

Rethinking the poetics of urban informalities in fiction: Reconstructing the city space in times of crisis

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Abstract

This paper considers ways of reading and theorising urbanity and the urbanites' coping strategies for survival. The prime motivation is to demonstrate their apt capacity to transform the urban space and utilise it to better their lives. Using resilience theory and focusing on the profundity of agency, the paper takes literature, particularly the short story set in urban Zimbabwe during the crisis of the past decade to focus on the characters as actors with the capacity to innovate and respond to difficulty with ingenuity through urban informalities; strengths we can all learn from.

Introduction

Even in the best of times, the artist is constantly reaching beyond the present; the severity of Africa's present situation of crisis must urge our artists even farther into their version of new life... inspired by the belief that given the severity of the current crisis of life for African peoples, and given the intuitive and cultivated ability of the creative artist to monitor and accurately capture the complexities of any human situation, ... writers should provide not only important insights into various dimensions of the problem, but also and perhaps even more crucial, subtle but reliable pointers to probable solutions. It is to the artists we must turn for a creative but ultimately realisable vision of the future (Anyidoho, Busia & Adams, 1999, p. ii).

The above quotation persuades one to seriously ponder over the words of Walter Rodney (1981) when he exhorted the African world to put more prominence in the desire to organise rather than simply agonise. Enshrined in this age-old wisdom is the desire for fortitude and resilience in the quest for solutions to issues that confront humanity, and realise that despite the level of difficulty within a situation, therein also is enveloped opportunity. This has been demonstrated and is corroborated by the lives of African-American slaves whose resilience, tenacity, inventions and heroic exploits still colour our present day world; all this in spite of the drudgery of the slave institution. Mention can be made of how this alter-history is articulated in the autobiographies of the likes of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs (Mlambo, 2011a).

This paper seeks to offer critical routes to understand the techniques of survival needed to make it in the city during periods of tempestuous changes that threaten to make and do the urbanites in Africa as represented through fiction. The aim is to explore and analyse the fictionalisation of coping strategies in crisis hit urban Zimbabwe and illustrate how literary

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texts can narrate resilience and inform us about critical concerns to handle change, adversity and uncertainty. Three short stories set in contemporary Zimbabwe will be explored and the prime motivation is to explore how urbanites are constantly remaking public space, reclaiming it and redefining it through their lived experiences so as to make it and better the self. The prime motivation is to positively explore the expression through fiction of the very multiplicity of agency at work, how this reveals another emergent discourse of public space reconstruction which suggests new forms of 'insurgent citizenship' – particularly how improvised selves and versions of hope attest to the ubiquity of agency and strategies that see city slickers move beyond survival. For as the German-Swiss poet and novelist, Herman Hesse once remarked, 'I have always believed, and still believe, that whatever good or bad fortune may come our way we can always give it meaning and transform it into something of value'. Therefore, rather than bemoaning the dystopian post-colonial city which has become reminiscent of the contemporary Afro-pessimisms, the extraordinarily energetic creativity of the urbanites, the tenacity and resilience of people who inhabit the city space will be amplified, clarified and celebrated.

Contextualising the dialectic of urban resilience in Zimbabwe

To put this argument into proper perspective, it is critical that one contextualises it in the fold of the events that shaped the Zimbabwean socio-political, economic and cultural sphere in the past decade (1999-2009), that culminated in what has been termed the 'Zimbabwe crisis'. With inflation in August 2008 at 23100%, unemployment rate at more than 90%, a protracted political impasse and incessant food and fuel shortages, and virtually almost everyone a billionaire in the Zimbabwean dollar terms, this 'worst case scenario' is unparalleled by any. This context has thus become the sine qua non definition of the post colonial crisis condition because in every respect it encapsulates the nervous condition where things fall apart in epic proportions. There is already exhaustive knowledge for theorising, describing and accounting for this 'crisis' (Nyambi, 2011, Mlambo, 2011b, Mlambo and Nyambi, 2011, Zegeye, 2010 and Bond, 1998). The grand word 'crisis' has been ably clarified beyond doubt and cynical knowledge created around it has almost attained a closure in the description of the Zimbabwean socio-sphere. Theoretically informed and knowledgeable as this profusion of literature has and still is, it however smacks of a rabid fundamentalism that attempts to homogenise cultural variety and difference (Zegeye, 2010, Ashcroft, n.d.).

