

SOUTH AFRICAN PRESS'S CONSTRUCTION OF NEWS ON ZIMBABWE'S OPERATION MURAMBATSVINA AND POLITICS OF REPRESSION

Introduction

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This paper discusses the representation of Operation *Murambatsvina* by three South African newspapers (*Sunday Times*, *Sunday Independent* and *The Mail & Guardian*). The paper argues that the representation of the operation revealed that it was a consequence of poor Zanu-PF leadership and, perhaps, an indication of a state on its way to failure. The paper also discusses how the South African Weeklies utilized the representation strategies inspired by Willems's¹ study which uncovers how the linguistic structures, as opposed to structural ones, are utilized by journalists to address the pressures related to broader constraints in news production and how this influences representation. Broader political and economic structures present journalists with a variety of constraints that impact news production in a number of ways.

Willems argues that the media often used “othering” strategies to represent Operation *Murambatsvina*. One prevalent “othering” strategy used was humanistic rhetoric. The latter successfully constructed victims of the operation as women, children and opposition supporters, therefore discrediting government's reasons for the operation and the plight of those who support the ruling party also caught up in the operation; news narratives were littered with the plight of these ‘victims’. This observation was more of a journalistic ideological

1 Willems talks of how the press uses ‘othering’ strategies some of which include : simplifying and personalizing events in Zimbabwe and sometimes even ethnicizing them and marginalizing other relevant players in the crisis. See W. WILLEMS, 2005. Remnants of an Empire : British Media Reporting on Zimbabwe. *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* © 2005 (University of Westminster, London), Special Issue, November 2005 : 91-108.

dilemma than a deliberate determination to be biased. It presented a perfect opportunity for scrutinizing two sets of journalistic ideological assumptions that makes news production superficial and sensational – those of time and objectivity.

The pressure related to the former ideological assumption (time) is offloaded by using certain linguistic devices consequently helping journalists deal with the demands of the latter (objectivity). This is how it happens ; since journalists don't have time, they tend to report 'both sides' of the story caring less about the content of what they say. For the journalists, reporting on both sides means being objective to 'balance' the story. Objectivity is a myth that is meant to address the journalistic concepts of neutrality and fairness when journalists are working under pressure².

Therefore, any approach that seeks to understand how news on Operation *Murambatsvina* in Zimbabwe is represented, should inspect the linguistic structures and devices used to construct versions of 'reality' such as those uncovered by Willems³ ; that was the burden of this paper. The selected South African newspapers used these devices to represent social upheavals in Zimbabwe in a manner that closed their discursive framework. This brings to the fore critical questions about journalistic ideologies and how such ideologies influence news production within the context of Zimbabwe's cultural historicity and political-economy. The most interesting issue about the newspapers' coverage of Zimbabwe is that their journalists are not based in Zimbabwe which makes reporting problematic. Owen and Purdey's work titled "*International News Reporting : Frontlines and Deadlines*"⁴ gives a clearer understanding of the ethical dilemma and challenges faced by South African journalists when reporting on Zimbabwe. Covering operation *Murambatsvina* was important due to the discourses surrounding socio-economic and political sanitization of Zimbabwe post-colonial position viz-a-viz ZANU-PF's quest to retain legitimacy to rule in the context of renewed questions of civilian property rights and liberty in Zimbabwe. Dubbed operation get rid of trash, it equated informal settlement with precolonial power structure memory that endeavored to keep "black poverty" out of sight. The Operation sparked attention and criticisms from the South African,

2 J. BIGNELL, *Media Semiotics—An Introduction*. Manchester, New York : Manchester University Press, 1977. K. TOMASELLI, *Appropriating Images – The Semiotic of Visual Representation*, New York: Intervention Press, 1996.

3 W. WILLEMS, *Remnants of an Empire : British Media Reporting on Zimbabwe*. *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* © 2005 (University of Westminster, London), 2005, Special Issue: 91-108.

4 J. OWEN and H. PURDEY, *International News Reporting : Frontlines and Deadlines*. Malden, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

predominantly white-owned, press basically because the press in Zimbabwe is largely state owned and therefore uncritically pro-government. The extensive reporting by the South African Weeklies brought forth questions related to the conflict between local and international consensus regarding democracy in Zimbabwe and the underlying competing discourses about the country's future with the press embroiled at the center and therein inviting academic inspection.

Contextualizing Operation *Murambatsvina*

Operation *Murambatsvina* was seen by many observers as a political strategy employed by the ruling ZANU-PF to monopolize power in the context of the crucial 2005 elections. Therefore, the fact that the March 2005 election, which was considered very critical in determining the future of ZANU-PF in Zimbabwe, coincided with the operation is not surprising⁵. The Government embarked on the controversial clean-up exercise (Operation *Murambatsvina*) soon after winning the 2005 elections. So how should the Operation be understood ? The meanings of the operation can be rationalized from the premise of the discourse of dirt in the Zimbabwean colonial and post-colonial context⁶. The main thesis advanced about these social disturbances code named *Murambatsvina* is that they reflected a post-colonial struggle for hegemony in the context of an increasingly unpopular ruling party. The interpretation of *Murambatsvina* in Shona means getting rid of trash⁷ which invited questions related to : "what constitutes trash, who is trash and who should get rid of trash ?" The interpretation meant that the operation was getting rid of trash, people included. The event was presumed to clean up the filth where dirt was used as an excuse to moralize the state's hidden political agenda of monopolising and clinging to power. Nevertheless from the operation, it was clear that there were binary opposite ideas being advanced regarding dirt and cleanliness with their roots in colonial, post-colonial, and nationalist constructions of purity and impurity, health and disease, as well as morality and immorality⁸.

