies in exploring how writers and literature in Africa can do more in giving voice to the sufferings of the people, and lending strength to the imagining of just and peaceful societies as this paper aptly suggests.

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Introduction

Scholarly reflections on conflict resolution, peace building and development in Africa rarely pay attention to literature, let alone children’s literature. Political scientists, legal experts and civil society activists have sought to clarify the meaning of post-conflict societies. This paper utilises perspectives from Zimbabwean children’s literature to explore contradictions in society and how they could be resolved. The paper emerges from the conviction that authors of children’s literature and children themselves possess a vision of a new society, with guiding values and principles.

Creative writers have long been associated with vision and the quest for social transformation. Chinua Achebe, one of Africa’s foremost creative writers, suggests that African creative writers have the responsibility to inform their societies of the wrong choices they have made (Achebe, 1988). They also have the task of prescribing solutions to social ills. Of course, this has generated debate, with some critics suggesting that there is space for “art for art’s sake” in Africa. These debates have gone on in adult African fiction. Unfortunately, African children’s literature has not received adequate scholarly attention.

The marginalisation of children’s literature has prevented scholars and other members of society from appreciating its potential as a resource for peacebuilding. This is also an outcome of the reality that societies throughout the world are adult-centred. Children’s own views and issues tend to be pushed to the periphery. Africa in particular should take children seriously as it is essentially a “young continent” (Trudell, 2002). Young people constitute the majority of the population in Africa. It is therefore crucial for the continent to listen to the voices of children and young adults.

Children’s literature represents an important resource for understanding the needs, wishes and aspirations of young people. African children’s literature should be investigated more purposefully in order to address the misconception that children are somehow yet to develop. Young people are not on their way to becoming; they already are. The “becoming moment” of children is not in some remote future; it is now.

Zimbabwean children’s literature has posted some notable achievements (Chitando, 2005a). A number of authors have published interesting and effective materials that address children’s issues. These publications address existential issues that children face. These include the challenges facing the girl child, such as marginalisation, prejudice, sexual abuse and others. Authors have also addressed issues relating to orphans and other vulnerable children, children with disabilities, albinism, children on the streets and others. These works capture the absence of peace and progress in Zimbabwean society. Writers have proceeded to muse and imagine the ideal society that they would like to see in Zimbabwe.

Children are not “partially formed beings working towards wholeness.” The state of being a child is not a compromised one. Children are full-fledged beings with rights, aspirations and hopes. They are capable of articulating their needs and painting a vision of the society they wish to live in. Fieldwork conducted for this project captured images of peaceful and prosperous communities that the children of Zimbabwe yearn for. In the words of Tambudzai, a twelve year-old resident of a Growth Point

The community that I want to live in has schools that have adequate books and recreational facilities. I want to be able to play with my friends till late without fearing any harm. I would be very happy if my mother would find enough medicine in the clinics. I do not like people who bully me.

Without idealising children’s views, it can be argued that children provide important ideas regarding peace and reconstruction in post-conflict societies. What is required is a deliberate process that de-centres adult-dominated views of peace and reconstruction. Social progress is attained when the voices of children receive due attention. Children’s literature needs to be informed by the visions of children themselves. Adults (and adult authors) should not dictate to children the characteristics of a peaceful society. By taking children seriously, children’s literature can contribute effectively to the emergence of peaceful societies. Children’s literature in Zimbabwe possesses great potential to become a key resource in reconstruction and development.

As has been reiterated above, children are not passive recipients of favours from adult members of society. Far from it: children are subjects who have the capacity to shape their environment. In Zimbabwe, children and youth have actively participated in political violence by political parties. Children and
young adults have been implicated in crime and other activities that disturb the peace. Youth are therefore known to be both perpetrators and victims of violence in various parts of the continent (Abbink and van Kessel, 2005). Young people are key actors in the social and political arena. To ignore them is to overlook a major section of the population. They are “makers and breakers” (de Boeck and Honwana, 2005). However, one must concede that in most instances, it is adult politicians who develop and implement policies that often compromise the welfare of children and youth. When children and youth are involved in political strife and struggles, it is often in response to oppression by adults. In an ideal environment, children are keen to engage in progressive undertakings like studying; it is in conflict situations that children are forced to react.

Children’s literature in Zimbabwe is a valuable resource that illustrates the route to be followed in post-conflict transition. It interrogates the factors that threaten health and well-being, while describing the ideal society that overcomes conflict. Some critics might allege that such literature is utopian. However, peace building and reconstruction require imagination. Creative writers in Zimbabwe describe the tension and conflict that undermine progress. Children themselves express their vision of a well-developed democracy in which they are free to express their concerns. The combined imagination of artists and children demonstrates that another world, one where justice and peace prevail, is possible.

The major focus of this paper is to highlight the role of Zimbabwean children’s literature in providing a vision for a post-conflict society. It regards children’s literature as a resource in creating images of a peaceful society. Theoretically, it is built on the conviction that children’s literature can be appropriated in reconstruction and development, especially in post-conflict situations. This emerges from the view that literature does have, and can fulfill, a functional role. Instead of art for art’s sake, literature can provide creative solutions to social challenges. In this paper, I argue that Zimbabwean children’s literature is strategically placed to guide society towards co-existence, peace and prosperity.

The paper seeks to:

- Illustrate the vision of a post-conflict society as depicted in Zimbabwean children’s literature.
- Harness the insights of writers in the quest for peace and reconstruction.
- Accord some space to the voices of Zimbabwean children regarding the post-conflict society they aspire to.

Zimbabwe: An Anatomy of Crisis

In order to appreciate the role of children’s literature in providing a vision for a post-conflict society in Zimbabwe, there is need to highlight key themes in the country’s history. Obviously, it is neither possible nor desirable to provide a detailed history of the country in a paper of this nature. However, since Zimbabwe has enjoyed a lot of attention in the international media since the fast-track resettlement programme of 2000, it is necessary to draw attention to some of the major issues in its politics. In addition, President Mugabe’s rhetoric at the United Nations and other gatherings has kept Zimbabwe in the news. His government’s harsh treatment of the opposition has also meant the spotlight continues to be on Zimbabwe.

From the onset, it must be remembered that Zimbabwe was a settler colony. When most African countries gained independence in the 1960s through peaceful negotiations, Zimbabwe was bracing itself for a protracted and bloody liberation struggle. It only attained independence in 1980. Following a decade of relative prosperity, the economy experienced a recession in the 1990s. After 2000, the economy plunged, precipitating a major social crisis (Bond and Manyanya, 2002). The following issues are central to unlocking the paralysis that Zimbabwe is reeling under.

Violence

Violence has been part and parcel of the Zimbabwean story. Although there was violence in the pre-colonial period, the colonial occupation brought a new dimension. The white settlers who were in the Pioneer Column that came to Zimbabwe in 1890 set the tone by violently putting down the 1896/7 African resistance. Equally, the 1970s war of liberation was brutal. After independence, the government used violence to counter “dissidents” in the Matabeleland and Midlands provinces. Thousands of civilians died in these military operations (Vera, 2002).

The farm invasions, as well as the 2000 parliamentary and 2002 presidential elections were
characterised by violence. David Kaulemu, a Zimbabwean philosopher and activist, argues that violence has been engrained on the national consciousness (Kaulemu, 2004). Violence has become the state’s preferred way of settling conflict or dealing with dissent. This stems from the liberation struggle where the gun was celebrated in song and dance. Political opponents were labelled “sell outs” and thereby lost all their rights. This valorisation of violence has persisted in the postcolonial period, with Mugabe brazenly declaring that he has “degrees in violence” (Blair, 2003).