The point of departure is in offering disclosures to the pluralities of responses, to further the description of city life by showing how multiple possibilities abound. This argument is centred on redirecting the focus from the over trodden and generalised, apathetic emphasis of victimhood and show how some people have moved beyond the crisis and how they reclaim the city as a place for multiple opportunities and possibilities (Zegeye, 2010, Mlambo, 2011). This is especially insightful and enriching, given the background where the city in much of African fiction has been portrayed as a threatening location, disorienting and potentially corrupting (Sharpe, 1999, Henderson, 1999, Nuttal, 2004). This has resulted in a gross and en masse downplaying of the potential the urbanites have, their capacity to informally reclaim the private and public spheres in the city and make them yield to them for survival.

This image of the city calls for a re-reading of the representation of the contemporary city space and in the context of that crisis in Zimbabwe, propel us to ask how these sites of struggle can be ideologically and pedagogically informing. For, without downplaying the extremities which spelt the crisis and life in urban settings, there is undeniably a need to shun single-factor explanations and look closely at the individuals themselves who were caught up in that crisis, and emerge with a new language, a new discourse of how the

ordinary people had to tenaciously gone beyond survival, their survival techniques and adaptation means, and how we can all learn from them.

In setting out to evaluate the representation of the techniques needed to make it in the city with its fluid social order and how people reconstruct the city space in the time of crisis, there is a need to come up with a relevant literary theory, cognisant of the fact that new ideas require new concepts and theorisation. This is necessitated by the fact that theoretical work needs to always address and direct us to the 'real world' and not take flight into a stratospheric region beyond actual human societies (Selden, 19889, p.4). For the arts in Africa are serving a central purpose in the society, not art for art's sake. The writers as in the short stories in question, struggle to create an aesthetic structure which crystallises a complex response to human experiences in times of crisis like the one in question, a response which could not possibly be represented in other (non-literary) terms. Therefore theorising such a complex situation as the reconstruction of the city space in contemporary Zimbabwe calls for an ideological shift, for it becomes imperative that a change in vision should direct our critical efforts to address what Vambe (2010) has called the "poverty of literary theory" in the explication of Zimbabwean literature. Addressing the challenges for writers and critics of African literature in the 21st century, Nnolin (2006, p.7) remarked;

With all humility one might ask how these dry exercises in structuralist discourses are conducive to solving (at least imaginatively) the problems besetting Africans at the turn of the century. How does deconstruction as a critical engagement address life-denying issues confronting Africans at the beginning of this century – poverty, unstable governments, and the HIV/AIDS pandemic?

In quest of relevance and informed by the above, this paper seeks to propagate resilience theory in the elucidation of contemporary literary texts, specifically to demonstrate that the characters depicted in these short stories are more than victims who both change and are changed by the city space and survive through inventiveness and innovation.

Resilience theory is in its nascent stage in literary circles though it has been in use for long in the social sciences. Resilience is the capacity for strategically absorbing disturbance and challenges, and for coping with the complex uncertainties in life so as to survive and move beyond survival (Mlambo, 2011). The emphasis is on fortitude, how to survive in the midst of adversity, the subjectivity that emanates in a people so as to surmount adversity and meet the challenges in their enormity and excesses. For Egeland, Carlson, & Scroufe, (in Mlambo, 2011), resilience is "the capacity for successful adaptation, positive functioning or competence ...despite high-risk, chronic stress, or following prolonged or severe trauma" (p. 3).