Consequently, Operation *Murambatsvina* drew parallel views making it difficult to come up with a single definition. It has seen parallel

5 T. CHARI, *World Apart : Representation of Operation Murambatsvina in Two Weeklies* in M. VAMBE, (eds). *The Hidden Dimensions of Operation Murambatsvina*, Harare : Weaver Press, 2008, pp. 105-117.

6 M. VAMBE, *The Hidden Dimensions of Operation Murambatsvina in Zimbabwe*, Harare : Weaver Press, 2008.

7 C. MUNHANDE and L. MATONHODZE, An Assessment of the Impact of Operation *Murambatsvina* (Operation Restore Order) on the Informal Market : A case of Zimbabwe's Bulawayo Central Business District (CBD) Flea Market Operations, in *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa*, 2008, Vol. 10 No 3 : 1-14.

8 Ibid

views being advanced in a more subjective rather than objective manner with one such view, most critical of the government, opining that it is a symptom of various government anxieties about the loss of control of the urban population irrespective of political affiliation. Contrarily, the government advanced the argument that there are simply trying to control the disorderly or chaotic urbanization, inappropriate urban agricultural practices and black markets⁹. However, whichever way it is looked at, the Zimbabwean government's 'good intentions' did not stop the public from accusing it of employing various forms of violent tactics during elections to maintain the status quo.

Such accusations brought forward discourses of human rights and democracy whereby rights of the victims of *Murambatsvina* were used to condemn the operation in a bid to lobby for democracy. Questions were raised on how forceful urban displacements that breached human rights and infringed on personal liberty could claim sanity in an environment that openly caused human suffering. So what were the real intentions of the state when carrying out the operation? Of course, from a human rights discourse, one cannot buy the idea that the state simply wanted to bring sanity and order by getting rid of dirt and illegal activities in the informal settlements such as the black market. This is due to the fact that people were denied their sources of livelihood and therefore such actions defeated the state's good intentions. It also made the accusations from the civil society operating in Zimbabwe, that the state wanted to displace the urban population in order to disrupt voting patterns during elections, appear credible.

What is well understood by many observers is that elections in Zimbabwe are usually controversial, therefore Operation *Murambatsvina* should be seen within the context of the long history of ZANU-PF's failed efforts to establish its rule as hegemonic – that is, more through consent than coercion and threats. A regime's loss of legitimacy to rule captures the complexity of the struggle for power anchored on the creation and distribution of wealth through economic policies that would engage citizens in a meaningful way and keep them out of the kind of discontent, quite often, ignited by large scale poverty¹⁰. The operation captures the complex relationship between economic policy regimes in Africa and their ability to create wealth for their citizens whereby the latter would guarantee those regimes legitimacy explaining why Mugabe

9 A. K. TIBAIJUKA, 'Reports of the Fact Finding Mission to Zimbabwe to Assess the Scope and Impact of Operation *Murambatsvina*', 2005. Retrieved from www.kubatana.net, 17 March 2010.

10 D. MOORE, Coercion, Consent, Context : Operation *Murambatsvina* and ZANU-PF's Quest for Hegemony, in M. VAMBE (Ed.) *The Hidden Dimensions of Operation Murambatsvina in Zimbabwe*, Harare : Avondale, 2008. pp. 25

was determined to rule through brutal force irrespective of people's resentment as argued by Moore in the following excerpt :

The operation is an understandable consequence of ZANU-PF's failure to establish rule through hegemony rather than a sudden and almost inexplicable eruption of violence and inability to deal with economic crisis. It should be seen as an almost logical extension of the techniques of a party that has consistently failed to rule Zimbabwe through consent rather than force or its possibility. Indeed, a closer inspection and historical analysis of the ruling party itself suggest that the leading elements within it rarely reach a position of 'minimal hegemony.' This lack of consensus spreads throughout the party and into society in manifestations of violence.

The Zimbabwean media extensively covered the operations in favor of the government due to their orientation (state owned), something that would have benefited this study if it chose to include local Zimbabwean newspapers, considering that the three South African newspapers selected did not cover the operations extensively. However, the nature of the South African press (privately owned, market driven and free) was a more important consideration that motivated the study by virtue of their largely white ownership and the desire to see reforms in Zimbabwe out of genuine fears of a spillover effect of the upheavals in Zimbabwe into South Africa. In addition, the limited coverage given by the South African press compared to the Zimbabwean press helped the study locate the stark difference in their ideological leanings. One would easily establish the polarized nature of their coverage. The South African press seemed to be driven by rightist discourses of human rights, property rights and civilian liberties characterized by democracy as opposed to national patriotic history, anti-neoimperialism and pan-Africanism advanced by the State media in Zimbabwe in attempts to sanitize Operation *Murambatsvina*. The polarized nature of public discourses about the operation were laid open by South Africa's and Zimbabwe's media¹¹ (*The Sunday Mail* and *The Standard*) with some of their reports going beyond the acceptable levels of permitted partisanship in ethical journalism which effectively works to alienates sections of readers. In Zimbabwe, the *Standard* largely presented operation *Murambatsvina* as a policy bankruptcy on the side of the State

11 The polarity was between the government owned media, *The Sunday Mail* (published by Zimbabwean Newspaper Limited, a government owned publishing company) and privately owned newspaper, *The Standard* (published by Zimind publishing group and owned by Trevor Ncube). Chari's (2008) "Worlds Apart: Representation of Operation *Murambatsvina* in Two Zimbabwean Weeklies" in the Hidden Dimensions of Operation *Murambatsvina*. p. 117 shows how different newspapers in Zimbabwe covered the operation. The coverage reflected their ideological positions.

that invited state terror, state apartheid and crime against humanity, as a way of consolation, in the contexts of diminishing hegemony to govern. The *Standard* newspaper attempted to shape public opinion to the disastrous consequences of *Murambatsvina* by devoting significant space to its impacts. *The Sunday Mail*, on the other hand sanitized and legitimated the operation calling it a noble exercise for the restoration of law, paving the way for the introduction and implementation of a critical government program of reconstruction¹².

