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URBAN REALITIES IN TENDAI HUCHU'S *THE HAIR DRESSER OF HARARE*

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**Abstract**

*Urban life and experiences have diversely occupied the context of African literary creativity. The delineation of experiences into thematic thrusts draws a great deal from veracities caused by urbanisation. The city has always remained and occupied the central position in literary thought and creativity. This generally implies that most expression of experiences by many African writers continue to draw their creative imagination from metropolitan environment(s) and experience. Thus, such realities like the dearth of basic infrastructure, the despicable housing structures all provide a glimpse to the complicated dynamics of urban life as represented in African fictions. Using Realism as a theoretical framework, this paper examines the mysteries of city life in *The Hair Dresser of Harare* to expound how Tendai Huchu represents typically, the social life of multi-cultural codes, relationships, fashionmongers, etcetera, co-exist. The paper also takes a look at a detailed appraisal of the economic life of the city to decipher how the juxtaposed civic life and financial system of the city thrives, and how this afflux works side by side with political activities and the life of politicians in urban areas. The conviction in this evaluation is that the social, economic and political spectrum of Africa's phenomenology is critically depicted in fiction to allow for an introspective acknowledgement of Africa's quandary realistically as symbolised in African novels.*

**Keywords:** Urbanism, Urban life, multi-cultural codes,

metropolitan, city life.

### **Introduction**

The urban novel or what has lately been called the 'city novel' has remained a strong discursive reality in both the production and reception of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century fiction. This implies that literary criticism has recently treated the phenomenon of the urban depictions as something to do with the processes and indications of 'modernity'. In this regard, urbanism in literary representation stems from the discourse that transcends the particularities of behaviours of people in such physical features as place, lifestyle, gender, sexuality, amidst social, economic, and political spheres of urban spaces. Perceived to be a privileged environment, the city is seen as a space in which the most important social and historical processes of a people are revealed through literature. Bart Keunen corroborates this view when he posits that

the urban novel, as it was construed first by writers and then by critics [...] usually stood for a confrontation with the processes and symptoms of 'modernity' overall — a confrontation that was easily taken to transcend the particularities of place, race, lifestyle, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or national origin that have come to complicate and refine academic discourse in more recent years. (105)

Thus, writers have a good reason to emphasise the exceptional social status of city life in novels. According to Richard Lehn, the city is a spatial entity with sociological consequences (35). Thus, literary representations of the urban novel (or studies about it) seem to do much more than normal descriptions of the urban space; it is a representation of the microcosm that metonymically refers to major happenings and developments in the social world being represented through its interactions with characters in such spaces. This infers that, in the depiction of the features of urbanism in fiction, the critic is bound to realistically analyse the totality of dearth of material and ideological misgivings inherent in the city.

There abound a plethora of activities that plague the urban space forming part of the representation of the whole of the city space. The city space is “a store of voices as well as gold. All sorts of dubious characters reside in the city. Politicians, and prostitutes, landlords and musicians, thieves and quack doctors live together and struggle to know the magic word that will open the door for the gold stored in the den” (Umar Abdurrahman, 174-5). Umar's outlook on features of the urban space aligns with how Madeline King views urban description in fiction. Madeline says the urban space “centres around low-income inner city dwellers whose metropolitan lives are survivalist. Stories [in this category]

involve sex, prostitution, violence, drugs, homelessness, gangs, and crime, and usually have fast-action plots and

[...] of conflicting narratives to depict homosexuality eventually contributes to bring about a striking depiction of a society in a crisis” (2). Thus, what Leroux needs to know is that, placing *The Hairdresser of Harare* in a social context needs to first acknowledge that urban realities are inherent in the novel. Leroux goes further to ask questions such as “How does this gay character fit into the fictional universe? What are the strategies at play to present him as an everyman and not a tragic figure in a hostile environment?” (2). Answers to this question must include the vivid description of the symbolic context of 'universe' as used by Leroux in his context. This is because urbanity is prominent in the universal nature of the earth basically.

Another view is that of Gibson Ncube. Ncube avers that “through a sociologically oriented reading of *The hairdresser of Harare*, [...] it is possible to analyse more than just identity concerns but various other underlying phenomena such as the effects of power (social, economic and political), culture and religion” (9). This postulation allows for the possibilities of the aim of this paper. In essence, the 'other underlying phenomena' so intended can only be recognised alongside the urban spaces where they emanate and co-exist. Abdou Ngom identifies social and environmental features relevant to the context of this paper. According to him “[n]ot only cars and buses are not roadworthy to the

