

# USE OF HISTORICAL NAMES IN SELECTED ZIMBABWEAN TEXTS

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**Abstract:** When we look for significant names in literature, the tendency is to find the type of literary onomastics which Kemp Malone has called “meaningful fictive names”. Such names are mainly the author’s inventions, but in this paper I discuss the different creative ways of using names of historical persons in literature. I demonstrate this point by referring to how historical persons’ identities are recreated in Gappah’s “At the Sound of the Last Post” and Chielo’s *The Trial of Robert Mugabe*.

**Keywords:** Zimbabwean literature, history, fiction, symbols, literary onomastics.

## Introduction

Literary onomastics (as it is traditionally named) involves analysing names of characters, places and titles that authors choose for their texts. Such names can “assist interpretation [...] and serve as an excellent mnemonic aid” (Maguer 1983: 89). Literary onomastics adds value to literary theory in that, when analysing names chosen by authors for their texts, critics will “characterise text[s] in many different ways” (Windt 2005: 43). The dominant literary onomastics discipline searches “for the hidden symbolic meaning” especially of names of characters and settings (Grimaud 1993: 5). When we look for significant names in literature, the tendency is to find the type of literary onomastics which Malone has called “meaningful fictive names” (Malone quoted in Robinson 2009: 14); such names are mainly inventions, but in this paper I would like to discuss the different creative ways of using names of historical persons to name characters in Gappah’s “At the Sound of the last Post” (2009) and Chielo’s *The Trial of Robert Mugabe* (2009). In the first part of the paper I elaborate on the significance and place of the *historical fiction* genre in Zimbabwean literature, in which the use of names of historical persons is more prominent. The second and last sections have two subsections that correspond to the two onomastic strategies deployed by writers with regards to the names of historical persons in fiction. The first strategy discussed is the *refusal to name* historical persons in Gappah’s selected short story. The second onomastic strategy employed by Chielo in his novel involves the use of names of historical persons in two simultaneous ways: as symbols and as reference to historical persons’ lives.

## Historical fiction and the use of names of historical persons

Significant to note is how there is often a thin line separating most narratives in Zimbabwean literary texts (especially those written in English) from history (and this is also applicable to most African literatures). This scenario is best described by Muchemwa (2005: 196) who argues that “writers use fiction to interrogate facts found in historical narrative [...] and also seek to collapse the boundaries of discipline and genre that separate history and fiction”. Such texts are thus best described as belonging to the category of *historical fiction*, which has been described by Green (1999: 121) as “the mode in which the discourses of history and fiction are usually considered to be at their most intimate”. *Historical fiction* also fits well into the category of realist literature. As Windt (2006: 114) aptly states

An important feature of realism is that the role of the literary character changed from the representative of universals into the representation of the individual, and one of the most important tools of the author in creating this change is the use of names.

Thus, in historical fiction names function to enhance the reality of the narrative. Such names are an extra-text that provides “the fiction with a solid foundation and the reader with some sort of recognition” (Windt 2006: 116).

Narrations of national history belong to a much contested terrain in Zimbabwe. Fiction writers in Zimbabwe participate in the controversy through challenging what Ranger (2004) described as “patriotic historiography”. By performing that function writers contribute to historical revisionism. The historical basis of most of the texts discussed in this paper can be located in the need to challenge “a series of omissions, additions and simplifications” (Primorac and Muponde 2005, as cited in Mangena 2012: 895) of ZANU-PF’s narrative especially of the recent crisis. Emphasis is placed on the realistic representation of history. A guarantee of such reality is granted through the use of names of real people and places, and reference to historical events among other narrative strategies. However, a certain element of fictionality is maintained at various levels. In some cases authors put a disclaimer at the beginning of the text that all characters and names are fictional. In others, writers avoid the use of actual names and settle for political and social titles that however still point to historical persons.

What I shall discuss in this paper is the use of historical names as a literary strategy employed by writers in selected Zimbabwean texts that belong to the category of *historical fiction*. In addition to authors selected for this study (Petina Gappah and Eze Chielo), there are others who use names of historical persons “fictitiously” in their texts. Vera in *Nehanda* (1994) recreates the name and person of a Shona legendary spirit medium, *Nehanda*, who fearlessly challenged white supremacy during the early days of colonialism. Names such as *Mapondera* and *Chaminuka* in Mutswairo’s cultural nationalist texts are historical names of prominent leaders of the First Chimurenga/Umvukela (1896–1897) and the Mapondera rebellion (1901). “The heroes’ names are remembered and re-inscribed onto the narrative of the second liberation war. The