In the context of such competing discourses emerged questions of human rights fronted through ideas of the worthy victim embodied by informal traders's responses to the operation in Zimbabwe¹³. The argument is that even though informal settlers/street vendors appeared useless (dirty), since they were assumed to be outside Zimbabwe's formal economy, they invented useful ways of survival in the system for their own benefit well captured by Jeremy Jones in "The Rise of *Kukiya-kiya*" or Zigzag economy¹⁴. Instead of bowing in defeat, they went back to the city and reconstructed their entrepreneurial structures in defiance. In addition, instead of participating in organized resistance following government crack-down, they intelligently avoided such resistance as much as possible and worked out solutions for their own benefit as argued below :

A progressive encroachment of economic styles and tactics formerly relegated to the urban social margins ... activities formerly associated with down-class urban youth and 'part-time' female work have rapidly become the source of livelihood for much of the urban population and of government and big business. This has involved new understandings of space and time, characterized by a shift from 'straight' transactions, conducted according to known rules and moral codes, to 'zigzag deals' cut 'in a particular time and place'¹⁵.

This shows that informal settlers think correctly about their situation and the circumstances surrounding them unlike the manner in which they have been represented by formal discourses of politics and human settlement. He argues that such mastery of local politics transformed them from mere victims to sophisticated equals of those

12 T. CHARI, *World Apart : Representation of Operation Murambatsvina in Two Weeklies* in M. VAMBE, (eds), *The Hidden Dimensions of Operation Murambatsvina*, Harare : Weaver Press, 2008, p. 109.

13 F. MUSONI, *Operation Murambatsvina and the Politics of Street Venders in Zimbabwe* *Journal of Southern African Studie*, 2010, Vol. 36 No. 2 : 301-318.

14 J. L. JONES, 'Nothing is straight in Zimbabwe.' *The Rise of the Kukiya-kiya Economy 2000-2008*. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 2010, Vol. 36. Issue 2 : 285-299.

15 A. HAMMER, J. MCGREGOR, L.B LANDAU, Special Issue : *The Zimbabwe Crisis Through the Lens of Displacement*, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 2010, Vol. 36 Issue. 2: 271.

with the 'formal' mentality. The latter is accused of undermining the informal sector's contribution to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP)¹⁶. The informal economy had become "a significant base" for 'social reproduction,' indeed survival, as the formal economy experienced doldrums. Notwithstanding its role as a survival net, the government appeared not to have understood the need to promote the informal economy. Instead, it tended to be hostile towards it through operations such as *Murambatsvina*¹⁷

Theoretical Conceptualization and Methodology

This paper used critical political-economy theories of the media and theories of news production in the context of cultural studies to examine how the three South African newspapers represented Operation *Murambatsvina* in Zimbabwe¹⁸. While critical political-economy is concerned with the macro-level factors that influence representation such as broader political ideologies, media ownership and control, advertising, the perception of audience as a market and news as a product in the "free market," theories of news production are concerned with the micro-level factors that influence the process of news production. These factors includes : institutional mechanisms, work practices and ideologies of journalism as a profession. Cultural studies, on the other hand, looks at the potentiality of multiple meanings due to the polysemic nature of language.

Methodologically, the paper used a directed approach to content analysis¹⁹. In this approach, Operation *Murambatsvina* was identified as a code (theme) or object of analysis from existing literature on social upheavals²⁰ in Zimbabwe as part of a wider study²¹ that also

16 F. MUSONI, Operation *Murambatsvina* and the Politics of Street Venders in Zimbabwe *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 2010, Vol. 36 No. 2 : 301-318

17 L. SACHIKONY, *The Impact of Operation Murambatsvina/clean-up on the Working People in Zimbabwe. A Report Prepared for the Labour and Economic Development Research Institute in Zimbabwe (LEDRIZ)*, 2006, (Online) Retrieved 30 May 2012 from www.archive.niza.nl

18 K. WILLIAMS, *Understanding Media Theory*. London, 2003. ARNOLD ; J. CURRAN, 'Rethinking Media and Democracy.' In Curran, J. (eds.) *Media Organisations in Society*. London: Routledge, 2000., pp. 19-65 ; J. CURRAN, 'Rethinking Media and Democracy.' In J. CURRAN, (eds.) *Media Organisations in Society*. London: Routledge, 2000, pp. 19-65.

19 H. HSIEH and S. SANNON, Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, 2005, Vol. 15: 1277 - 1288.

20 Other upheavals in Zimbabwe included cholera outbreaks and the influx of Zimbabwean into South Africa. See OGENGA 2010 ; OGENGA, 2012.