The Zimbabwean state has used violence in its interaction with citizens on many occasions. Whenever university students have demonstrated, police have intervened swiftly, using “maximum force.” Many political activists, including Lovemore Madhuku of the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA) have been routinely beaten up and tortured. Violence has been adopted as an instrument of control.

Due to the state’s tendency to visit violence on its perceived or real opponents, the overall environment has been dominated by violence. Opposition youth have often resorted to violence as they seek to open up the democratic space. On the domestic front, men use violence against women and children. Survivors of gender based violence have testified how their intimate partners have used violence as a strategy to control. The prevailing notion of a “real man” as a strong individual perpetuates violence.

In her chapter, “Masculinities, Race and Violence in the Making of Zimbabwe,” Jane L. Parpart illustrates how violence pervades the history of Zimbabwe. She notes that both blacks and whites have been perpetrators and victims of violence, resulting in a violent society. She concludes her chapter thus:

As we have seen, the violence of both government and nationalist forces in Rhodesia spawned insecurity, atrocities and suspicion, and a population inured to violence in everyday life. The evidence suggests that the hyper-masculine, warrior imagery used to fuel the struggle on both sides fostered a vision of masculinity that prized physical toughness, ability to commit violence and loyalty to a cause and to one’s fellow warriors above all other characteristics. Enemies were feminised while success in war and the ability to kill became the litmus text of successful manhood, often vociferously supported by women as well. (Parpart, 2007)

As this paper argues below, children’s literature in Zimbabwe names violence as a stumbling block to peace and prosperity. This is in keeping with oral tradition that discourages the use of force and violence in resolving conflict. Authors show that violence reduces society’s health and well-being. It damages both the victim and the perpetrator. Zimbabwean children’s literature seeks to eliminate violence and develop a culture of peace.

Racial Tension

Following the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) in 1965, racial segregation in the country became acute. Whites, coloureds and Indians constituted racial categories that were above blacks in all spheres of life. White supremacy was institutionalised, and blacks were reduced to a source of cheap labour. Legislation to force blacks off productive land was enforced. Urban areas were conceptually and physically constructed as white spaces. Many blacks experienced alienation in cities and found solace at the periphery (Mukonyora, 2007).

The popular understanding (and less complicated) interpretation of the liberation struggle was that it was a war against mabhunu (“Boers”/white settlers). Revolutionary songs ridiculed white people as thieves, ugly, cruel slave drivers and ungrateful guests who abused the hospitality of blacks. In turn, whites stereotyped blacks as lazy, dirty, dishonest and intellectually challenged. Mutual suspicion has characterised black-white relations in Zimbabwe.

Upon the attainment of independence, Mugabe surprised many people when he pronounced the policy of reconciliation. He challenged blacks and whites to work together, and to overlook the past. He argued that reconciliation would enable the country to open a new chapter, and promote development. However, when his political fortunes dwindled in the late 1990s, he revoked the policy of reconciliation. Once again, white people, especially commercial farmers, became unrepentant enemies. Mugabe went back to the language of the liberation war and encouraged his militia to “instil fear in the heart of the white man.”

Divisive Ethnicity

Ethnic diversity has become a major source of conflict in many parts of the world. Ideally, ethnic diversity should be celebrated. Unfortunately, in many parts of Africa, African elites manipulate ethnic
identities to further their own interests. The 1994 Rwanda genocide stands out as a dark reminder of the potency of ethnicity. Africa needs to recognise that ethnic identities should not immediately translate into conflict.

Zimbabwe is home to a number of ethnic groups. Apart from the Shona and the Ndebele, the dominant ethnic groups, there are other, so-called minority groups. For the most part, the Shona and the Ndebele have enjoyed healthy relations. However, some extremists have promoted notions of superiority and ethnic purity. Shona and Ndebele elites have used ethnicity to promote their own agendas at different times in the history of the country. (See for example Yap, 2002.)

Memories of the Ndebele raiding the Shona during the pre-colonial period and Ndebele recollections of state-sponsored violence provide a favourable environment for ethnic tension in Zimbabwe. Events like soccer matches between the Harare-based Dynamos and Bulawayo-based Highlanders are sometimes used to fan ethnic loyalties. University student politics has often involved campaigning on the basis of having “the right ethnic qualities,” rather than a clear programme of action. This confirms the view expressed earlier that elites manufacture, magnify and exploit ethnic identities.

The theme of ethnicity finds its way into Zimbabwean literature in Shona and Ndebele. Some authors wish to reaffirm the mythical superiority of their ethnic groups. They reinforce the stereotypes about the other ethnic groups. However, other authors pursue a nationalist agenda and call for an end to the manipulation of ethnic identities (Musiyiwa and Matshakaile-Ndlovu, 2005).

Poverty and Inequitable Distribution of Wealth

One of the key rallying points during the liberation struggle was the promise by African nationalists to eliminate black poverty and redistribute wealth. Peasants and workers were encouraged to participate in the struggle on the understanding that independence would transform their situations in radical ways. Mugabe and some of his followers espoused a Marxist-Leninist ideology. This was adopted by the ruling party at its 1984 Congress.

Despite some progress during the first decade, the gap between the rich and the poor grew bigger in the 1990s. The Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP), adopted in the early 1990s, led to increased suffering for the majority. As unemployment increased and the cost of living went up, life in Zimbabwe became a hard struggle for most people. Poverty has become widespread in the country, with millions of people settling in other countries. The phenomenal rise in the number of people leaving the country is a key indicator of the Zimbabwean crisis.

Poverty is an underlying factor in most conflict situations. The struggle to access resources often triggers conflict. In Zimbabwe, the militancy of opposition youth stems from their feeling of marginalisation. They have watched the consumption patterns of the ruling elite with envy. They have resorted to violence in some instances to express their frustration.

Gender Inequalities

There is a growing interest in the theme of gender in Africa (Cole, 2007). It is a significant concept that allows researchers to examine power dynamics between women and men in society. After a long period that saw the term being reduced to “women’s issues,” there is now an effort to retain its original meaning of interactions between women and men. In Zimbabwe, the recent analysis of masculinities in literature and society is a helpful addition to the discourse on gender (Muchemwa and Muponde, 2007).

Unfair relations between women and men have been the cause of conflict in Zimbabwean history. Men have been socialised to regard themselves as heads of families and leaders of communities. Women have been denied power by society. Patriarchy tends to promote the interests of men at the expense of women. This has led to tension on many occasions.

Women writers such as Tsitsi Dangarembga, Yvonne Vera and others have described the women’s struggles against patriarchy in the country. They have shown how women work hard to improve their lives in situations of oppression. Women have lost power and influence due to the impact of colonialism. Traditionally, women’s control of agriculture assured them of influence. However, the colonial economy promoted male labour. This has led to the marginalisation of women in the postcolonial period.

Zimbabwean literature shows how women defy patriarchy to improve their situation.
In *Uncertainty of Hope*, Valerie Tagwira captures how poor women in the high density suburb of Mbare battled against police brutality during Operation Murambatsvina/Clean Up in 2005 (Tagwira, 2006). She explores how women in different social classes negotiate abuse by patriarchy, physical violence and vulnerability to HIV. Other women writers encourage women to work hard and overcome the odds.

Having summarised key issues that inform conflict in Zimbabwe, in the following section the paper shifts attention to children’s literature. It examines the meaning of children’s literature, paving the way for an analysis of how the themes described in this section inform Zimbabwean children’s literature.