names resuscitate a past of symbolic motivation and consciousness required to inspire the second generation of liberation war fighters” (Nyambi, forthcoming). Such names are manipulated in literary texts (and elsewhere) as symbols of resistance. Solomon and Joice Mujuru (ZANU PF stalwarts) are fictionalised in Huchu’s novel *The Hairdresser of Harare* (2010), with Joice Mujuru named as *Minister M...*, and also in Chipamaunga’s *Chains of Freedom* (1998), as *Gono* and *Tapi* respectively (Primorac and Chan 2010). Kilgore in *We Are Now Zimbabweans* (2009) uses Robert Mugabe to name one of his characters. In an effort to fictionalise the death of the historical Josiah Tongogara, Kilgore creates a character and names him *Tichasara*. The two names, *Tichasara* and *Tongogara*, are Shona names with semantic connections: “Tongogara means ‘we will stay’ and Tichasara means ‘we will stay behind’. So the use of Tichasara in the narrative is a clever evasion of the use of the historical name Tongogara” (Mangena 2015: 101). Authors construct stories about Zimbabwean politics and make them very real by using names of historical persons to name their characters. Since in most Zimbabwean literary works there is a thin line that separates literature and history, one notes that there are quite a number of literary works that use such names. However, for purposes of this discussion I will refer to “At the Sound of the Last Post” and *The Trial of Robert Mugabe*.

### Onomastic strategies

#### *A refusal to name public figures: Gappah’s onomastic strategy in “At the Sound of the Last Post”*

Petina Gappah is one of the upcoming black Zimbabwean women writers who made it into the literary field with her publication of a short story anthology, *An Elegy for Easterly*, published in 2009. Prior to that, she had contributed with short stories to Staunton’s *Women Writing Zimbabwe* (2007). The narratives of her stories belong to the contemporary Zimbabwean literature of the crisis. Gappah is one of the writers who rewrite “state lies” on the Third Chimurenga Crisis (for more on this, see Nyambi 2013 and Mangena 2015). Since most of her stories are historical, she often focuses on the lives of public political figures. In “At the Sound of the Last Post”, Gappah deploys an onomastic strategy of refusing to name most of her characters, which are, however, clearly drawn on historical public figures. She largely relies on the use of political and social titles. In this case these titles include *president*, *vice president* and *first lady* among others. As I shall demonstrate below, these titles are not mere discrete labels, as any reader who is familiar with Zimbabwean history and politics can actually fill in the gaps and attach names to the titles.

In this story one of the “gallant sons”<sup>1</sup> of the nation is being buried at the national heroes’ acre and the widow narrates the events of the day. Gappah’s characters include “the national hero” (who is being buried), “the widow” (Esther, who narrates the events of the day), “the President” (who presides over the funeral), “the first lady” and

<sup>1</sup> “Gallant sons and daughters” is a phrase used in Zimbabwe to refer to liberation struggle fighters, who upon their deaths are accorded national hero status.

cabinet ministers. Gappah refuses to name most of her characters and, to a great extent, uses social and political titles to identify them. Most of them are public figures and it is easy for the readers to match most of the historical persons' names to characters' descriptions.

The buried hero is not named, but it is likely that he is Edison Zvobgo, A ZANU PF ex-cabinet minister who died and was buried at the national heroes' acre in August 2004. All the other elements of his life narrated in the story are fictional. For instance, his wife Julia died earlier than him, so there is no way she could be Esther and the narrator of the events of his death. However, clear pointers towards the "buried" hero's name and identity include the fact that he was exiled during Smith's regime, was fortunate to be accorded the status of national hero at death, for "only those who would have not disagreed with the President at the time of their deaths become heroes" (20). An onomastic interest can also be located in the names that the hero gave his children. The names are not historical but are "telling" signs on the personality of the name giver, specifically his patriotism and political affiliation. His first child is named *Rwauya* ('death has come'), the second child born was named *Muchagura* ('you shall repent'), and last born *Muchakundwa* ('you shall be defeated'). The names are described by the narrator as "ominous names" (11) with messages directed towards the white colonialists, but the irony is that all the names are Shona names which might not have meant anything to the intended recipients who were largely incompetent in Shona.