Resilience therefore emphasises the strengths that the people have rather than their vulnerability through exploring the coping strategies that the people exhibit. For stressing the people's vulnerability, as has been touted in the discourse on the Zimbabwe crisis, perpetuates the Afro-pessimisms which have their roots in the heart of darkness images which have been widely written in African literature and criticism. This perspective (about vulnerability, crisis), failing as it does to register the resilience of the people and their subjectivity can be inaccurate as the short stories under focus will demonstrate, often camouflaging and downplaying the strengths, innovativeness and agency of the disadvantaged ordinary people. This is a view that homogenises people and emphasises weakness, victimhood, fragility and inability to act positively for survival. Analysing literary texts through the lens of resilience theory therefore means focussing on the people's survival techniques, their responsiveness in exploiting opportunities, and their capacity to prop up agency even in the worst of situations like the one in question (urban Zimbabwe

during a crisis). J.F. Kennedy once remarked that when written in Chinese, the word ‘crisis’ is composed of two characters – one representing danger and the other representing opportunity. Resilience theory in literature can therefore help open instructive fissures for better elucidating the representation of the inspirational survival tactics of Zimbabwean urbanites as a case study on urban informalities, the restructuring of the urban space and coping strategies.

Magnets of hope: The urban space, coping and resilience in three short stories.

Irene Staunton’s 2003 anthology, *Writing Still: New Stories from Zimbabwe*, contains twenty-three short stories from different writers, providing the reader with a collage that represents Zimbabwe during a crisis. The opening story to the anthology entitled “Universal Remedy” by Pat Brickhill, a white mother of three who lived in Zimbabwe for twenty-one years, provides the reader with certain unsaid and “unrepresentable” truth-claims that are found in a post colonial country with a history of violence; violence of colonialism, anti-colonialism and anti-neo colonialism (in what was termed the Third Chimurenga, the final war for economic emancipation that started with farm repossessions in Zimbabwe). The truth-potential in the story, which is a life narrative in its autobiographical leanings, centres on two characters, the unnamed autobiographical narrator and Esilina Sibanda, a black woman. The two women meet at Avondale Shopping Centre and from there an amiable relationship is established. Esilina ends up occupying a cottage at the narrator’s house and their relationship continues to grow as they both rely on one another for mutual benefit.

“I first met Esilina one dusty hot Zimbabwean summer’s day as I walked to my local TM at Avondale shopping centre...,” (Brickhill, 2003, p.1) the story begins. What is immediately arresting in the story is the registration of the reclamation of the city space as a social arena. The city walker, both women in the story, engage in performances of identity creation and cross cultural and cross racial interactions in the street of Harare, a city formerly polarised on racial lines in the colonial days and which has had this racial polarisation revived with the white farm repossessions during the crisis in question. What is also evident is the increasing mobility of the post-colonial populations with the city offering a platform as a melting pot for multiculturalism as articulated in literature.

The city space is presented as both site and symbol of positive and resilient chutney identities which stand to be beneficial to both parties, a mark of post-colonial subjectivity and this is specifically located in the city “...because the city is a space of movement, collection, aggregation and interaction” (Ashcroft, n.d., p. 5). “Chutnification”, a metaphor for racial intermixing, allows us to understand the city in a more extended idiom, the heterogeneity of lives juxtaposed in close proximity. Esilina refuses to see the city as one dimensional as she walks across its historically cruel economic divides set in place by the colonial set up and now aggravated by the rich / poor divide of post-colonial Zimbabwe. For her, limitations are not absolute as she “...greeted me politely and stopped me to tell me that she was looking for a job” (Brickhill, 2003, p.1), remarks the narrator. In the city Esilina is bold to take the initiative and reclaim her voice, than when she was a ridiculed, abused, labelled (barren) and divorced women in the rural village.

Esilina is able to embrace the liberating character of the city and from her and the narrator’s street level intimations, we read the city as a lived complexity that can be captured in narratives of wandering as the story “Universal Remedy” demonstrates. This can be termed the transitivity of the city (Nuttal, 2004, p. 742), which is a way of capturing the city as a place of intermingling and improvisation by the urbanites that utilise the spatial and temporal openness of the city forged through daily encounters and multiple experiences, resulting in versions of social hope as these two characters display in the whole story.

“We grew to recognise each other, become gradually more familiar. We started greeting one another when we met on the grassy pavement each carrying our own shopping or when I was walking my oldest child to and from school” (Brickhill, 2003, p.1), remarks the narrator. This is an indication of urban informalities on a socio-cultural level and the trope of wandering/wondering signifies a gender-related city consciousness. From the relationship of the two women, what is also evident is that urban informality does not end with the economic sphere but is multidimensional and that the public sphere is an area that is subject to re-interpretation. For Esilina it is also a place to better one’s economic and social status, where she can look for a job, thereby indicative of the ubiquity of agency in her, cast in terms of black subjectivity and forward looking resilience for survival.