**Children’s Literature: A Definition**

**When Is a Child a Child?**

Children’s literature means different things to different people. To begin with, various terms have been used in an effort to characterise the discipline. Some of the terms that have been used interchangeably with children’s literature include literature for children (Meniru, 1992), children and youth literature (Khorana, 1998) and others. Two terms, children and literature, intensify the challenge of definition. Who is a child is not simply a matter to be settled by looking at registration documents relating to age. Children’s literature is often associated with material written for children aged 12 and below. However, age is not just a number. Different ethnic groups define childhood differently. Although cultures are always changing (Bourddillon, 1993), some groups continue to approach childhood and adulthood on the basis of undergoing specific rites of passage. For example, a person aged 16 who has been circumcised might be regarded as an adult, while a 24 year-old who has not been circumcised continues to be seen as a child.

Due to cultural differences, it is difficult to clearly state the focus group in “children’s literature.” This has seen efforts to increase the scope by including “young adults.” In this regard, “children’s literature” stretches up to those aged 16. Nana Wilson-Tagoe, herself an author of children’s books, adopts a helpful approach. She regards children’s literature as addressing different age groups, such as the 4–5; 7–8 and 9–12 year-olds. She maintains that these age groups are important as they have different sensibilities. If an author fails to write with these specific groups in mind there will be major challenges. According to her:

> What I would call a children’s book is a book that is produced largely with a child’s interest and needs in mind, one that deals honestly with children, portrays them candidly and in a medium to which they can respond with imagination and pleasure. (Wilson-Tagoe, 1992)

It is clear that Wilson-Tagoe places emphasis on children’s sensibilities in her definition of children’s literature. Willemina Bertha Broeze adopts a similar stance in her analysis of what constitutes children’s literature. According to her:

> In order to qualify as a children’s book, or a children’s story, the work of art in question must contain a world of feeling, perception and experience which represents a child’s world. (Broeze, 1988)

Children’s literature therefore specifically addresses the world of children. It endeavours to speak to children, and to impart certain values to them. Writing with an African cultural nationalist slant, Sam Mbure contends that African children’s literature addresses the existential situation of African children. For him, “children’s literature should basically teach children simple, yet very important things about who they are, about their surroundings etc” (Mbure, 1997). He underlines the functional value of children’s literature, especially in an African context. He is convinced that African children’s literature must serve the specific context of helping children to appreciate their identity and context.

For the purposes of this discussion paper, we adopt a working definition that regards children’s literature as literature whose primary audience is children. This literature may be produced by adults or by children themselves. It seeks to address the issues relating to children. While the socially constructed definition of childhood differs as young people navigate adulthood (Trudell, 2002), we shall limit the age to 12. However, we recognise that most people in Zimbabwe consider anyone under the age of 18 a child.

> When is a child not a child, and when is an adult a child? The Shona term *mwana* (child) is so elastic that in the presence of her mother, the 60 year-old grandmother is expected to act like a child. We recognise that being a child is as much about age as it is about relations. On the other hand, a child demonstrating high levels of maturity is no longer
viewed as a child. Age, like gender, is culturally constructed. Childhood is often associated with innocence and lack of responsibility. However, as this paper will demonstrate, this often leads to patronising and paternalistic attitudes by elders.

Literature: A Slippery Concept

The term literature has witnessed a lot of scholarly reflection. It shares this characteristic with other concepts in the humanities that include history, philosophy, religion and others. From the African context, the debate has included whether material ought to be written in order for it to merit classification under the label. Oral literature has gained a high degree of acceptance within academic departments in Africa. In general, literature has been associated with works of art that are inspired by the human imagination and creativity.

Oral literature is particularly important in Africa because authors have either consciously or unconsciously borrowed from oral traditions. African children's literature is influenced by traditional folktales, songs, chants and other oral forms. According to Isidore Okpewho:

African oral literature is studied side by side with modern African literature because many modern African writers consciously borrow techniques and ideas from their oral traditions in constructing works dealing essentially with modern life. (Okpewho, 1992)

Although published material for children constitutes the main focus of this paper, it also pays attention to the importance of folktales (ngano) as a valuable resource in shaping children's moral values. Indeed, given the focus on children's literature as an avenue for understanding peace and reconstruction, the paper highlights how story tellers (sarungano) have traditionally sought to inculcate values associated with peace and tolerance. As we have noted elsewhere:

These folktales, myths, and legends are an integral part of the people's oral tradition. They were mostly told by grandmothers to children in the village. They used different communication strategies, including song and dance to ensure the participation of everyone. The central function was to educate and to entertain. Zimbabwean authors utilise these to capture the imagination of children. (Chitando 2005b:38)

Children's literature is a specialised aspect of literature. As argued above, it speaks to children's imagination and aspirations. In Zimbabwe, authors have utilised traditional folktales, modern fantasy and other artistic devices to communicate with children. Critically, the main characters in children's literature are children themselves. Their struggles, joys and hopes are the centre of plots. This paper argues that apart from the didactic aspect of children's literature, society should appreciate one key dimension from the discipline: placing children at the centre.

The concept of Zimbabwean children's literature is a source of further debate. The definition of who finds and does not find space under the label is contentious. The issue is closely tied to the problematic of citizenship and identity in postcolonial Africa (Mamdani, 1996). Robert Mugabe, President of Zimbabwe, has adopted a narrow definition of "Zimbabwean." His rhetoric often excludes whites and migrant farm labourers (Mugabe, 2001). This paper employs an expanded definition of Zimbabwean children's literature. It includes contributions by white Zimbabweans.

From the foregoing discussion, it is clear that there is a lot of debate in children's literature. To a very large extent, children do not write their own literature. It is adults who write for children. This runs the risk of adults deciding what they think children should consume. This paper seeks to attain a balanced perspective by capturing the views of children themselves on peace and development in Zimbabwe. Since most publications are adult-centred, this paper endeavours to privilege the views of children, while placing these side by side with the conceptualisations of creative writers.

Children's Literature: An Approach

It is unlikely that a universal definition of children's literature will be developed. Ideally, this would be a definition that spells out, once and for all, what children's literature entails. Such a definition would capture what children's literature was in the past, what it is now, as well as what it will mean in future. Furthermore, the definition would try to prescribe the meaning of the term for different cultural and political contexts. Clearly, such a definition remains elusive.

This paper adopts an expanded definition of children's literature. As well as appreciating children's literature as literature that addresses children and their imagination, there is an effort to capture the sentiments of children themselves. Authors of
children’s literature are adults who utilise the power of imagination to create material that excites and informs children. However, children themselves are not devoid of imagination. They do have images of the world they would want to inhabit. Consequently, the paper breaks with tradition and invites children to express themselves on selected themes.

Critics might contend that the output of children's creativity and views has traditionally not been classified under children's literature. In addition, as adults, they can charge that the author still had the power to sift children's perspectives; choosing to present some of their views and leaving out others. The first charge indicates a preoccupation with traditional approaches to children's literature that totally marginalise the views of children. The second charge is pertinent and raises the challenge of subjectivity in all scholarly pursuits. Nonetheless, there is an endeavour to treat the views of Zimbabwean children with sensitivity and respect. Their constructions and dreams of a highly developed, friendly and prosperous post-conflict society are critical.

Ideology in African Children’s Literature

Postcolonial Africa continues to search for identity. The theme of identity has received attention from researchers working on African music (Palmb erg and Kirkegaard, 2002), history (Werbner and Ranger 1996) and other disciplines. This is due to the reality that colonial literature tended to degrade Africans. Colonial children’s literature in particular sought to subtly undermine the integrity of the African child (Maddy and MacCann, 1996). According to the African-American critic, Meena Khorana:

Africans are stereotyped as gullible, lazy, childish, simple-minded, indolent, cruel, and corrupt. In contrast, white characters are invariably virtuous, brave, self-less and disciplined. In children's fiction, even adult Africans are portrayed as childish or as grotesque caricatures of human beings; they are irresponsible and fearful, and they take childish glee in trinkets and toys. (Khorana, 1994)

It is important that postcolonial African children's literature attempts to rehabilitate African identity. Authors seek to retrieve the past and present it in a more favourable light. Emerging in the 1960s following the attainment of independence by many African states, postcolonial African literature seeks to produce books for African children. It maintains that these books must be written by African authors and should reflect the African ethos, experiences and worldviews (Schmidt, 1997). The insistence that the authors be African is informed by the belief that other people have written for Africans for too long. Those who subscribe to this view contend that the time has come for Africans to produce their own material in the different areas of human endeavour.