"The President" is also one of Gappah's characters not accorded proper names in the narrative, but whose identity is also predictable. Gappah's President wears "glasses" and is a "very old man" (3). His "first wife" is buried at the National Heroes' Acre and he has a "Second First Lady", "her Amazing Gracefulness, and Our First Lady of the Hats" (15). "The President kept an unofficial wife in a small house [...] who had become the Second First Lady at State House. She wore hats of flying-saucer dimensions while cows sacrificed their lives so that she could wear pair upon pair of ferragamo shoes" (17). He was once called "Prime Minister, before the Presidential Amendment Act, before he ditched the Marxist austerity of his safari suits for pinstripes and gold cufflinks, before he married his second wife" (15). The President's titles include "Commander of the Armed Forces, Defier of Imperialism, [...] Orator at the Funerals of Dead Heroes"<sup>2</sup> (5). "The President" is easily identified with the historical Robert Mugabe. Robert Mugabe is the only president that Zimbabwe has ever had (from 1980 to the time of writing of this paper). His first wife, Sally Mugabe, was laid to rest at the National Heroes' Acre. After Sally's death, he married Grace Mugabe, who is described in Gappah's narrative as a "Second First Lady". Gappah is close to naming Mugabe's wife when she playfully refers to her as "her Amazing Gracefulness", which remains a playful allusion to Grace (Mugabe). As president of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe has to date buried many heroes on the National shrine, and each time he does that, he delivers sent-off speeches. The

<sup>2</sup> Gappah's titles are a mockery of the historical Robert Mugabe's political titles "Head of State and Government and the Commander-in-chief of the armed forces President".

speech delivered by the “President” in Gappah’s story is not far from the historical Mugabe’s rhetoric:

I say to you today that, much like the gallant hero we bury here today, you too must guard against complacency. You must follow the example of our fallen comrade who lies here. We must move today and strive ahead in togetherness, in harmony, in unity and in solidarity to consolidate the gains of our liberation struggle (6).

Even with a bit of exaggeration, some of the usual things said by the historical Robert Mugabe during most of his public addresses are an easy pick. The usual subjects include a reliving of the liberation struggle, an attack directed at opposition politics and a statement on sovereignty. Even without the “President” tag, readers can easily associate Gappah’s referred character with the President of Zimbabwe. On a comparative plane, Ndlovu in her short story “Torn Posters” (2007) refuses to name one of her major characters and simply refers to him using the pronoun “HIM”. Significant to note is how Gugu reconstructs Gukurahundi in a way that nails Robert Mugabe (and his predominantly ZANU PF government) as the perpetrator of the violence against the innocent Ndebele ethnic group. In place of a proper name, Gugu uses the capitalised pronoun *HIM* to refer to the perpetrator of violence. The “HIM” person’s photo is seen on ZANU PF election campaigning posters that the narrator and other Ndebele children destroy in anger. The other characters (who are Ndebele) hate “HIM” for killing them. For instance, the narrator’s father says “its HIM, [...] he is killing us” (180). Even if Gugu does not use Robert Mugabe’s real name, readers easily associate the “HIM” character of her story with the historical Robert Mugabe. What is missing in both the title *president* and the pronoun *HIM* is just the name, otherwise all the details on personality are provided and on the basis of these we know the name of “the president” (who is also called *HIM*).

In the table that follows below, I list the other political titles used by Gappah in “The Sound of the Lost Post” and the actual names not discussed above:

**Table 1. Political titles in “The Sound of the Lost Post” and corresponding actual names**

<b>Title and description</b>	<b>Actual name</b>
Governor of Central Bank	Dr. Gideon Gono
Police Commissioner	Comrade Chihuri
Vice President with hooded eyes who looked like he was the next to go	Comrade Joseph Msika

Gappah’s story is also made more historical through reference to real toponyms: *Stoddard Hall* and *Warren Hills*. Reference is also made to national events which include “unity galas, musical bashes [...] and state funerals” (20).

With less use of names to refer to her major characters, Gappah still advances the historical aspect of her fiction.

***Historical names as representations of actual persons  
and as symbols in The Trial of Robert Mugabe***

Chielo is a Nigerian who wrote a text that qualifies as Zimbabwean literature. His narrative in *The Trial of Robert Mugabe* (as reflected in the novel title) is about the fictional Robert Mugabe's trial in the afterlife. Almost all character names used in Chielo's book are historical and are used in two significant ways: as references to real-life persons and as symbols. These names include *Robert Mugabe*, *Joshua Nkomo*, *Abel Muzorewa*, *Ndabaningi Sithole*, *Joshua Gumede*, *Yvonne Vera*, *Dambudzo Marechera*, *Steve Biko* and *Olaudah Equiano* among others. Chielo's character names and personalities are largely drawn from history, and yet his work remains fiction. At the beginning of the novel, the author gives a disclaimer and explains that "this book is a work of fiction. Names, characters and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental". He is right to say that the names are used fictitiously; however, there is doubt if "any resemblance to actual events [ ... ] or persons living or dead is entirely coincidental". Clearly, the names that Chielo uses in his book are not coincidental, for what the "fictive" characters do in the book tallies with what the historical figures used to do "fictitiously".