This form of reclamation of the public space, of “the grassy pavement” (Brickhill, 2003, p.1), is an enactment of the “unrepresentable” and unsaid truths of life which the city through fiction can articulate. This is specifically in Kant’s view of the ethics of cosmopolitanism, from which this paper borrows so as to express how urban space is negotiated through talk, to bring a sense of the rainbow nation discourse that is much talked about in Southern African socio-political circles. This is a particularly relevant phenomenon in the wake of the recent eruptions and manifestations of racism and xenophobia in many of Southern African states and the world over. For Kant (in Ashcroft, n.d., p. 6) cosmopolitanism is a universally philanthropic policy that potentially would ensure peace among nations and grant individuals the right to international hospitality or the right of a stranger not to be treated with hostility when he arrives on someone else’s territory. What can further be said is that this welcoming of the other is the beginning of moral consciousness, a willingness to engage with the other and an openness to divergent cultural experiences and needs and a way to embrace as well as celebrate contrasts and diversity rather than uniformity only. This is what Esilina and the nameless narrator illustrate at both a symbolical and literal level. It is an illustration that human relations, the ties that bind humanity together can go beyond circumstances of lack, impoverished conditions and polarised racial and political environs. Yet this does not come in neat packages like Christmas gifts; there is a need to extend a hand, a need for a measure of tenacity, fortitude and resilience, a need to want to better one’s condition by any means necessary, driven by the age old wisdom enshrined in the ubuntu philosophy (humaneness, fellow feeling and kindness). And Esilina’s sense of determination in this case preaches to us loud and clear.

Furthermore, what is more inspiring in the story “Universal Remedy” is Esilina’s resilience for economic self-determination and self-sufficiency. Given the statistics on inflation and unemployment above, the indescribable shortage of commodities and food stuffs and hunger and starvation in the historical context of this short story, she becomes an epitome of successfully surviving through innovation and resilience; the pillars for survival during the crisis. Her life is scripted with grammars of rethinking the public sphere as a contested space which the ordinary people utilise to their advantage. Existing on the margins of the formal economy or the lack thereof as the crisis hit Zimbabwe had at that time, Esilina re-appropriates and restructures the urban space for urban agriculture – for subsistence purposes and as a form of market gardening.

Having failed to get employment and with no means of subsistence, Esilina, now accommodated by the nameless narrator, innovatively uses the resources available in the city for survival and to go beyond survival. She refuses to be swallowed in victimhood and helplessness but allows the agency in her to dictate the pace. Whereas “...most of the gardeners in town only knew about flowers, she knew only about vegetables” (Brickhill, 2003, p. 3). Esilina begins to turn the backyard into a vibrant garden; where flowers used to grow, she now grows food; a tactical adjustment to survive the crisis. This adjustment is also

evidenced in the narrator herself, who instead of renting office premises in an exorbitantly inflationary environment, now decides to cut costs and maximise on the resources around her by creating a home office.

Moreover, the informal reconstruction of the city space goes beyond the city council's demarcated area, which is in the confines of the residential stand where Esilina has turned the backyard into a miniature market gardening farm. On returning from work the nameless narrator;...found her (Esilina) walking on the road with a hoe over her shoulder. I asked her where she was going and she told me she had found a piece of unused land nearby where she was growing sweet potatoes and maize. I marvelled at her stamina and her consuming need to grow things (Brickhill, 200, p. 3).

The level of symbolism here needs to be clarified. First, symbolism works from the narrator's stating of "sweet potatoes and maize" as Esilina's choice of crops. Sweet potatoes symbolise breakfast and maize, the staple of Zimbabwe, a commodity of scarcity during the crisis that hit Zimbabwe, symbolises the two other meals of the day and thus the completion of a person's stomach needs. Second is the fact that the narrator is not given a name but remains the first person narrator, a voice the reader easily identifies with so that one unconsciously utter as well, "I marvelled at her..."(Brickhill, 2003, p. 3). For this restructuring of the city space by Esilina is representative of a wider variety and versions of urban informality for economic enhancement and self-sufficiency. It could be urban agriculture, car washing, flea markets, street vending, shebeens and the kapanas found in urban Namibia; what is evident is that the innumerable variety of urban informalities as represented by Esilina, articulate the multiple social and economic narratives of urban Africa. It is a force of note and to reckon with, and with dizzying levels of unemployment and deprivation in Southern Africa, there is a lot we can learn from the likes of Esilina.