The ideological character of postcolonial African children’s literature is essential for understanding the teaching of Zimbabwean children’s literature on peace and social reconstruction following conflict. In other words, very few African critics have accepted the dictum of “art for its own sake,” especially in children’s literature. Zimbabwean children’s literature is “preponderantly didactic” (Osa, 1995: xi). Authors have regarded children’s literature as an ideal opportunity for communicating values. They seek to inculcate progressive values in children.

Zimbabwean authors of children’s books such as Stephen Alumenda, Stephen Chifunyise, Charles Mungoshi and others are motivated by cultural nationalism. They are convinced that children need to be "guided" in their search for identity. In an effort to remind children of the African past, they utilise folktales in their works. Mungoshi's Stories from a Shona Childhood seeks to familiarise children with folktales (Mungoshi, 1989). The values that are communicated in the folktales include peaceful coexistence, respect and others. This paper argues that these values are important to post-conflict societies in Africa. They provide post-conflict societies in Africa with values that are critical to the process of reconciliation and reconstruction.

Zimbabwean children’s literature endeavours to instil values that equip the target audience to become good citizens. It undermines violence and greed. It promotes solidarity with marginalized social groups like people with disabilities. It seeks to socialise children to respect others and protect their rights. Zimbabwean children’s literature therefore seeks to mould children into effective citizens. However, authors have not fully captured the aspirations of the children themselves. Children aspire for health and prosperity, instead of just being loyal citizens. They subscribe to the nationalist vision only to the degree that it enables them to have meaningful lives.

Zimbabwean authors have not shied away from tackling difficult political issues. Memory Chirere’s story, “Beautiful Children,” forces society to confront the ugly reality of xenophobia (Chiere, 2000). His
story is about Mozambican children seeking refuge in Zimbabwean society. They are shunned, abused and stigmatised. Of course, Zimbabwean children and adults were to experience this in South Africa and Botswana (Nyamjoh, 2006). Alumenda’s *Street Life* challenges society to reflect on police brutality towards children on the streets (Alumenda, 1999).

Zimbabwean children’s literature provides valuable space for reflecting on the struggles and aspirations of children. It captures the changing fortunes of the country, from the protracted liberation war of the 1970s, the relative prosperity of the 1980s–1990s, to the strife after 2000 (Chinodya, 2006). Although most critics overlook children’s literature, it is an important resource in peace-building and reconstruction. It provides meaningful perspectives on conflict and how to build enduring communities in its aftermath. It is therefore necessary that it must be subjected to “rigorous appraisal and criticism” (Odaga, 1998).

Children’s literature in Zimbabwe interacts with politics in very subtle but interesting ways, as illustrated above. The ruling nationalists were quick to notice the potential of children’s literature to further their ideology. They sought to promote a Pan African identity, and saw children’s literature as an important tool for achieving such a goal. However, as the excitement of independence waned and new struggles emerged, authors of children’s literature captured them in their works. The following section outlines some of the themes that dominate Zimbabwean children’s literature.

**Naming Conflict: Zimbabwean Children’s Literature**

Material on the historical development of children’s literature in Zimbabwe is scarce. However, the country’s own peculiar circumstances imply that whereas the growth of children’s literature followed trends in other African countries, the timelines are different. When other African countries were seeking the Africanization of children’s literature in the 1960s and 1970s (Schmidt, 1989), the country was involved in the struggle for independence. Colonial children’s literature generally sought to undermine African confidence. It encouraged African children to embrace European values.

With the attainment of independence in 1980, the nationalist black government moved to promote African identity. It established the Zimbabwe Publishing House in 1981. With its socialist ethos, the government sought to promote values of co-operation and peace amongst the citizens (Banana, 1987). Children’s literature was seen as a vehicle for articulating positive values. Unfortunately, the country did not have black authors of children’s book. It commissioned Meshack Asare of Ghana to publish an original story based on Great Zimbabwe. One can detect the ideological overtones of the project as Great Zimbabwe has been contested, with African nationalists appropriating it as a testimony of black people’s creativity and civilisation. Asare published the book, *Chipo and the Bird on the Hill*, which centres on the mysteries of Great Zimbabwe (Asare, 1984).

The growth of Zimbabwean children’s literature was facilitated by the presence of publishing houses that thrived in the first two decades of independence. As a newly independent nation, Zimbabwe invested heavily in education. The government sought to ensure that literacy levels increased significantly, given the marginalisation of blacks in the education system during colonialism. The rapid expansion of the education sector witnessed a growing demand for children’s literature.

Zimbabwean children’s literature identifies numerous sources of conflicts. It highlights factors that prevent children from enjoying peaceful and fulfilling lives. Children’s literature in Zimbabwe also demonstrates the fact that the resolution of initial conflict does not necessarily usher in an era of peace and development. After the 1970s war of liberation, independence did not bring about a complete end to conflict. There emerged “struggles after the struggle,” even as there had been “struggles within the struggle” (Sithole, 1980). This is an important reminder of the fact that “post-conflict” societies are likely to be faced with new conflicts. In the following section, the study outlines some of the key sources of conflict identified in Zimbabwean children’s literature. It describes the views of authors and captures the voices of children on particular themes.

**War**

War is the most vivid demonstration of conflict in society. The taking up and use of arms is indicative of an escalation of conflict in a country or society. Zimbabwean society experienced a brutal guerrilla war in the 1970s. After having pursued a strategy of civil disobedience for decades, African national-
ists embarked on armed resistance. The white settler regime had enormous military power and the result was a long and bloody war in which thousands perished. The nationalists employed various tactics for recruitment, and children were often caught up in the armed conflict (Bhebe and Ranger, 1995).

Ben Chirasha’s *Child of War* describes the horror that children face in situations of armed conflict (Chirasha 1985). It focuses on the recollections of the 13 year-old Hondo Tapera. The name itself is symbolic. It means, “war, we are finished,” that is, the war will finish us. It is a stark reminder of the devastation caused by war. The book uses the eye of a child to remind society of the physical and psychological destruction caused by the war. Zimbabwe’s war of liberation left many dead and maimed physically and mentally. According to Osa, the book, “makes the young reader think and reflect deeply on the grimness and inhumanity of war” (Osa, 1995:14).