21 This paper is based on a wider doctoral study : "The Misrepresentation of the Zimbabwean Crisis by South African Weeklies, 2000-2008." The thesis has been approved for the award of the degree of doctor of philosophy in media studies by the University of Witwatersrand, South Africa.

included economic and political variables. The directed approach has been referred to as deductive category application²². Theoretically, the study conceptualized news media content as a product of construction through representation. The theories of representation used in this paper provided predictions about "Operation *Murambatsvina*" as a code identified and selected for analysis. The directed approach, for example, recognized the social production of news through the consideration of the theories of news production. The general elements and processes of news production are premised on the idea that news is shaped by being set in relation to a specific 'consensus' in the society. Events that go against the grain of the societal consensus are deemed newsworthy.

Stories related to the operation in the three newspapers were randomly selected in the years that they occurred (2005). Two stories appeared in *The Mail & Guardian*, one in *The Sunday Independent* and another one in *the Sunday Times*. The first story appeared in *The Mail & Guardian* June 10 to 16, 2005 edition titled : "Out in the Cold"²³. The story was sub titled : "Last Month the Zimbabwean Government Launched a Crackdown on 'Illegal' Houses and Businesses. The Thousands Displaced Have Got Nowhere to Go and Little Hope for the Future." The article was accompanied by a photograph of a weeping middle-aged woman and a child in the background next to a demolished house.

The second story²⁴ appeared in *The Mail & Guardian* May to June 2, 2005 edition titled: "Bob Plans R3m Bash." The story was sub-titled, "As Harare Burns, Mugabe is Planning a Lavish Anniversary Celebration." The third story appeared in *The Sunday Independent* July 2, 2005 titled: "The Horror of Bob Mugabe's Final Solution – We Must Clean the Country of the Crawling Mass of Maggots, Says the Police Commissioner as Hundreds of Thousands are Put Out in the Cold"²⁵. The fourth story appeared in *The Sunday Times* June 26, 2005 titled "Destitution and Despair in the New Zimbabwe Ruins"²⁶. The story used a readily available source identified by name and age to dredge up the discourse of suffering. The story quoted Kaunye complaining about his destroyed flower stall at Africa Unity [in central Harare]. The narrator states how she "meandered through rubble and household property, strewn about chaotically, as if a malevolent god had unleashed his wrath upon those

22 P. MAYRING, Qualitative Content Analysis. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 1(2), 2000. Retrieved May 15, 2009, from <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/2-00/02-00mayring-e.htm>

23 H. MUTASA, Out in the Cold. *Mail and Guardian*, Johannesburg, June 10-16, 2005, pp. 24

24 Godwin, G. 2005. Bob Plans R3M Bash. *Mail & Guradian* Johannesburg, May- June 2, pp. 12

25 L. JAMBAYA, "The Horror of Bob Mugabe's 'Final Solution.'" *Sunday Independent*, Johannesburg, July 2, 2005, pp. 9.

26 D. NTULI, "Destitution and Despair in the New Zimbabwe Ruins." *Sunday Times*, Johannesburg, June 26, 2005, pp. 18.

people.” The story uses repetition to reinforce the discourse of pain, suffering and hopelessness, and blames the operation for homelessness and joblessness. It was actually puzzling that despite the public outrage about Operation *Murambatsvina*, this study randomly came across only four stories about the operations in the three South African newspapers. The latter however revealed a totally different ideological perspective to the narrative about *Murambatsvina* as pointed out earlier explaining the inherent polarization of Zimbabwe’s post colonial narrative.

The directed approach revealed that the operations occurred sometime between June and July, 2005 as pointed out by the scholarly literature on Zimbabwe. The methodological approach used involved actual counting. Counting was done to quantify the number of times Operation *Murambatsvina*, as a theme identified for study, appeared in order to make qualitative analysis of the context in which it was used to find out the underlying meaning beyond the frequency of occurrences. This meant that quantitative content analysis was initially used to pave way for qualitative content analysis of the three selected stories in the three newspapers between June and July, 2005 for an in-depth understanding of the meanings behind the operation as discussed in the findings below.

Representing Operation *Murambatsvina* and Politics of Repression

One fascinating issue about Operation *Murambatsvina* is how the three South African newspapers simplified the operation through the utilization of humanistic rhetoric and the notion of the worthy victim. This kind of representation was meant to secure consent by winning the hearts and minds of the audience in order to divert their attention from the complexities of the operation. In such a strategy, overt bias is hidden behind the mask of sympathy using modes of addressing the reader where victims of Operation *Murambatsvina* form the major feature in the news. A good example of how victims of the operation featured in most stories appeared in *The Mail & Guardian* June, 10-16, 2005 story “Out in the Cold”. The story reports how the Zimbabwean government launched a crackdown on ‘illegal’ houses and businesses displacing thousands. It highlights the plight of the victims, women and children, by blowing Chengatayi’s (a mother) plight out of proportion. This is done by devoting a significant amount of space to the impact of the clean-up operation on her family and on diverse sections of the society. This is a good example of a case where the press chose one aspect (selection), inflated it into the defining characteristics (magnification), and then

established it as the most easily recognizable image (reduction). See the following excerpt from the story :

At first she did not believe it. Reality hit when she heard the howls of her women neighbors, as their dwellings were ripped apart by the metal-mouthed machines. She managed to haul most of her belongings outside before the bulldozer arrived at her door... Until they can find somewhere else to go, Chengetayi's family sleeps out in the open. Her eyes are bloodshot from lack of sleep. She stays awake at night, keeping an eye on her children and their belongings²⁷.