say the least, (*sic*) but, more importantly, overcrowding is a daily treacherous occurrence despite being a disaster waiting to happen with unintended consequences” (606). This features mentioned in their reality are the basic urban actualities that this paper aims at examining to ascertain their influence and contribution to the fall and upswing of the urban spaces through the actions, inactions and reactions of the characters who inhabit these urban spaces.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper adopts realism as its theoretical framework. Basically, realism in literature, is an approach that describes life generally without idealisation or romantic subjectivity in texts. Although realism is not limited to any one century or group of writers, it is most often associated with the literary movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century France, specifically with the French novelists Flaubert and Balzac. George Eliot introduced realism into England, and William Dean Howells introduced it into the United States. Realism has been chiefly concerned with the common places of everyday life among the middle and lower classes, where character and attitude are a product of social factors and environment is the integral element in the presentation of life's complexities in literature. Realism in literature has been the theory or practice of fidelity to the accurate representation of real life experiences without idealisation.

Realism in art and literature is an endeavour to portray life as it is. It shows life with reality, omitting nothing that is ugly or painful, and idealising nothing. The realist writer's most important function is to describe as truthfully as possible what is observed through the senses. This implies that the writer in his or her effort to re-present the society, s/he is keeping in mind the basic reality while narrating a piece of art.

However, in the process of selecting and presenting their material, the realists cannot help being influenced by what they feel or think alone. True realism depicts man and society as complete entities instead of showing merely one or the other of their aspects. It is not just an echo but the real perspective of an individual or society or jointly, a voice of their being. Thus, from this perspective, Tendai Huchu, in his realistic evaluations of Zimbabwe depicts the city as not just a background against which the lives of ordinary people interrelate, but also of how the individuals are presented as significant illustrations of the aspects of the way of the social life in Zimbabwe. This is because every aspect of personal life is radically affected by the quality of the general life of all humans. Thus, if using realism as a literary critical tool entails revealing personal and general problems, which finally leads to the representation of the entire society or mankind as a whole, then, there is need to energise

enthusiasm in the necessity of applying it as a critical framework for human uplift and development as done by Tendai Huchu in *The Hairdresser of Harare*.

### **Synopsis of Tendai Huchu's *The Hair Dresser of Harare***

*The Hair Dresser of Harare* is a novel that tells the story of Vimbai, a skilled hair dresser and single mother, who is deservedly revered as the best hair dresser in Harare. Being the centre of attraction in Mrs Khumalo Hair and Beauty Salon in Zimbabwe, Vimbai reclines in the exciting conviction and self-confidence that she is unequalled. She carries with her an air of ineffable pride and amplitude which makes her break certain ethics at the salon. Her status of invincibility is threatened by the arrival of a young man, Dumisani. His short stay at the salon consigns Vimbai to a second class expert, which drives her wild with disbelief and anguish. With his expertise and lavish demeanour, Dumi conquers the hearts of clients who once patronised Vimbai. Dumi and Vimbai eventually become very close friends. With a vacant room at her apartment, and with Dumi having accommodation challenges, Vimbai takes him in as tenant. This proximity stirs some strong emotions between them.

As time passes, Dumi invites Vimbai to his brother's wedding and introduces her to his family as his fiancée. His



family is happy at the affair and welcomes Vimbai most affectionately. Vimbai wonders why Dumi's family will accept her even though she is a single mother. She also wonders why Dumi prefer the salon job when he is from such a wealthy background. Vimbai eventually discovers through entries in his diary that Dumi is gay and that he has a homosexual affair with Minister M's husband. Irritated by this finding, Vimbai takes the diary to Minister M who sends a group of thugs to attack Dumi. Dumi is badly beaten, but survives miraculously, leaving Vimbai with an admixture of grief and guilt. Vimbai later helps to make travel plans for Dumi where he would live in exile to escape the harsh, homophobic Zimbabwe.

### **Urban Realities in Tendai Huchu's *The Hair Dresser of Harare***

The novel begins with an inordinate description of the composition of what primarily constitutes the city life, architecture, and composition. The portrayal discretely identifies the major constituents of city existence and experiences. Businesses strive on the basis of expertise and a heavy adaptation of advertisement techniques. Expertise in services breeds a wave of support and patronage from sundry; thus, commitment in this expertise becomes a trademark that customership and patronage exists. This is what Khumalo Hair and Beauty Treatment Salon in *The Hair*