War shatters the peace and tranquillity that communities enjoy. It negates development and creates uncertainty regarding the future. In *Child of War*, children are not protected from the problems that are associated with war. They are beaten up and face a lot of trauma. Narrating the horror through the eye of a child allows the author to remind society that war is harmful. It robs children of their innocence and exposes them to inhuman treatment. Although Chirasha is writing about the Zimbabwean situation, his description of the violence associated with war is applicable to other countries as well. According to Caroline Sweetman:

Age, as well as gender identity, determines people’s experience in battle. Children of both sexes are commonly used as ‘canon fodder’: sent across mined land to ensure that soldiers can pass safely; or abducted, brainwashed, and forced to commit atrocities which will forever distance them from innocence. Both children – particularly girls – and adult women are used for sexual purposes: as slaves to be raped repeatedly, or ‘married’ to combatants, or kept, used by tens or hundreds of men, and ultimately murdered. Being female exposes one to an additional range of atrocities, since heterosexual sex involves the possibility of pregnancy. Many women and girls become traumatised mothers of children conceived through rape; and eventually, despised outcasts from their original homes and communities. (Sweetman, 2005)

Although the war of liberation ended many years ago, children in Zimbabwe are fully aware of the pain caused by war. They are exposed to images of war in the media, and recollections by older members of society. They regard war as unfortunate, and discourage older people from engaging in armed conflict. As Alumenda illustrates in his work, *The Girl Who Couldn’t Dance*, war results in people losing their limbs (Alumendo, 2001). In the words of 11 year-old Elizabeth Mutero:

War is a waste of lives and money. They should give the money to children so that we can use it well. I would use the money to buy books for our school. I would also improve our playgrounds and those of our neighbouring schools. War results in people becoming disabled. It is not nice to see so many people dying. God does not want that. (Interview with Elizabeth Mutero, Masvingo South constituency. 17 April 2007)

Interviews with children in Zimbabwe indicate that they would like society to find peaceful means of conflict resolution. Children know that adults punish them if they fight at home or at school. They find it odd that adults themselves do not appear willing to implement their own recommendations regarding the resolution of conflict. Children encourage adults to engage in dialogue as they seek solutions to disagreements. They regard war as disruptive and destructive. They would like adults to uphold a culture of peace as this will ensure sustainable development.

**Racial Conflict**

The race question has been at the heart of liberation struggles in Southern Africa (Mandaza, 1997). White settlers set themselves apart as a special class, subjecting blacks to racial discrimination. This became a major source of conflict. Racist children’s literature in South Africa for instance, has portrayed blacks as inherently inferior to whites (MacCann and Maddy, 2001). Racial tension between the white minority and the black majority has characterised countries such as Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

Patricia Chater’s *Crossing the Boundary Fence* draws attention to the racial divide that haunts Zimbabwe (Chater, 1988). It focuses on how two children, Musa and Diana, have to negotiate the “boundary fence.” Musa is the daughter of a black farmer, while Diana is the daughter of a white farmer. Although their farms are adjacent to one another, their worlds are totally insulated from each other. The meeting between the two children at the well initiates a process of crossing the fence. The book
succeeds in articulating the abiding problem of the land question in Zimbabwe, and the struggle for liberation.

The willingness of the children to engage in reflection on the challenge of race and possession bears testimony to the capacity of children's literature to bring key issues to the fore. Children are not portrayed as naïve: they have the capacity to identify racial injustice in the land issue. They, more than the adults, are willing to cross the fence and begin a process of dialogue. Land, being central to Zimbabwe's “unfinished business” (Hammar et al., 2003), is the subject of thoughtful reflection by children in Crossing the Boundary Fence.

Children in Zimbabwe are aware of the politics surrounding the land issue. Many have listened to Mugabe's fiery speeches on radio and television. They have heard his refrain on “Blair and Bush” as architects of the country's socio-economic problems. Many children have heard Mugabe's attack on the whites, and his declaration that land belongs to blacks. Some of them have been adversely affected by the land invasions that reached their peak in 2000. Children of farm labourers who were previously employed by white commercial farmers faced bleak(er) futures in the aftermath of the exercise. Many were forced to retreat to rural “homes” to which their parents were scarcely connected, or found small patches of land. For Godknows Chifamba, aged 13:

We were staying on a farm when a group of armed people came in trucks. They went to the farm house and chased the murungu (white person) away. They said that we had to leave as they were taking over the farm. We were very afraid as they said that some people were going to die. I wish we had found a way of sharing the land. Now we are here, and the school is so far away. (Interview with Godknows Chifamba, Morgenster Mission, 25 May 2007.)

Poverty

Children do not thrive in situations of economic deprivation. An analysis of Zimbabwean children's literature shows how authors describe poverty as a paralyzing condition. It is poverty that prevents children from reaching their full potential. Children in situations of poverty are extremely vulnerable, and their chances of escaping from the vicious circle are slim.

Alumenda’s works, such as Street Life, capture the consequences of poverty for children (Alumenda, 1999). The story is narrated in the first person singular by Tamla, a child living on the streets. Tamla lives on the streets with Mona, his 8-year-old sister. They have six other gang members and they survive by picking up food from the rubbish bins, begging, pushing trolleys and guarding cars. They lead precarious lives, worsened by the constant harassment by police officers. Hunger is a major menace and the children have to steal and lie in order to survive.

Poverty condemns children to miserable lives. Unlike their age mates in more developed countries, Zimbabwean children are shown battling for survival. Their basic needs like food, clothing and shelter are not available. Tamla’s gang lives in pipes. The worsening economic situation in the country limits the capacity of members of society in their efforts to assist orphans and other vulnerable children. There is tension and conflict between children on the streets and other members of society who regard them as a nuisance. Alumenda calls for sensitivity on the part of other members of society, illustrating how children on the streets aspire for better lives.

Zimbabwean children’s literature shows how poverty creates conflict in the lives of children, and within the community. Poverty forces children to adopt survival strategies that are classified as anti-social. It threatens peace and stability in society. Poverty generates pressure as the poor struggle to get out of their situation. Post-conflict societies can have a high level of stability if they address the fundamental issue of poverty.

Children in Zimbabwe anticipate a world without poverty. They would like poverty to become history as it prevents them from leading wholesome lives. Children in difficult circumstances are clear about their hope for better lives. They know that poverty frustrates their aspirations and would like to see its eradication. Programmes that refer to poverty reduction do not take children’s wishes into account: children do not want poverty to be reduced; they want it removed! Tonderai Rwambiwa, aged 10 says:

Poverty means that I am unable to get medicines when I am sick and my mother has to worry about me. Poverty forces us to stay in this house with two rooms when we are seven. If we remove poverty there will be no thieves and we would all be happy. This world would be such a happy place to live. Poverty makes me hate life. I want to be able to buy things for my parents and family members. (Interview with Tonderai Rwambiwa, Harare, 1 August 2007)
The deteriorating socio-economic and political situation in Zimbabwe deprived many children of happiness and the sense of a bright future. Many children shared their parents’ anxiety about the availability of basic commodities and uncertain futures. They hoped for a dramatic change of the country’s economic fortune as this would give them a sense of hope. This demonstrates the fact that although Zimbabwe moved from war to peace at independence, economic problems brought a new situation of ‘un-peace’, lack of peace. Post-conflict societies should always work together protecting their peace if prosperity is to be attained.

Gender-Based Discrimination

Throughout history, women have faced serious challenges. Patriarchal ideologies have left women at the bottom of the heap. The history of women in Zimbabwe shows the multiple struggles that women have endured. Zimbabwean children’s literature pays attention to the theme of the marginalisation of the girl child. It calls upon society to reflect critically on the silent and undeclared war between women and men. Authors challenge society to review its negative attitude towards women. They encourage members to work towards achieving gender justice. They highlight the fact that some of the most enduring conflicts in society, such as those emerging from gender discrimination, will require creativity if they are to be overcome.

Alumenda has written passionately about the challenges that the girl child faces in society. In Marita Goes to School, Alumenda narrates the experiences of the little girl Marita. She does not attend school as her father maintains that it is a waste of money to send girls to school. Alumenda utilises Marita’s reflections to jolt the conscience of society. He writes:

Marita wondered why boys were always allowed to do what they wanted, while girls had to collect firewood, wash the pots and help with the sweeping at home. Boys were supposed to be stronger than girls, at least that is what they always said. Why then should they do less work? (Alumenda, 1997:4)

Patriarchal oppression results in the suffering of the girl child. Social development is retarded when women are prevented from engaging in meaningful pursuits. Alumenda shows the positive value of sending the girl child to school when Marita salvages the situation by reading a letter for her father, who had previously dismissed her. Miss Hombo, the schoolteacher who secretly gives Marita lessons, is a progressive individual. In the sequel, Marita’s Great Idea, it is Marita and Miss Hombo who mobilise the community to repair the school after it has been damaged by floods (Alumenda, 1998).