The story is further accompanied by a photograph of a weeping elderly woman and a little boy next to a demolished home with a caption that reads : "A Woman Weeps in Kambuzuma, Eastern Mashonaland, amid Demolished Homes and Businesses." One would expect the photograph to be of Chengetayi and her family owing to the fact that the entire news narrative talks about her plight. Unfortunately, a photograph of another subject is used. In addition, the photograph is taken by a local Bishop meaning it was not an original image of a journalist on the ground and like several other photographs used by the South African Weeklies, it was just borrowed for humanistic rhetoric to reinforce the argument that the operation affected the poor and the most vulnerable. Worthy victims, such as Chengatayi and her family, "are given generous coverage characterized by gory details and quoted expressions of outrage and demand for justice." The eye witness-account narrative technique is normally deployed to support what the newspaper reporters or editors want to dredge-up thus enabling news reports to bring out a lot of details about the horrifying experience of the victim. Most of the time, the narrator is probably the 'victim' of the clean-up operation who has first-hand experience²⁸.

Haru Mutasa, the narrator, combines her report with first-hand experiences of Chengetayi to form a narrative sequence that dramatically and emotionally represents the operation in order to draw the sympathy of the readers. In so doing, the narrative "glosses over the pertinent dimensions of the event or issue"²⁹. In addition, the fact that Haru Mutasa works for *Aljazeera* and not *The Mail & Guardian* is problematic. It reinforces the argument that *The Mail & Guardian* does not have their own journalists on the ground in Zimbabwe, therefore, stories written about that country lack proper context, since the paper

27 N. NDLELA, *The African Paradigm : 'The Coverage of the Zimbabwean "crisis" in the Norwegian Media.'* In *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, 2005, Special Issue : 71-90.

28 M. VAMBE, *The Hidden Dimensions of Operation Murambatsvina in Zimbabwe*. Harare: Weaver Press, 2008.

29 Ibid

depends on foreign wire service or correspondents³⁰. But this is not to argue that all South African newspapers lack correspondents on the ground³¹. Some newspapers have a correspondent in Zimbabwe but not a photographer. The lack of a photographer was the problem, especially when journalists wanted to represent the situation in that country using images making editors face all kinds of questions about the authenticity of their reports. Nick Dawes, editor in chief of *The Mail & Guardian* explains the charges they face regarding photographs : “We face a charge that we don’t have a dedicated photographer in Zimbabwe. We do have a dedicated correspondent in Zimbabwe but not a photographer so we have to make do with what we can get from the wire and from agencies and so on.” The reliance on wire services for photography is equally problematic, since photographs play a very important role in news construction. For journalists to take a reliable and convincing photograph, they must be present at the scene of the event, however, this was impossible for South African journalists since Zimbabwe’s media environment was too hostile.

The implications of the latter affected the quality of journalistic reports captured about Zimbabwe by the three South African Weeklies. Their news stories were not informed by actually having correspondents or photographers in Zimbabwe. The lack of photographers on the ground also betrayed their reporting since news usually makes claims to reality, and therefore, it has to be neutral, objective and reflective of what really happened in the ‘real world.’ It does this well when supported by images to account for what happened in order for it to claim legitimacy for their reality as argued below :

News photos operate under a hidden sign marked ‘this really happened, see it for yourself.’ Of course the choice of this moment of an event against that, of this person rather than any other, indeed the selection of this photographed incident to represent a whole complex chain of events and meanings is a highly ideological procedure. But by appearing literally to produce the event as it really happened, news photos repress their selective/interpretative/ideological function. They seek a warrant in that ever pre-given neutral structure, which is beyond question : The ‘real’ world. At this level, news photos

30 The lack of reliable correspondent in Zimbabwe makes it difficult for the international media to relate well to the events unfolding in that country. See Ndlela, Nkosi (2005). *The African Paradigm: The Coverage of the Zimbabwean Crisis in the Norwegian Media*. London : University of Westminster. See also Willems, W. (2005). Remnants of an Empire : British Media Reporting on Zimbabwe. *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* © 2005 (University of Westminster, London), Special Issue, November 2005 : 91-108.

31 J. OWEN and H. PURDEY, *International News Reporting: Frontlines and Deadlines*. Malden, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

do not only support the credibility of the newspaper as an accurate medium. They also guarantee and underwrite its objectivity, that is, they neutralize its ideological function³².

The Mail & Guardian May 27 to June 2, 2005 story, "Bob Plans R3m Bash," reported how 'residents watched in anguish as police swooped on and arrested more than 9 500 people as part of Operation *Murambatsvina* in Glen Norah Township.' It narrates how the police destroyed tuck-shops to the ground and burned carpenters' stalls 'alongside roads leading into opposition strongholds.' Female victims of the operation are identified by name and a description of the nature of the destruction is given using metonyms such as 'metal mouthed machines' that conjure ideas related to body politics and pain inflicted on the victims by state terror. A good example of state terror was reported in *The Sunday Independent* July 3, 2005 story, "The Horror of Bob Mugabe's Final Solution." The story is an example of the use of humanistic rhetoric where the government is quoted arguing that it "must clean the country of the crawling mass of maggots". This ambitious agenda turned out to victimize the citizens by putting hundreds of thousands of them in the cold. See excerpts from one of the victims quoted in the story:

The house I spent all my fortune on is gone. My family is homeless. It all happened so quickly. One minute we heard rumors about our house being demolished, the next we were hurriedly packing our family's belongings since the riot police were moving in fast. We watched helplessly in the winter cold as bulldozers razed our houses. The house I had spent four years building was destroyed in the blink of an eye.

