

***The Uncertainty of Hope*** by, Valerie Tagwira, (Harare, Zimbabwe: Weaver Press, 2006), 368 pp., \$21.95.

Valerie Tagwira's first novel, *The Uncertainty of Hope*, won the 2008 National Arts Merit Awards (NAMA). Tagwira, a obstetrician and gynecologist by training, provides a glimpse into the struggles, triumphs, and lives of Zimbabweans in Mbare, a high-density suburb of Zimbabwe's capital, Harare. Set immediately before and after the 2005 government-led forced removal and destruction of high density settlements throughout the country known as Operation Murambatsvina (Drive out Rubbish). This event, which Zimbabwean refer to as a 'tsunami of destruction' led to the internal displacement of hundreds of thousands of people in a clear and blatant violation of international law for political retribution according to the United Nations Special Envoy for Zimbabwe, Anna Tibaijuka. The novel chronicles the lives of two courageous women and several other characters determined to survive in a country beset by economic, political, and social collapse. Poignant, relevant to issues of social justice, it salutes the indomitable Zimbabwean survival spirit and a national character to 'make a plan' and 'somehow survive' despite the circumstances. Expressing disbelief that the Zimbabwean government would unleash a wave of terror and destruction on its own citizens, Tagwira writes of the protagonist disassembling her own shack (142), "The sound of collapsing wood gave her a deep, strangely satisfying feeling. She was in total control... The riot police edged closer... Onai ignored all of them. She did not care. She was a woman possessed."

The themes of HIV AIDS, sexual violence, economic injustice, friendship, social class, hope, and betrayal are intricately and inexorably interwoven in the lives of the main characters centered on the experiences of Onai Moyo, a market vendor and mother of three children and her best friend Katy Nguni, a black market currency trader and market vendor. Other characters include: Tom Sibanda (a young businessman and farmer); Faith, his girlfriend and law student; Emily, Tom's sister and a health professional; and Mawaya (a beggar who turns out to be Onai's financial salvation).

During times of economic and social meltdown, which Zimbabwe has endured since 1997 and which was accelerated by the chaotic fast-track land reforms after 2000, altered and in many cases shattered the lives of ordinary Zimbabweans. Already living in a precarious situation, the economic collapse coupled with the authoritarian government's disregard for the dignity of human life comes through unequivocally in this novel. This novel, written by someone intricately familiar with the situation on the ground, is factually and chronologically accurate in terms of the sequencing of events, the names of places, and the capturing of the nuances of the country's socio-economic descent into the vortex of politically self-induced catharsis. As services collapsed, people's lives became one of daily survival. Tagwira writes (287), "Zimbabwe was surely a nation of queues. What was the joke? 'We have high IQs,'" "Very soon we might progress

to sign-posted queues: registration queues, bread queues, petrol queues, sugar queues, cooking-oil queue... Her weak attempt at humour made her feel slightly better." In a subsequent chapter (317), Onai thinks to herself after getting into the sewing business, "Being in a position to earn money once again gave her a fresh taste of independence and a sense of renewed optimism. Everything was slowly starting to fall into place. The shortages and the endless queues didn't bother her so much, now. They had become a way of life, even entertaining social events."

In one part of the book, Onai, the protagonist is beaten by her womanizing husband Gari thus requiring hospital treatment. Tagwira's apt description of the paltry and insufficient services, provided at costs that no ordinary person could afford, by Harare's medical establishment led to the protagonist's indignation. Onai, who is forced to pay the bills after Gari's death from AIDS, is engulfed in an inescapable fatalism. The declining quality of an increasingly unaffordable medical care often leads to the economic damnation of those people whose lives are already on the precipice of ruin. Tagwira writes (307), "Onai felt growing anger. It was unfair that she had incurred the first bill after Gari has assaulted her. It was even more unfair that he had died... leaving her with this colossal bill from his stay in the ICU. If only he'd treated her better... she wouldn't have minded being obliged to pay the bill." Onai a traditional woman, cared for Gari in his last days despite the fact the he had created a "small house" and shacked up with another woman." She muses (308), "When would life get better? When, when, when?"

The socio-economic travails of the characters in Valerie Tagwira's book provide an accurate depiction of the fluid situation in Zimbabwe at that time, which continues to this day. She sheds light on a dimension of existence beyond the statistics of inflation, unemployment, AIDS casualties, and the drumbeat of negative news coming from Zimbabwe. The heroic actions of the characters in this book constitute explanations for how and why Zimbabwe has not completely imploded. Her rendition of the struggles of ordinary Africans is a refreshing alternative account of Zimbabwe, a contrast to the standard Eurocentric writings of white Rhodes and Zimbos.

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