Alumenda takes the opportunity to challenge his audience to re-examine their attitude towards the girl child. Conflicts that emerge from gender-based discrimination can be overcome by openness to new ideas. He demonstrates how women can ensure the salvation of the community through their actions. What is required is for society to grant them the space, and to empower them through education. Alumenda is a proponent of equitable gender relations that will eliminate tensions that emerge from gender oppression.

The theme of the emancipation of the girl child in children’s literature is central to Alumenda’s other works. These include Tambudzai Anoona Nyoka Huru (1999) (Tambudzai Sees a Big Snake) and Thandiwe’s Spirit and the River (1994). These works have the girl child as the focus of attention. They show that the girl child has the capacity to intervene and save herself and others. In the former, Tambudzai sees a big snake and uses her intelligence to expose evil in her community. In the latter, the spirit of Thandiwe saves others. Alumenda is questioning society’s tendency to dismiss the girl child as weak and ineffectual. He charges that the girl child has potential to transform society. He challenges the stereotypical presentation of women in children’s literature where:

They are featured as diminutive characters: a weak, helpless and unintelligent lot that must always be protected by male relatives. They are considered fit only for production and service jobs, or for their reproductive functions and tiresome domestic chores. In the majority of oral narratives and indeed in some creative works for adults and children as well, women are identified with evil and inhuman acts; yet, at the same time, they are revered as mothers, providers and nurturers of life. (Odaga, 1998:23)

Despite the progress that Zimbabwe has made in its efforts to attain gender justice, the girl child continues to face numerous challenges. These challenges retard development. They include physical and sexual abuse of the girl child. Organisations such as the Girl Child Network (an organisation that works to-
wards empowering the girl child) have emerged in a bid to address the issue of the abuse of the girl child. What is frightening is the fact that in most instances, the girl child is abused by men in positions of authority. These are the same people who are supposed to protect the girl child. They include fathers, male guardians and relatives, teachers, religious leaders and others. According to Tatenda Muusha:

*Men make our lives so miserable. They do not regard us as equals and just seek to abuse us. This causes problems in society when we resist their moves. We need our parents and the police to protect us. If I had the power, I would imprison all those who harass and abuse girls. Older men threaten to beat or kill us if we do not give in to their demands. There can be no progress when girls are always crying.* (Interview with Tatenda Muusha, Chivhu, 3 August 2007)

**HIV and AIDS**

Although it may not be immediately clear for some, HIV and AIDS are both a cause and manifestation of conflict in society. AIDS is the leading cause of death in Zimbabwe and other countries in Southern Africa. It has massive consequences for development as it continues to deplete the human resource base. It is likely to be a major political issue in the near future (de Waal, 2006).

Zimbabwean children’s literature has shown the impact of HIV and AIDS on individuals and families. Following the trend where women are more vulnerable to the epidemic, authors have illustrated the struggles of girl children orphaned by AIDS. Shimmer Chinodya’s *Tale of Tamari* narrates the challenges facing a 14 year-old orphaned girl, Tamari, who lives with her brother and three lodgers (Chindoya, 2004). The vulnerability of the girl child to the HIV epidemic is clearly articulated in this story. It challenges society to put more effort into the prevention and mitigation of the impact of HIV and AIDS. It presents HIV as taking advantage of existing faultlines and conflicts in society to inflict further damage. According to Chinodya, poverty and gender inequality fuel the epidemic.

*The Bundle of Firewood* by Jairos Kangira (2003) focuses on Tombana, an orphan whose parents died of AIDS when she was very small. As is the case with most orphans in Zimbabwe, she is now being looked after by her grandmother (Matshalaga, 2004). Poverty prevents her from realising her dreams. However, due to her intelligence and environmental consciousness, she helps to save a pangolin. It is an endangered animal. The author imagines a peaceful society where human beings and wildlife co-exist harmoniously. Because of her kindness towards the pangolin, Tombana gains favour with the National Parks and Wildlife people and is able to pursue her studies.

The HIV epidemic has given rise to the problem of representation in Zimbabwean literature. In most cases, artists have portrayed women as carriers of the HIV virus. Authors of children’s literature have challenged such negative images by drawing attention to the vulnerability of the girl child to HIV. Chinodya and Kangira ask society to repair its roots so that it is in a better position to deal with HIV and AIDS. They show that it is both a consequence of conflict and a manifestation of conflict in society. It thrives where cracks exist in the social fibre. Mary Zambuko reflects on the impact of HIV and AIDS on the girl child:

*When we lose our parents we are like sheep without a shepherd. There are some people who regard us as their wives. They will not consider our situation, only waiting to take advantage. I have been lucky as my grandmother is taking very good care of us. AIDS must be stopped.* (Interview with Mary Masvingo Central, 26 May 2007.)

**Intolerance**

Zimbabwean children’s literature draws attention to the problems that are associated with intolerance. They show that intolerance breeds conflict in society. It prevents individuals and groups from enjoying life. Intolerance gives rise to stigma and discrimination. Groups that experience stigma and discrimination do not experience life positively. They seek their liberation, and this gives rise to conflict in society. Intolerance creates conditions that produce strife and tension.

This paper has already drawn attention to the challenge of xenophobia in Zimbabwean children’s literature. Chirere shows how Zimbabwean society ill-treats children from Mozambique. This is a major source of conflict as it reflects ingratitude on the part of the Zimbabwean society. Mozambique played a crucial role in the liberation of Zimbabwe. Mozambican lives were lost, while its children missed opportunities due to its support for the liberation struggle. Zimbabweans decided to repay by stigmatising Mozambican children. They made them feel
unwanted, inferior and abused them as maids and general hands. The vulnerability of Mozambican children in Zimbabwe also reminds readers of the devastation of war.

Zimbabwean children’s literature also tackles the issue of intolerance of people with disabilities, albinism and other forms of difference. Two books, Anani the Albino Boy (Alumenda, 2002) and Takadini (Hanson, 1997) focus on the need to accept children with albinism. They encourage children to shun discrimination and embrace those among them with albinism. The authors call upon society to re-examine the myths that underlie prejudice against children with albinism.

In The Girl Who Couldn’t Dance, Tamara has a disability that was caused by a landmine that was planted in the ground during the war of liberation in Zimbabwe (Alumenda, 2001). This is a testimony of the ugly effects of war. Alumenda mobilises children to accept people with disabilities. People with disabilities are looked down upon in society. When Lena, who has befriended Tamara who has a disability, tries the crutches and finds them heavy, the author is challenging society to look at the world from the point of view of people with disabilities. It is only through trying to understand what it is like to live with disability that society can build a better world for all.

Zimbabwean children’s literature draws attention to numerous factors that threaten social stability. It describes various sources and arenas of tension. Authors encourage their audience to face these challenges creatively as Zimbabwe tries to negotiate its post-conflict status. They demonstrate how new tensions emerge, even as old ones are being resolved. Writers also share their vision of a peaceful and developed society. Zimbabwean children have also articulated the Zimbabwe they want.

Envisioning a New Society:
Zimbabwean Children’s Literature

Creative writers are often accused of being idealistic. They dare to dream, and to paint vivid pictures of the world they would like to see. Using the power of the imagination, they invite their readers to look forward to a new era where peace and prosperity prevail. Zimbabwean children’s literature provides interesting perspectives on resolving conflict and providing the vision of a new society. Authors create images of a society where children thrive and their rights are upheld.

Building a Culture of Peace

Zimbabwean children’s literature promotes a culture of peace. Writers urge children to celebrate peace and stability. Utilising folktales and other traditional genres, authors turn the values that are often celebrated by society upside down. Values of strength that often result in conflict are undermined in stories of the lion and the hare. The lion is often seen being defeated by the hare. While society worships speed, the chameleon with its slow pace is put forward as a hero. Children are encouraged to identify with the underdog and to critique values that engender conflict.