The story "The Horror of Bob Mugabe's Final Solution" continued with the same trend of highlighting the plight of women and children by quoting from *The Daily Mirror* (intertexts) to capture the impact of the operation on Shamiso Makamba. See the excerpts from a victim of the incident quoted below :

Our lives have been destroyed...we don't know what to do next... I have nowhere to go with my children I have spent four days sleeping in the cold. Even if I get a place to live, I do not have the money to pay rent and transport to go to work. My husband is unemployed and I have three children who are all in school...I have been made homeless in my country of origin. Where can I go for refuge ?

32 M GUREVITCH, J CURRAN & J. WOOLACOTT, *Culture, Society and the Media*, London, New York : Rutledge, 1982.

The story is accompanied with a photograph that reinforces the discourse of human rights from the perspective of the most vulnerable. It compares the operation with the assault during apartheid in South Africa. The caption reads “A Boy goes Through the Rubble of a Demolished Business Center Last Week...The Assault Which is Reminiscent of Apartheid’s Forced Removals has Left Hundreds of Thousands of People Jobless and Homeless.” Newspapers characteristically deploy the first person narrative technique to provoke different kinds of emotions from the audiences in order to bring to their attention the kind of government they are dealing with. The government is described as a monster capable of trampling on its victim, while the victims are projected as “good natured” and “helpless.” The newspapers’ main argument is that state violence against innocent citizens in Zimbabwe must stop, but since it is difficult to win local support for a popular uprising certain propaganda strategies had to be used to create a picture, through communication, in the mind of the reader of the battle between two binary opposites (good versus evil) to manufacture consent. Quite often such communication approaches employed by the mainstream press do not come without consequences, one of them being that they diverts public debate about important policy issues which makes those issues escape public scrutiny and therein delay the necessary reforms as argued below :

The objective of the strategy is firstly, to secure consent by winning the hearts and minds of the audience. Secondly, it diverts the audience’s attention from other important aspects of the issue at hand by appealing to their sympathy. Thirdly, it masks overt bias by pretending that what the reader or viewer is getting is ‘objective.’ Such representations mask the complexity of Operation *Murambatsvina* and create an impression that it was mounted solely to punish the most vulnerable segment of the populace³³.

The discourse in the stories appearing in the three selected newspapers centered on the fact that the operation was a strategy to crush the opposition. However, the reality is that supporters of the ruling party were equally affected. The story “Out in the Cold” argued that the Movement for Democratic change believed the operation was a ploy by the ruling ZANU-PF to punish urban residents for voting for the opposition party in recent parliamentary elections. Such representations are potentially misleading because they lead to assumptions that the motive of the operation was to simply crush the opposition and yet even

33 Ibid (Chari 2008 : 114)

supporters of the ruling party were affected. This kind of superficial coverage denied the opportunity to holistically unmask the motives of the operation.

Most stories regarding the operation blamed the government for persecuting opposition supporters. For example, *The Mail & Guardian* story "Bob Plans R3m Bash" reported that "Police on Wednesday destroyed tuck shops to the ground and burned carpenters' stalls alongside roads leading into the opposition ground." The report suggests that the police had seemingly razed all tuck shops before finally reaching "stalls alongside roads leading into the opposition ground." Alleging that the police only selected property belonging to the opposition presumes the existence of exclusive opposition designated areas in the city. Such a presumption defies the logic behind demography in human settlements. Human beings interact, socialize and settle in patterns that, more often, defy abstract political or municipal segmentation. Nevertheless, the fact that the three South African newspapers simplified and personalized Operation *Murambatsvina*, should not obscure the popular conviction that they were obviously conducted violently. The question is whether or not the operation was a deliberate ZANU-PF political strategy to cling to power following real threats from the opposition as noted in the following argument :

The violence is... symbolic and punitive, signifying ZANUPF's determination to maintain power and social control in the face of a population who (probably) didn't provide a majority vote for it, with areas who voted for the opposition, MDC the worst affected. The security personnel [sic] moved from destroying small businesses to peoples' homes, making at least 200,000 people homeless... and costing the lives of the weak and vulnerable including two babies who had been reported as frozen to death in the winter³⁴.

The arguments above, where people freeze to death, are well captured by the *The Mail & Guardian* June 10 to 16, 2005 story "Out in the Cold" described earlier which explains how violent the operation was. Arguably, the state used the operation to terrorize its citizens (including babies) in a dialectic approach meant to instill fear, under the guise of maintaining law and order but thereafter, subordination (disempowerment). While that may have been the case, the problem is how the three newspapers covered the situation. It would have made more sense for the papers to report more using photographs in

34 M GUREVITCH, J. CURRAN and J. WOOLACOTT, *Culture, Society and the Media*. London, New York, Rutledge, 1982, 342.

the period that the operations were said to have occurred to establish the trend and reveal that to readers. However, the three newspapers only managed to do four stories in the period that coincided with the operation (June –July 2005) that were not very comprehensive, which makes any keen reader question the authenticity of their conclusions. Nevertheless, as pointed out earlier, this should not obscure the reality that the operations were violent and undermined human rights. The latter would convince anyone that Operation *Murambatsina* was a political strategy that ensured that those affected did not risk voting for the opposition well described below :

Already, vendors' licenses are being reissued in Harare – but only to those who have a valid ZANU-PF card. Similarly, in those areas that have been razed to the ground, such as White Cliff Farm, land is already being re-pegged, and the sites are being allocated to members of the army and police. Furthermore, people from MDC supporting cities are being displaced into ZANU-PF strongholds in rural areas, where it is quite simple – those who do not support ZANU-PF will not be allowed access to food this winter³⁵.

