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THE ZIMBABWEAN NATION
AS CULTURAL CONSTRUCT IN THE WORKS OF
JOHN EPPEL, DAMBUDZO MARECHERA
AND YVONNE VERA

by

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Nations and peoples are largely the stories they feed themselves. If they tell themselves stories that are lies, they will suffer the future consequences of those lies. If they tell themselves stories that face their own truths, they will free their stories from future flowerings.

The Centre for Science Development

Ben Okri, *Birds of Heaven*

I was greatly helped by the research and development leave granted by the University of South Africa.

My wife and children, to whom this work is dedicated, offered encouragement and moral support throughout the time this thesis was being written. I also want to thank my mother, Nzumba and her husband for their interest and encouragement.

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None of the people mentioned here is responsible for the flaws contained in this thesis.

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ABSTRACT

This study contributes to an understanding of how the nation is textualized in African literature. It offers readings of three Zimbabwean writers - John Eppel, Dambudzo Marechera, and Yvonne Vera - to show how the notion of difference underlies representations of the nation in their texts selected for study. It begins with an overview of a number of theories of the nation and, then, notes the importance of an approach that takes account of the interplay between nation and narration but also attends to the notion of difference in examining representations of the nation in literature. It justifies the choice of writers by arguing that John Eppel, Dambudzo Marechera, and Yvonne Vera can be regarded as representatives of their country's literature. All these points are made in Chapter One.

In Chapter Two, the thesis examines John Eppel's *The Great North Road* with a focus on the polyphonic structure of this text and its description of the settler culture. It shows that both these strategies disclose an othering of the natives, within Rhodesian culture, which is reflected in the imagined geography of the nation described in the novel. Selected poems from his collection *Spoils of War* (1989) are also analyzed as grounds for further exploring Eppel's questioning of Rhodesian identity.

In Chapter Three, the thesis reads Yvonne Vera's *Nehanda* as a text which represents an early colonial Shona community as a nation struggling to recover its cultural identity and land. It shows that Vera's representation of this nation is achieved through various strategies, such as, firstly, the inscription of her heroine as an intermediary between two

sections (the dead and their descendants) of what appears to be a 'family-nation' and, secondly, the inversion of the binary roles between the settler and the native.

Marechera's texts, examined in Chapter Four, reveal a representation of Rhodesia/ Zimbabwe as a concentration camp and, generally, a space of violence leading the subject to alienation. Such portrayals, the thesis argues, are consistent with Marechera's refusal to identify with his nation. The issue of the variety of his representation of Zimbabwe leads to an inquiry into the complexity of his representation of nation in his work, for example, questioning why notions of margins, displacement, and mimicry underpin such a representation.

In Chapter Five, the thesis returns to Eppel in order to consider how his novel *Hatchings* suggests the emergence of a modern Zimbabwean nation even as it concentrates on corruption in the Zimbabwean society.

In the concluding chapter, the thesis summarizes its main arguments. It stresses that the common thread running through all the texts selected for study is the imagining of the Zimbabwean nation as a community divided along some category of difference, thus validating the study's main assumption that difference informs representations of the nation in much of Zimbabwean literature.

Key terms: Zimbabwe(an) nation. representation. cultural space. difference. margin(alization). settler. native. John Eppel. Dambudzo Marechera. Yvonne Vera.

OPSOMMING

Die wyses waarop die begrip 'nasie' in literêre teksverband (en spesifiek in Zimbabwiese literatuur) figureer, vorm die ondersoek terrein van hierdie studie. Vertolkings van die Zimbabwiese skrywers, John Eppel, Dambudzo Marechera en Yvonne Vera word aangebied ten einde die verskille in hul onderskeie voorstellings van die begrip 'nasie' bloot te lê. Ter inleiding word 'n oorsig van die teorieë oor 'nasie' verskaf, waarna die belangrikheid van 'n benadering waarin die wisselwerking tussen nasie en vertelling (met inbegrip van die verskillende voorstellings van die begrip 'nasie' in die Zimbabwiese literatuur) ondersoek word. Die keuse van skrywers is geregverdig omdat John Eppel, Dambudzo Marechera en Yvonne Vera as verteenwoordigend van Zimbabwiese literatuur beskou kan word.

In Hoofstuk Twee word John Eppel se *The Great North Road* ondersoek en daar word gefokus op die veelstemmige kultuur in hierdie teks asook die beskrywing van 'n setlaarskultuur. Daar word aangetoon dat albei hierdie strategieë 'n "othering" van die inboorlinge in die breë Rhodesiese kultuur openbaar wat ook in die denkbeeldige geografie van 'nasie' in die roman reflekteer word. Geselekteerde gedigte van sy bundel, *Spoils of War* (1989) word ook as verteenwoordigend van hierdie bevraagtekening van die Rhodesiese identiteit ontleed.

In Hoofstuk Drie kom Yvonne Vera se *Nehanda* aan die beurt as 'n teks waarin die vroeë koloniale Shona-gemeenskap as nasie 'n stryd voer om hulle kulturele identiteit en grond te herwin. Vera se voorstelling van haar heldin as 'n tussenganger tussen twee entiteite

(die gestorwenes en hul afstammeling) wat as 'n 'familie-nasie' voorkom asook die tweeledige omgekeerde rolle van setlaar en inboorling dien as voorbeeld van hierdie stryd.

Hoofstuk Vier sentreer rondom die geskifte van Marechera waarin Rhodesië/Zimbabwe as 'n konsentrasiekamp en 'n geweldsruimte wat tot vervreemding lei, voorgestel word. Sulke voorstellings hou verband met Marechera se weiering om met sy nasie te identifiseer. Die vraagstuk na die verskeidenheid van sy voorstellings oor Zimbabwe leit tot die ondersoek van die komplekse voorstelling van 'nasie' in sy werk, wat onderskryf word deur begrippe soos marginalisering, verplasing en koloniale bespotting.

In Hoofstuk Vyf word terug gegaan na die werk van Eppel met die doel om te kyk op welke wyse sy roman *Hatchings* die verskyning van 'n moderne Zimbabwiese nasie voorstel te midde van korrupsie in die Zimbabwiese samelewing.

Die laaste hoofstuk van die verhandeling is 'n opsomming van die hoofargumente, wat beklemtoon dat die gemeenskaplike draad wat deur al die bestudeerde tekste loop, 'n denkbeeldige voorstelling van die Zimbabwiese nasie as 'n verdeelde gemeenskap is. Die kernopvatting is dus dat dié diversiteit in die gemeenskap gereflekteer word in die eksemplariese tekste van Zimbabwiese literatuur wat in hierdie studie bespreek word.

Sleutel terme: Zimbabwe nasie. representasie. kultuur. ruimte, verskil. grens. marginalisering. setlaar. inboorling. John Eppel. Dambudzo Marechera. Yvonne Vera.