War-mongers and those who seek to harm others are criticised in children’s and young adult fiction in Zimbabwe. Characters that are glorified are those that promote peace and harmony. Censured too are those who abuse their intelligence to gain unfair advantage, such as the scheming hare. The pursuit of peace in Zimbabwean literature seeks to speak to the children’s imagination. It endeavours to undo visions of war and conflict. It seeks to break the cycle of violence that has gripped Zimbabwean society during different historical periods.

Children’s literature in Zimbabwe has played an important role in the transition from conflict to peace. The book, Crossing the Boundary Fence, prepares children for the important task of reconciliation. It enables children to appreciate that differences in race and culture do not translate to superiority and inferiority. It is possible for black and white children to develop and sustain true friendships. Such friendships put an end to conflict.

Teachers play an important role in guiding children to adopt peaceful attitudes. They have the capacity to shape behaviour. It is therefore crucial for those societies that are moving from conflict to peace to retrain teachers so as to empower them to play this role effectively. Teachers who are able to utilise material published for children in Zimbabwe have an opportunity to impart enduring values to children. According to Jackie Kirk (2006):

In post-conflict contexts, schools are the context in which new curricula will be oriented towards peace, living together and active citizenship in a democratic society. Children need to learn new information, skills, and attitudes which will protect
them through the difficult transformation towards peace, encourage them to assert their rights, and enable them to participate actively in development and reconstruction processes.

Dialogue and Tolerance

Zimbabwean children’s literature promotes dialogue and tolerance as solutions to intolerance and conflict. As shown above, children are encouraged to respect those who are “different” from them in terms of ethnicity, nationality, physical condition and other variables. It seeks to mould children into respectful citizens who celebrate difference. This is a critical dimension that needs to be reinforced. As the world continues to shrink into a global village, children must be equipped to accept difference. They must not allow difference to become a source of conflict.

Literature that examines the plight of children with disabilities, albinism and other conditions that make them different prepares children to respect the rights and feelings of others. This is a form of conflict management training as it allows children to notice that people are not the same. However, the rights of all must be respected. Children’s literature therefore is an important resource in training children in the values of dialogue and tolerance. Joseph Huber (1984) has provided a useful description of tolerance. He writes:

The improvement of individual and social living is brought about by tolerance. It means an understanding attitude and fair treatment of others. It recognizes sympathetically the beliefs of others without necessarily embracing them. It is the willingness to accept the opinions and customs which differ from your own. It is the reluctance to interfere with the freedom of thought and action of others.

Zimbabwean children’s literature prepares children to become effective peace makers. Using different strategies and stories, authors equip children to appreciate non-violence and conflict resolution. Animals that terrorise others are ultimately defeated, while those that are willing to negotiate are seen succeeding. More critically, children’s literature shows the importance of negotiation. It has been defined as follows:

Negotiation is a process by which the people involved in a dispute talk to each other about their problem or differences and try to reach a solution acceptable to all. Negotiation or dialogue has settled disputes between employer and employee, families and governments. For peace building to be successful, there are important strategies and tactics that must be put in place. (Kangeremu, n.d:26)

Authors of children’s literature in Zimbabwe illustrate these principles by highlighting the need to prepare for negotiation, negotiating and reaching an agreement. Folktales and children’s stories show the value of negotiating and upholding agreements. In some stories, quarrels over drinking water, boundaries and other disputes are settled through negotiation. Children learn the following principles of dialogue:

Openness

Ideological rigidity and fundamentalism sponsor and worsen conflict. They are informed by a false belief that one is right, and all other people are wrong. Individuals who are not open minded tend to resort to violence. If one has fixed ideas about gender, ethnicity, religion or political ideology, one is likely to defend these identities “to the death.”

Children’s literature shows that maturity is characterised by openness. Children and young adults are encouraged to approach life with open minds. They are taught to shun fundamentalist beliefs. This is consistent with traditional ideas concerning living together in the community.

Respect for the Other

Where there is no respect for opponents, there is a likelihood of violence. However, where there is respect, there are greater possibilities of finding peaceful ways of resolving conflict. Respect entails respecting the humanity of the other, and trying to view reality from their point of view. Individuals who are self-centred do not have respect for others. They hinder efforts to bring peace as they always insist on having their own way every time.

Children’s literature encourages respect for others, as illustrated above. Children are taught to show compassion and understanding. They are taught the importance of upholding the integrity of others. Folktales criticise those who believe they are superior to others. Children are shown the importance of humility and accepting others.

Integrity to Uphold Agreements

Dialogue becomes very difficult when parties to the conflict are not sincere. When opponents are not willing to uphold agreements, conflict persists. Ne-
Negotiating parties must ensure that they abide by the decisions made during negotiations. People of integrity are effective makers of peace. The continent of Africa desperately needs women and men who are willing to reach agreements and fulfill their part of the bargain. Zimbabwean children’s literature encourages individuals and communities to uphold agreements, as this is an effective strategy of conflict resolution.

Gender Justice

There can be no peace and development without gender justice. Post-conflict societies must tackle the issue of gender justice with urgency; otherwise no sustainable peace will be achieved in such societies. Upon the attainment of independence in 1980, Zimbabwean society moved swiftly to pass legislation that promoted the rights of women and children. It was felt that political independence was inadequate if it was not accompanied by moves towards gender justice.

The rebuilding of the lives of girls and women who survive wars and gender violence is an important step towards reconstruction. There can be no reconstruction in the abstract. The rebuilding of lives of people must be at the core of discourses of reconciliation and reconstruction. In the words of Rutendo Masikati, a 15-year-old girl, “Girls must be assisted to move on with their lives if they have suffered misfortunes.” (Interview with Rutendo Masikati, Masvingo Central, 27 May 2007.)

As demonstrated in the previous sections, Zimbabwean children’s literature reminds children of the importance of gender justice. It equips children to question the marginalization of the girl child. It challenges the boy child to question the patriarchal dividend that he enjoys and recruits him as an advocate of gender justice. Authors seek to empower the girl child to pursue her dreams. They show that women can achieve remarkable results if society provides an enabling environment in which they can thrive.

It is critical that post-conflict societies ensure the participation of the girl child in development programmes. Zimbabwean children’s literature provides useful insights by illustrating the creativity of the girls themselves. They must be consulted and be at the centre of the programmes that are designed to benefit them. Many young people are taking up the motto, “Nothing for us without us,” seriously. The vision of young women must become a priority as societies move from conflict to peace.

Efforts to stop violence and achieve sustainable peace have been dominated by adults. In most instances, adults instigate violence and children are left to bear the brunt of their violent acts. In many African contexts, the views of children have been totally ignored. The traditional emphasis on age and seniority has left children invisible and without a voice.

This study has privileged children’s ideas of a peaceful and prosperous Zimbabwe through an analysis of children’s literature and highlighting the views of children themselves on particular issues. As the country struggles to shake off the legacy of violence, racism, divisive ethnicity, gender inequality and poverty, children’s literature has painted an attractive picture of the ideal society.

In 2006, Zimbabwe’s churches produced a discussion document, “The Zimbabwe We Want: Towards a National Vision for Zimbabwe” (The Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference et al., 2006). It lists the following core values for nation building which I summarise below:

1. Spirituality and Morality: Honesty and sincerity in dealing with others.
5. Respect for Other Persons: Humility and affirming the inherent worth of all persons.
6. Democracy and Good Governance: Equal opportunity for all to exercise their democratic rights.
7. Participation: Uphold the right and duty of all people to participate in the activities of their communities.
8. Sovereignty: Accept Zimbabwe’s sovereignty, but within the reality of global inter-dependence.
10. Gender Equity: Reconstruct gender roles to promote equity.
11. Social Solidarity and the Promotion of the Family: Acceptance that we all belong to one human family.
13. Justice and the Rule of Law: Accept that without justice there is no peace and harmony.