Seemingly, the government displaced the urban opposition supporters in order to deny them their sources of livelihood. In such a helpless situation and within the context of their 'new homes' (ZANU-PF strongholds in rural areas), the government used food as a weapon to buy their consent. This dialectic approach used against those displaced was meant to create a food crisis among opposition supporters, now residing in ZANU-PF strongholds, with the aim of starving these newcomers into submission by taking advantage of their plight. So what compelled Mugabe's regime to resort to such authoritarian tendencies ? Authoritarianism was most likely with the first regime of Economic Structural Adjustment Program (ESAP) in sub-Saharan Africa. The ESAP³⁶ of 1991-96 slowed down the economy by providing a momentum for lack of competitiveness in key manufacturing sectors while causing inequality through overburdening the poor and promoting uneven development. The political and economic takeover of the state by private rent seekers ensured power was maximized for the survival of personal interest and protection of "little business empires".

35 Sokwanele in S. BRACKING, *Development Denied : Autocratic Militarism in Post-election Zimbabwe*. *Review of African Political-Economy*, 2005, Vol. 32, Issue 104-105 : 342.

36 A. S. MLAMBO, *The Economic Structural Adjustment Program : The Case of Zimbabwe : 1990-1995*, Harare : University of Zimbabwe Publication, 1997 ; L. M. SACHIKONYE, 'Whither Zimbabwe ? Crisis and Democratization', in *Review of African Political Economy*, 2002, Vol. 29. No. 91, 13-20.

In such a volatile macro-economic environment, the state tends to resort to authoritarianism to protect the political and economic interests of the privileged and those in power positions in order to maintain the status quo. ESAP accelerated primitive accumulation of wealth that happened rapidly and variedly with severe consequences to Zimbabwe's political- economy going forward making the country fit well into the common narrative about failed states in Africa characterized by moral bankruptcy. Undoubtedly, no regime would willingly accept the severity of their 'moral bankruptcy' or other circumstances they are faced with regarding its political-economy. That is why, despite public outrage and protest about the character and conduct of most regimes in sub-Saharan Africa concerning human rights and democracy, it's business as usual for them. The government in Zimbabwe, in concert with that of Mbeki, devised various discourses to cover up the inhumane actions in that country courtesy of Operation *Murambatsvina*. The popular neo-imperialism discourse and pan-Africanism is a case in point that leads this discussion to the next sub-section.

Government's Justifications for the Operation

In a display of pan-African solidarity and the spirit of good neighborliness, Mbeki's and other African governments through the African Union refused to publicly criticize Mugabe on many issues. The AU argued that national governments were at liberty to conduct affairs inside their territories without outside interference in the context of the operation that was launched in 2005. While Mbeki and the South African government was torn in between a tight balancing act of attempts to "show firm disagreements with Zimbabwe policy and keeping fellow Africans happy," Mugabe's government was busy subverting the discourse around the political motives behind the operations³⁷. The ruling party justified reasons for the operations which it considered 'successful.' Although innocent Zimbabweans were seriously affected by the ruthlessness of the operation, such misrepresentations masked its complexities. However, as it has been pointed out already, the selected newspapers employed humanistic rhetoric, repetition and rhetorical questions to criminalize the operation. The story that demonstrated how the ruling party justified the operation was The *Sunday Times* story titled "Destitution and Despair in the New Zimbabwe Ruins". It reported that one main reason for the operation was "service delivery" while

37 V. GRAHAM, How Firm is the Handshake ? South Africa's use of Quiet Diplomacy in Zimbabwe from 1999 to 2006, in *African Security Review*, 2006, Vol. 15 Issue 4 : 113-127.

other reasons were “the black-market economy, which was thriving in the informal sector, was threatening the formal economy, and that the informal settlements had become hotbeds for crime”. This paper would, however, like to underscore the contribution of the informal market in the formal economy. Even though, the government could have been right about the idea of crime, basically due to the difficulties faced by police when accessing the informal settlements, the contribution of the informal market to the mainstream economy should not be taken for granted. First and foremost, it is important to appreciate that informal settlements were inherited colonial nightmares in which the then colonial regimes invented through policies of marginalization and segregation. The situation was worsened in post-colonial Zimbabwe by a black majority government that desired to be urbanized ‘the western way’. That desire explains government’s selective use of Zimbabwe historiography by applying pan-African, anti-neocolonial ideologies only when suitable³⁸. Informal settlements are actually a living testimony to the failure of urban planning and the inability of the current government and their lack of imagination that makes them stick to the footprints of colonial masters, but walking backwards blindfolded, evidenced in the mushrooming of peripheralized, peri-urban ghettos.”

In the story “Destitution and Despair in the New Zimbabwe Ruins,” the government argued, through the City Council official, that they lost accountability due to the increasing number of illegal traders who did not pay for service delivery. However, one of the traders, a victim of the operation, Roselyn Machaya, took a swipe at the government for seeking to benefit from what they have categorized as illegal structures. The meta-narrative and the motive of the operation were therefore contested through the victim’s plight. Narratives of victims demonstrated how these ‘operations’ serve to steal from the poor to reward and resource government uniformed personnel with the spoils of the election. The government claimed the vendors were trading illegally yet most were licensed, including the 3,000 Bulawayo small traders whose City Council pleaded with the government to respect the licenses it had issued. So who was accountable for the fact that ordinary people trying to make a living in their own country ended up being threatened, intimidated and displaced from their stalls by a government that is supposed to create an enabling environment for business? This brings to the fore issues of accountability and political responsibility, hotly contested topics in post-colonial Africa.