Furthermore, following the theorisation of ethics of cosmopolitanism above, the reciprocity of the two women's benefits cannot be overemphasised. The narrator is not simply a benefactress but learns a lot from Esilina, and above all, she appreciates it; "...she (Esilina) was one of those people that some call an angel, one who comes into your life for a season or a reason. Esi came into my life like that" (Brickhill, 2003, p. 2). Whilst this is at a social or emotional level, the benefit is also at an economic level as the narrator remarks that, "She also taught me to save the seeds from fruit and vegetables that I bought..." (Brickhill, 2003, p. 4). And finally when the narrator migrates to West Sussex, she says "I bought a spade and a fork and some seedlings. I tied up my hair and I turned to my garden to dig" (Brickhill, 2003, p.4), a statement that closes the story, as if to allow this open ended-ness to echo and reverberate in the reader's mind forever.

Two major points can be made from the above observations. The first is that in crisis hit Zimbabwe with shortages of commodities and hyperinflation, Esilina innovatively adjusts as a coping strategy. Instead of going all over with her billions looking for seeds and being frustrated either by empty shelves in the stores or her billions which may not be enough to buy a sachet of seeds, she makes use of the seeds from the fruits and vegetables she has. And despite the setback that some of the fruits are hybrids hence the seeds won't germinate, she still is undaunted as if inspired by Albert Einstein's words that "in the middle of difficulty lies opportunity". Her resilience is worthy of emulation.

The second point is the metaphorical transportation of the restructured Zimbabwean urban socio-sphere mentality by the narrator to West Sussex. What she learns in Zimbabwe about the restructuring of the urban space for urban agriculture she applies in the United Kingdom because she has realised the benefits thereof. The story therefore becomes a

form of writing the universal urban metropolis from Zimbabwe. The lessons we can learn from that crisis hit urban Zimbabwe are therefore not for Southern Africa only but for the world; we learn how to survive, how to innovatively restructure the city space and how urban informalities have a social and economic dimension that can be fruitfully utilised. Certainly literature sees this possibility. According to Ernst Bloch (in Ashcroft, n.d. p.9), the utopian function of art and literature lies precisely in the imagination of possibility, an imagination captured in anticipatory illumination. And the city space provides the right setting for such futuristic and hopeful projection, for despite an unpalatable past in the rural areas, as the narrator observes that Esilina had come to town to start a new life away from both her disappointed family and her former in-laws (Brickhill, 2003, p. 6).

Ultimately the anonymity which the city offers Esilina, away from the jeers at being thought of as barren, helps heal her. It also gives her some remarkable measure of independence and autonomy and finally:

Over the weekends, when she was not digging, she walked around the suburb selling some of our excess produce (my emphasis). We never discussed what she would do with the money but I would see a new fork, a pair of clippers, or a brand new bucket, neatly arranged where she kept her tools in the shed. She spent hours cultivating seedlings in an army of wooden trays that I bought in, from the supermarket (Brickhill, 2003, p. 5).

That is a mark of creativity and innovativeness and certainly she may not be rich but her livelihood has been bettered, resilience has paid off. She can sell her excess produce and the street is her market place. She has reclaimed her life and the city space. Hers is one form of coping strategies and what the story illustrates is that agency is ubiquitous and despite the challenges besetting people, they are more than victims and there is life outside the Mugabe/Tsvangirai debacle, the political cesspools in Zimbabwe and all the touted horrors of the crisis in Zimbabwe. Such a response to life is indeed a “universal remedy” as the title of the story intimates.