*Dresser of Harare* uses to commandeer the attention of Amai Ndoro who, once she became a habitu  of the saloon, they “never needed to advertise again” (8). The reality of joblessness and job seeking remains paramount. As expertise, patronage and businesses boom, the charge for gainful employment and empowerment persists in earnest. 'Vacancy' becomes an economic activity hunted by unemployed with ruthless potency by every means. *Grapevine* becomes the life wire for effective information transmission fundamentally struggling to replace the official method of 'announcements' and 'notices'. This is likely due to the reality that the informal space remains the most sought as government jobs remain nearly out of reach by the population that seek jobs in private industries. In this reality too, there is the easiest possibility of job losses as there is the firm reminder that as an employee, “you're just a worker. One day you're going to get fired ...” (10). This feature of the city also qualifies it for its description as a maker and breaker of its citizens. This raw veracity seems to keep the employees on their oars to enable the sustainability of updating the dynamics of expertise in order to keep businesses afloat and in high demand. In the business of hairdressing, the narrator has the jinx in control: “your client should leave the salon feeling like a white woman” (9). This metaphorical transformation that the narrator is capable of remains what

drives the wave of partnership to her expertise and her employer, “Mrs Khumalo understands this and that’s why she would never fire [her]” (9). Thus, in the city, businesses tend to survive on the way the experience is used to build expertise to woo patronage; the way Dumisani briskly turns Matilda’s hairstyle to fit the contours that her face carries. This singular action gained Dumi the job that plenty have been calling the saloon to apply for.

The novel acknowledges that crime and immorality are a paramount feature of urban spaces. The desolating effect of crime on city populace cannot be left out in the evaluation of urban lifestyle. Its toll on gender remains a remarkable feature that needs to be rated with discrete sensitivity and responsiveness because the psychopathy that arises from the influence of this also remains immense especially from the complexities re-presented by Tendai Huchu. For instance, at the mention of the possible reality that the burglars “...worked 24/7 and a house full of women made for easy pickings” (18) leaves the female gender vulnerable in the scenario of crime in municipalities. Worse still, the presence of the “sleeping powder” (18) intensifies the sophistication that complements the intentionality of those who perpetrate this crime in metropolises. All of these point to the circumstances that practically relate to survival drives typical of inhabitants of urban spaces. Thus, as these drives exist,

there is also the consciousness of security that beclouds the mentality of inhabitants. Urban life places some level of psychosocial pressures on its inhabitants to the point that others become peculiar about the security of their spaces; others are impressed by its effect on their psycho-social *selves* and “how it has driven a wedge” (18) in their daily routines. This is visible in the streets where hawking is the major preoccupation for even minors who have possibly become dropouts as a result of pecuniary incapacity. Albeit, they are poised to make ends meet at any expense. The streets are full of what fundamentally connects the urbanites - their trivial, yet, quotidian living, which provides their immediate and material gains and interests. The reality of this is presented thus:

[t]his lively bustle of the townships can never be replicated in the low density areas .... The streets were full of people moving in both directions .... A cobbler sat on a street corner [...] [t]here were vendors selling freezits, *maputi*, maize cobs, fruit, eggs, and vegetables. It seemed as though there were more vendors than purchasers. With no jobs available everyone tried to sell something, just to eke out a living. Almost every second house had a wooden shack near the gate; tuck shops, only a little classier than the vendors with their makeshift stalls. (23)

Immorality is also presented as an emotional or psychological characteristic of the urban people. At the Forward in Faith Ministries, the Pastor observes how the multi-cultural codes of fashion mongering by city dwellers constitutes immorality in the city causing it to fall from moral utopia, thus; “[t]here are no more moral values in people's hearts. Just coming to this church this morning, I saw many young women wearing mini-skirts....They are harlots like Jezebel [...]. People are having sex outside of marriage” (52). The complexities here re-presented indicate that the perceived moral authority of the city lies in the psychological derives of most urban dwellers as a permanent urban culture. By this style, representing the city becomes a crystallisation point of resentment against moral degeneration and decadence in order to rebuild the psyche of bibliophiles for social development generally. Thus, exposed vices emanating from the deeper complexities of the modern urban life become a way to control the upsurge and dominance of immorality in the urbanity. Vimbai's mental disorientation when she discovers Dumi's sexuality typifies this functionality of literature to the naturalistic being of man as she says that Dumi's hidden action: “... is the sort of thing that is so far outside of nature it can never happen. Even animals have sense enough to tell which one is female and which one is not” (115). This self-posed derogatory

sexual identity that Dumi chooses is a way of understanding the urban place as a rapidly transforming and expanding space which in turn generates fears and anxieties for decadence to thrive.

In exploring urban lifestyles, Tendai Huchu develops the scenes in this fiction to depict the profound rapport between romantic idealism cultivated by real social conditions in the midst of fecund materialism. This is the state of emotional build up that the narrator has with Phillip Mabayo. The narrator is swayed into the ginormous show of wealth that has become the trade mark of Phillip Mabayo - her new lover - whose lifestyle is typical of the pre-eminent rural idealism which basically articulates the age-old urban tradition perceived and felt as a sophisticated modern sensibility of city life. In urban areas, romance causes many youth to aspire for quixotic love which they are rarely able to realise because of poverty and youthfulness. This emotional status infers them to the realisation that the ideal cannot be realised, as the realised is eventually not the ideal; as can be inferred in the narrator's countenance of defiance to Mabayo's initial advances to her: "I didn't care. I had a boyfriend, the same age as me and even though he owned nothing, I loved him with the deluded passion that only youth can offer" (20). Basically, what transpires between Vimbai the narrator and her sister translates the dichotomy of city life and family

relationships in moral terms of good and evil. Criticism can further examine this dichotomy in terms of family and love relationships; what exists in normal urban settings. Ironically, the gulf between good and evil in this realisation is balanced by the veracity that “[o]nce you've had a little nibble of that world, you can't help but want more” (22).