I have outlined the core values identified in the national vision document as they echo those discussed in the preceding sections. This paper has described the vision that Zimbabwean children's literature has regarding the new society. The ideals suggested above do not suggest that post-conflict Zimbabwe will be without tension. This would be a misreading of the concept of post-conflict society.

It is necessary to underscore the point that a democratic, peaceful and prosperous Zimbabwe is not a fantasy. It is a possibility that can come about if all political and other actors are willing to work together. By developing strategies and mechanisms for resolving conflict, members of the community can achieve peace and development.

Grand Vision, Stifling Context: Challenges Facing Zimbabwean Children's Literature

As this paper has demonstrated, Zimbabwean children's literature has grown into a significant area of study. Authors have played a major role in developing a culture of peace. Some authors like Alumenda took time to immerse themselves in the lives of children on the streets, thereby gaining insights into their challenges. However, there are a number of factors that have made it difficult for authors to be more effective social commentators. These are outlined below:

A Crippling Economic Environment

As indicated above, Zimbabwe's economy has undergone serious decline since the mid-1990s. It is characterised by high unemployment, hyperinflation, shortage of basic commodities and other features. In such an environment, artists suffer as members of society prioritise basic necessities like food, clothing and shelter. Only a few established writers like Chinodya and the late Alumenda have been able to survive solely on proceeds from the profession.

The economic environment also stifles creativity. It forces many authors to spend more time looking for basic commodities, like other citizens. When authors do not have peace of mind, their creativity is inevitably compromised. Writing becomes a luxury that is indulged in when “more important issues” have been resolved.

A Difficult Political Context

Zimbabwe's political terrain is highly charged. This makes it very difficult for artists to allow their imagination to wander randomly. There is a marked degree of self-censorship among the authors of children's literature in Zimbabwe. Mai Palmberg drew a similar conclusion in her analysis of the response by musicians to the country's crisis (Palmberg, 2004). As a result, most authors tend to avoid producing books that challenge the government in a direct way.

The government of Zimbabwe is very sensitive to criticism. A number of artists who engage in protest theatre have been harassed. Musicians who criticise the government's policies have been denied airplay on public radio stations. In this environment, authors of children's literature are careful to avoid confrontation with the government.

A Declining Publishing Industry

The early years of independence saw the publishing industry in Zimbabwe expanding rapidly. This corresponded with the government's significant achievements in education. However, as the economic situation worsened, the publishing industry was not spared. Some publishing houses have folded and this has affected children's literature. Also, the rapid decline of the Zimbabwe International Book Fair has deprived authors of children's literature of a platform where they could market their work. The decline of the Zimbabwe International Book Fair is due to the economic and political situation in the country.

The Low Status of Children's Literature

Authors of adult fiction tend to receive recognition, while those who write children's literature are, in most cases, hardly known. This is also the case in Zimbabwe. Authors of children's book are not popular. Society wrongly thinks that they engage in "childish" activities. This is unfortunate as one requires a lot of skill to write for children. The low status of children's literature can also be seen from the fact that very few emerging authors operate in this particular field.
**The Absence of a Support Group/Association**

Writing is an intensely personal pursuit. However, in a difficult environment, such as the one in Zimbabwe, authors of children’s literature would benefit from an effective support group or association. The Budding Writers of Zimbabwe and the Zimbabwean Women Writers are dominated by writers who have an interest in adult fiction.

**Suggestions for Strengthening Zimbabwean Children’s Literature**

Zimbabwean children’s literature has recorded some notable achievements. Its teaching on conflict resolution and peace shows its value to national development. It is important to find ways of addressing the challenges facing the discipline so that authors can achieve greater results. In the following section, I suggest strategies that could be adopted to improve Zimbabwean children’s literature.

**Greater Interaction with Children**

This paper has drawn attention to the importance of listening to the voices of children in developing children’s literature. It is tempting for adult authors to assume that they know the issues that are of prime concern to children. There is need for authors of children’s literature to interact more closely with children so that they can articulate the needs of children more effectively.

Although in children’s literature it is largely adults who try to capture the world as seen by children, it is necessary to promote children’s creativity. Zimbabwean children’s literature stands to gain if it supports children writing for themselves. If adults grant space to children, children do have the capacity to express themselves. They have clear ideas regarding their aspirations and the kind of society they would want to live in. Children’s literature worldwide needs to democratise and grant space to children’s voices.

**Investing in Children’s Literature**

Although the country is experiencing serious economic difficulties, there is need to continue investing in children’s literature. This is a task that should not be compromised as the future of the country depends on it. Children’s literature is critical for moulding character and imparting values for responsible citizenship. This paper has demonstrated how Zimbabwean children’s literature offers guidelines for peace building. It is important to invest in this area as this will ensure that there is a culture of peace in the country.

Investing in children’s literature implies recognising the value of the industry and supporting the publication of books for children. It also means finding resources to record traditional folktales and publishing such results. Writers who operate in this field must be supported, including affording them opportunities for exposure visits to other countries that have achieved more in the area of children’s literature.

**Creating a Conducive Environment**

The vision of a peaceful and prosperous Zimbabwe that is yearned for by children’s literature would support the growth of the industry. Authors of children’s books would thrive in an environment characterised by tolerance, dialogue and good governance. Politicians in Zimbabwe must recognise that artists have a duty to inform society and to criticise those in power. They do this in order to promote democracy and development. The victimisation of artists must be condemned by all those who believe in transparency and freedom of expression.

**Conclusion**

**Heaven on Earth: Prosperity and a World without Conflict**

Children in Zimbabwe and authors of Zimbabwean children’s literature dream of another world. This is a world without poverty, war, conflict, and HIV and AIDS. Harsh critics dismiss the optimistic ending of children’s stories as unrealistic. Stephen Chifunyise’s *The Ghost Car of Chegutu and Other Stories*, anticipates an era when gangs of thieves finally abandon their anti-social activities (Chifunyise, 2002). Works by Alumenda have happy endings when children on the streets finally own big houses and invite all the other children on the streets to live with them. Orphans become successful traditional medical doctors, and ambitious girls like Marita succeed in life. These artists compel society to dream of another possible world. They call for new visions of society, and encourage children and adults to work towards the realisation of such a world.

Children are not in a state of becoming. They already are. They know that a world characterised by poverty and strife does not allow them to experience...
life in its fullness. They are interested in struggles for sustaining peace as they are aware that peace is infinitely better than conflict. They challenge adults to join them in the struggles for peace as this provides an environment in which they can thrive.

Children’s literature in Zimbabwe has endeavoured to journey with children as they both imagine and work towards a peaceful and prosperous society. Such a society must be first dreamt into being. Children’s literature in Zimbabwe dares to imagine such a society and mobilises children and adults to aspire towards it. Based on values like tolerance, compassion, friendship, responsibility and others, it is possible to establish a peaceful society. The children of Zimbabwe and other African countries posit that such a world is possible: the challenge is for politicians and technocrats to translate this world into reality.
Bibliography


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Imagining a Peaceful Society: A Vision of Children's Literature in a Post-Conflict Zimbabwe addresses the marginalisation of children's literature from the discourse on conflict and peace building in Africa. By presenting a unique perspective to how writers of children's literature, and children themselves understand, grapple with, and envision peace in a post-conflict Zimbabwean society, this Discussion Paper calls attention to the immense, but largely untapped potential of literature as a critical resource for the promotion of peace in Africa.

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