Having said so, the following section offers post cards or glimpses of the ingenuity of urbanites as they innovatively reconstruct their lives and reclaim the city space through informalities. The intention is not to fully explore the short stories like in the previous section, but to highlight some key points and establish some commonalities which bind the stories together. The story ‘Tables turned over’ by Adrian Ashley is set at a market place in the high density suburb of Mabvuku. In the story we see Ruth and Mai Jira, market women who survive through street vending. Whereas many are content on lamenting that “We are pressed” (Ashley, 2003, p. 7), the two women do not accept such fatalism but decide to act. When the bread delivery van comes and the driver announces yet another trebling in the price of bread as had become the norm in crisis hit Zimbabwe, the people on the market cannot have it anymore and they revolt. Ruth, despite being heavy with child, also joins in and Mai Jira is one of the ringleaders as they first topple the bread delivery van and forcefully take bread and then later march to the city centre.

The bulk of this story, whilst illuminating the survival strategies of urbanites as represented through literature, however gravitates more towards what may be termed an image of transgressive urban carnival propounded by Michael Bakhtin, but that dimension will not be explored in the present paper. However, there are some points which can be briefly highlighted here. The first is the relationship between the two women, Ruth and Mai Jira, something that transcends feminism, which can possibly be described as stiwanism, a new term gaining valence in literary circles as an acceptable descriptor than feminism (stiwanism is from the acronym STIWA – a term used for African feminism by the critic

Molara Ogundipe-Leslie standing for Social Transformation Including Women in Africa). This is the form of relationship we have witnessed between Esilina and the nameless narrator in the story “Universal Remedy”. What ties the two stories together is the fact that the urban setting rather than being a temptress and male place where women tread at their peril as much post-colonial literature has often painted, here the women are often given more prominence and the city offers more possibilities for them (Mlambo, 2011b). For Kurtz (2000), “Because it disrupts traditional social patterns, the city is, despite its nature as a male place, a site where women are at times able to create a measure of personal emancipation, however limited, from traditional restrictions” (p. 108).

Furthermore, in the city scape, there is a reversal of roles as the women take over the roles of bread winner, often preserved for the men in traditional Zimbabwean culture. And to survive, to make it in the competitive urban market as street vendors, they form some kin associations, alliances and some rudimentary form of marketing gimmicks. The city affords them an opportunity to collaborate, work together and share experiences as we see Mai Jira as, a senior to Ruth, exhort her that she has to.

Beautify your goods. Sprinkle your fruit with water. Make them look delicious. And don't be afraid to drop your price if the fruit is bruised. You'll be amazed how much remains unsold if you don't bring the value down. Here, do it this way, rub the apples on your thigh, then splash a few drops like this... (Ashley, 2003, p. 9)

There certainly are light moments in situations like this, for laughter in itself is also a coping mechanism that the people use so as to absorb with humour the shocking effects of the crisis (Mlambo, 2011). But perhaps more important in the present discussion is the value of informal education as a resilient tool for survival strategy. The crisis itself becomes a university for life and the urbanites share this invaluable information. The street vending stalls are the classrooms without walls and graduates from this school include Ruth and the professor being Mai Jari. This is particularly inspirational, given a situation like crisis hit Zimbabwe in the past decade, where institutions were on the verge of collapse and where the bottle neck education system could only favour a few.

The pregnant Ruth also participates in the protest and refuses to be a bystander, a fragile and passive object. This starts off by a questioning mind which is inspired by her mentor cum professor, Mai Jira, and in intrapersonal musings she ponders; “What can I do? Will they catch me if I take some bread? Will they arrest me? Will I give birth to my child in prison?” (Ashley, 2003, p. 13). That is a mark of an ingenuous mind, the beginning of her reclamation, of her subjectivity and resilience or responsiveness in exploiting opportunities in spite of the dangers that the course of action may entail.

What gives the whole story impetus and set the various actions into action is the need for bread, both in the physical and symbolical domain of representation. Ultimately the story ends as the crowds engage in the act of walking the city. The act of walking is central in the ordinary people's reclamation of the city space. Historically in Southern Africa, colonial domination was expressed through the curtailment of movement and this was made possible through instruments put in place like apartheid, the passbook and trespassing law. Therefore in this post-colonial context the act of walking inscribes the city as a place of movement, of change and of crossings. It is a symbolic act of opening up new possibilities and this is emphatically put across in the final line of the story where “With one hand on her slightly bulging belly she (Ruth) began to pick speed. She daren't lose Mai Jira”.