38 T. RANGER, Nationalist Historiography, Patriotic History and the History of the Nation : The Struggle over the Past in Zimbabwe. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 2004, Vol. 30 No 2: 215-234.

The lack of accountability on the side of the government can be qualified due to the chaotic nature of politics and elections in Zimbabwe. However, it is worth noting that accountability and political responsibility are more serious issues that need attention in many African countries. They are symptoms of institutional malgovernance and corruption. The latter necessitated the need to ensure that the poor are out of sight lest it remind the elite of the reality of poverty and underdevelopment as argued below :

Disdain for the poor is partly related to the conservatism that they have rediscovered from the erstwhile white elite : a desire for poverty to be out of sight. It also has a contemporary frame, where the continued poverty of the urban informal sector has become a constant reminder of industrial decline, formal sector unemployment and the contraction of the economy brought on by the retreat of the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) since 1998³⁹.

The idea of citizenship has been narrowed by the ESAP induced liberal nationalism where the urban poor have been ignored and seen to have lesser claims on citizenship because of the relative gap between them and the 'rightful' inheritors of the nationalist revolution (the landed elite). At the same time, the citizenship rights of the white minority have been increasingly denied. From this backdrop, then it is clear that the operation had deeper motives and far reaching consequences that demanded a more nuanced analysis. While the journalist in the story "Destitution and Despair in the New Zimbabwe Ruins" went an extra mile striving to be objective about what 'really' happened from the government's and victim's point of view regarding the operation, she needed to have nuanced the context of the situation. She did not go further to confirm the claims made by her sources. Take, for example, the City Council's official arguments that "they had lost accountability due to the increasing number of illegal traders who did not pay for service delivery".

The official should have been put to task to statistically proved these claims and demonstrated how the council dealt with or was planning to deal with the "increasing number of illegal traders" or, at least, indicate the exact number of 'legal traders' in the area. This calls for further research, an approach that demands that the reporter goes against the grain of the journalistic ideology of time and its pressures— these are some of the serious ideological challenges facing journalists when

39 S. BRACKING, *Development Denied : Autocratic Militarism in Post-election Zimbabwe*, in *Review of African Political-Economy*, 2005, Vol. 32, Issue 104-105 : 341-357.

constructing news apart from the idea of press restrictions. In such a context stories such as “Destitution and Despair in the New Zimbabwe ruins” and many others discussed in this paper, cannot help the reader establish the truth or the real motives of Operation *Murambatsvina*. Time pressure and deadlines ensures journalists are more concerned about the event as it is rather than its historical trajectory.

Conclusion

This paper contends that the selected South African newspapers used techniques of “othering” to represent Operation *Murambatsvina* in Zimbabwe. One prevalent technique used was humanistic rhetoric which constructed the idea that women, children and the opposition supporters were the only victims of the operation. Simplification of Operation *Murambatsvina* through narratives of the victims was meant to condemn the operation in order to direct public opinion to the disastrous consequences by devoting significant space to its impact. This kind of representation was meant to secure audience consent by obscuring other important aspects of the issue at hand by appealing to their sympathy. It was also meant to mask overt bias by pretending that what the reader or viewer is getting is objective while in real sense, journalists lacked enough time to contextualize stories about the Operation. Such misrepresentations mask the complexity of *Murambatsvina* which complicates any attempt to understand its real motives and consequences. The government’s real intention is therefore spared from in-depth scrutiny by the superficial manner in which the operation is covered.

The pertinent issue in the conclusion is whether or not discussions about Operation *Murambatsvina* in this paper are enough to safely conclude that the government in Zimbabwe lost its legitimacy to rule. Is there enough evidence that the government was really desperate to hold on to power which would technically lead to conclusions that Zimbabwe is a failed state? Well, the three newspapers did little to provide us with such crucial evidence. However, their coverage, even though not extensive and nuanced, can be merited for problematizing an event that will be forever remembered in the history of Zimbabwe’s political conflicts between the ruling party and the opposition since it appeared the operations were directed at opposition supporters in order to intimidate and disenfranchise them. Therefore, the state was in

full control of the situation and even boasted over the 'fact' that it was bringing sanity and order in urban settlements in the clean-up exercise. The burden of proving if the states justifications for the operation was true or false was a crucial responsibility that the press failed to handle.

Therefore, it is difficult for this paper to slot Zimbabwe into one or more obvious categories of states but it is certainly not an emerging power like South Africa. If Zimbabwe is described as a state in transition then questions still remain on where to ? Zimbabwe can also not be compared to failed states like Somali due to the fact that the state has continuously exercised virtual monopoly of force and it is totally in control of its territorial jurisdiction as evidenced through various operations. The conclusion is that Zimbabwe has failed to deliver "social and economic goods to all its citizens in reasonable quantities, but even that is not enough to bracket Zimbabwe with more obvious examples of state failure where there is clear evidence of impending or actual breakdown in both political and economic dimensions of statecraft"⁴⁰. Zimbabwe is perhaps an autocratic state on its way to complete collapse depending on how the state can handle the prevailing circumstances regarding issues of governance, avoid social upheavals such as Operation *Murambatsvina*, and reclaim its legitimacy to rule. ■

40 OBE, S. J. E. 'Point Man' on Zimbabwe : South Africa's Role in the Crisis. The Roundtable : *Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs.*, 2006, Vol. 95, Issue 384 : 191-199