To a large extent, Huchu is interested in the interiority of urban life. He rarely describes physical contour of urban space, but when he does, the interior space of the urban city is seen to contain detailed depictions of how human relations are grappling with the physical and psychosocial urban features to achieve human flourishing. For instance, Vimbai's experience battling with traffic illustrates this thus:

It took me time to cross the street because the traffic light was not working and no one wanted to give way. Cars, or rather their drivers, pushed and hooted madly trying to cross Jason Moyo Avenue. Heroically, I ran and weaved my way across the mayhem, knowing that pedestrians would always get short shrift. It was not a feat for the faint-hearted. I stopped to catch my breath leaning on the metal railings that fenced Town House. The old building stood in its glory as if the colonial times were mocking the failure of our independent era. It was

still the City Council headquarters. The colourful ... flag drooped impotently in the smog-filled, stagnant atmosphere. (39)

The presence of these urban features described in this space focuses on interiority in order to foreground the fact that urban representations depicts much of the morbid social and human landscapes. Elitist residential areas have “mansion[s] with ... thatched roof, oiled beams, and built of granite and glass. The floors were tiled in marble and there was a fishpond with goldfish in the entrance hall...” (66). Through characterisation, Huchu explicates human relations and interactions amidst these juxtapositions when the authorial voice reveals that “[i]t surprised me how with only ten per cent of the population employed, the streets were full of people bumping past each other first thing in the morning. I passed a vendor whose business consisted of selling single mints and single sticks of cigarette as I turned into Robert Mugabe Road” (39). Evidently, these characters are forced to deal only with one another on the spaces where urbanity runs in their veins. Huchu's depictions of urban realities in his action includes the complex and multifaceted socioeconomic and cultural dimensions of the city and urban life. This is shown in the description of a scene at the mall where



[i]ts immaculate pinkish walls and the litter-free pavements made it feel like something from a first-world Mediterranean country. The people who shopped here also had a sophistication about them. They wore beautiful clothes and ate ice-cream. There were so many shops, all fully stocked. It was a woman's paradise. The only thing that put me off were the prices. I couldn't believe that people paid them, but there were plenty of customers with heaving shopping bags making their way to their flashy cars. (61)

This also shows the interaction between characters and the city and what characterises modern urban life. This urban representation reduces the city to a form of interiority. Obviously, the city exists vaguely in the background, implicated only in metonymic details such as cars, telephone, theatre shops, and etcetera.

The presence of the city space and its urban life in Tendai Huchu's representation depicts a somewhat stereotypical characterisation of certain urban peculiarities consciously constructed to showcase the contrasting dichotomies of elitism and modesty. This is symbolic of the need to show the existent realities in distinctions between social 'Others' based on the nature of urban cultures and to re-present the

existence of the social laws of economic power eminent in the urban spaces. For instance, in Vimbai's case, the choice of drinking coffee or tea became a profound irony which became only achievable through the turnaround she has experienced from her relationship with first Phillip Mabayo, and then, Dumi who belong to high class families. Basically, seeing the city as a maker and breaker of its inhabitants is also a metaphysical sense of critiquing the city and urban life. This also implies focusing on the effects of urban life in such manner as alienation, anxiety, social indifference and isolation, and a moral degenerating agent of the society. This critique, is also indirectly couched in the idealism that the city and its lifestyle remain a 'maker' of the inhabitants in it. Thus, the idea of the city as the host of knowledge where everyday life activities are inserted comes to play. All of these draw us to the realisation that the emerging plural spaces of the city produces new forms of knowledge that need to be explored and examined for interpersonal interaction and introjections.

### **Conclusion**

Criticism on African literature has shown that African writers usually employ the approach of depicting the social, economic and political realities in the continent in an elusive way like some 'real' world outside the text. This is done through practical descriptions in a manner that addresses the

society directly or indirectly. This is why Tendai Huchu's depiction of urban realities in *The Hair Dresser of Harare* has registered its efforts in modern African literature to come to terms with the realities in urbanity in its fundamental effort towards socioeconomic, political and cultural transformation. These urban depictions are imaginative; yet, they are the realities that humanity needs to keep sentient for reshaping the inadequacies prevalent in the African urban society.

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