Once again the symbolism needs not be missed here for we have the Biblical Ruth, an actor who makes things happen, and the Biblical allusion seeks also to not only be prophetic but

also to universalise the agency displayed here. Moreover, the symbolism in the pregnancy can as well be read with multifarious interpretations. The child in the womb is an indication of hope and the bulging stomach can as well symbolise how pregnant the situation is, pregnant with hope despite all the negativity, an indication of how the city space is also pregnant with possibilities. And finally, the pregnancy can also be interpreted as a state of fragility and vulnerability, a state that the urbanites, as epitomised in Ruth, refuse to accept for she chooses action in spite of the limiting and limited conditions. What the story demonstrates therefore is the fact that the public space in the urban sphere is a place of struggle and a sight of contestation. And the story 'Tables turned over' falls within the category of the coping-strategy literature, showing as it does that the inhabitants of the city space are actors and active participants who incessantly search for ways to ameliorate the worst effects of life threatening forces and they do this with a measure of success since as the narrator says, "Ruth was lucky, her fruit sold well" (Ashley, 2003, p. 9). The urban informalities in the form of street vending thus are presented as a reality and a means for survival as the story 'Universal remedy' has also shown.

Finally, the story 'Not slaves to fashion' can also be briefly discussed in as far as it demonstrates the changing cultural terrain in urban Zimbabwe and how particularly the women have fashioned informal alliances in the form of women's clubs so as to help others, and also for financial gain in a country with less than ten per cent of the population being formally employed. It is a very brief story about the Masuku family that has gathered to arrange for a wedding. As the meeting progresses, one particular point is raised that instead of the family members doing the cooking, they could hire some people, since "There are now women's clubs who, for a fee, do all the cooking, serving and washing up at family gatherings" (Mthimkhulu, 2006, p.85). Since this does not go well with the traditional elders, the matter is settled through a vote and many people vote for the idea. But the idea that is interesting for this paper is on how the women, to use Rodney's words, choose to organise than agonise over the present situation. The women's club is another form of urban informality which shows how the ordinary citizens innovate, organise and move forward so as to make ends meet. And such a club is one of many that flourished during the crisis in Zimbabwe; there were clubs to alternatively carry children to school, clubs for fuel queues, to buy groceries (or import from neighbouring countries), for bank queues to withdraw money, to mention but a few. The point is that where circumstances are limiting, informal arrangements by the ordinary people can assist them to remain afloat. The urban setting, instead of being viewed as a problem, is actually a resource to be utilised, and these insightful characters are paragons of resilience; they can organise and are able to cope. It is such informal arrangements which carry the day, and the world with different versions of crises can indeed learn from such phenomena which the short story writer makes available in non-prescriptive but intuitively suggestive terms.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to demonstrate the ubiquity of agency during times of crisis, to show how the city space can be reclaimed and restructured by the urbanites for survival and to illustrate how informing the urban informalities are, as markers of resilience and hope. More could be said along the same lines as illustrated by these three short stories but what has been made clear is the fact that literary texts can assist our understanding of these dynamics and inspire us to meet our challenges with confidence. Instead of cataloguing the problems during the Zimbabwe crisis, what has been demonstrated is that we can learn more from the inspiring coping strategies of these characters who oppose the current, for it is only the dead fish that flow along with the current whilst live ones flow against it. The characters in the short stories are artful dodgers of some sort who have demonstrated an apt capacity to transform the urban space and their lives by

constructing resilience strategies to survive and transcend the crisis. A particular thread of coping strategies can also be discerned; in the first story it is more private and at individual level and in the second story there is movement to beyond the individual, a united public front is portrayed (though fairly rudimentary) and finally in the last story, the women's clubs represent a form of organised effort. And resilience theory has a critical usefulness in elucidating stories of our time with a significant measure of success. The ultimate conclusion is that challenges can be stepping stones or stumbling blocks, it's a matter of how you view them; but with the crises that befall us at individual, community, national or even global level, the lives represented here can be inspirational and we can learn a lot from their resilience.

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