The name *Robert Mugabe* is one of the names of prominent historical persons that feature in Chielo's text. There is a resemblance between the "fictive" Robert Mugabe character and name and the historical Robert Mugabe. In Chielo's novel Robert Mugabe has a dream in which he is tried in God's court for many crimes. Robert Mugabe is accused of Gukurahundi, what is termed *Guku Africanus*. He is also accused of forcing many Zimbabweans into exile during the crisis period and torturing supporters of the political party Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). In addition to reflecting on the crimes committed by the real Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwean history, the name *Robert Mugabe* also gains symbolic meaning in the figurative systems of the literary world. In Nkomo's testimony, what Mugabe did in Gukurahundi is compared to what other political persons did elsewhere. Reference is made to Nero's destruction of Rome and Hitler's Jewish genocide. The fictional Robert Mugabe is also described as having a "Hitler's moustache" (11). In other words, what Mugabe did in Zimbabwean history especially during the Gukurahundi genocide transformed him into a Hitler. As shown in Mlalazi's "Idi", Mugabe is also conceived as some kind of a Zimbabwean Idi Dada Amin. Idi then becomes a new tag that Mugabe acquires in Mlalazi's literary narrative. The name Idi is a "dictator tag imposed on Mugabe and ZANU (PF), mostly by opposition supporters and western countries" (Nyambi 2013: 50). Symbolically, "Idi evokes ruthless political dictatorship as signified by the person and character of Idi Amin Dada, the historic and arguably most notorious African dictator who ruled Uganda from 1971 to 1979" (Nyambi 2013: 52–53). Through such name manipulation, connections between despotic and tyrannical leaders are established. In the literary world, Idi Dada Amin of Uganda, Hitler of Germany and Nero of Rome can all be used to describe Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe. All these historical figures are connected to each other as despots in the fictional world.

Among members of the divine jury, there is Yvonne Vera (1964–2005) and Dambudzo Marechera (1952–1987). Reference to these two is a fictionalisation of the real Marechera and Vera, Zimbabwean writers whose texts challenged colonial and postcolonial Zimbabwean states. Marechera and Vera “are cast here as the moral conscience of the nation” (Pucherova 2009). However, as Pucherova argues, Chielo’s text “falls short of both Vera’s lyricism and Marechera’s subversive wit, falling rather too easily to sentimentality that dampens the narrative’s poignancy. It is also hard to imagine Marechera, this gad-fly of Zimbabwean nationalism, who heckled Mugabe on the eve of Independence in 1979, to address the disgraced dictator ‘Sir’ and ‘Your Excellency’”<sup>3</sup>. Inclusion of such names as *Steve Biko*, *Olaudah Equiano* and *Enoch Santonga* affords Chielo to re-interpret “Zimbabwean history in a clearly trans-national context, linking it (through characters such as Biko and Equiano) with South Africa’s apartheid, the Nigerian-Biafran War”<sup>4</sup>. As Pucherova claims, “Eze embraces the cosmopolitan idea of universal responsibility (as opposed to national unity) that has been increasingly on the fore-front of progressive political thought. The Africa he imagines creates its idea of progress by borrowing selectively from all the world’s cultures, rather than remaining closed in its own ‘tradition’”<sup>5</sup>. Steve Biko (1946–1977) is considered the martyr of the South African apartheid, Chief Justice Oludah Equiano was an ex-slave who participated in the abolishment of slavery, and Enock Santonga brought together the South African nation through his prayer *Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrica* [God Bless Africa].

Four onomastic strategies are also deployed in Chielo’s selection of names of witnesses to Mugabe’s criminality in his narrative. The first strategy is the use of historical persons’ names such as *Dadirai Chipiro*. Secondly, there is a manipulation of names of historical persons and creation of “new names” for witnesses. This is apparent in Chielo’s “Emerson Manyika” and “Chenjerai Shiri”. The author also uses fictional names that are very Zimbabwean. The last strategy involves relying on characters from other literary texts and introducing more characters into the existing narrative. Chielo does this in the last part of the narrative; from that perspective he rewrites Vera’s *The Stone Virgins* and allows her characters (and other new ones) to testify against Robert Mugabe.

The historical person Dadirai Chipiro is “fictionally” afforded an opportunity to narrate her gruesome death. In real life, “Dadirai Chipiro, wife of Patson Chipiro who heads the Zimbabwean opposition party in Mhondoro district, had a hand cut off as well as both of her feet before a petrol bomb was thrown through her window”<sup>6</sup>. The other witness, Erica Maidai, is a character whose name is fictional, but resembles a Zimbabwean woman. The surname *Maidai* easily passes as a Shona surname, whose meaning can be translated as ‘you could have’. Functionally, then, *Erica Maidai* is

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.mazwi.net/reviews/the-trial-of-robert-mugabe-a-review>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.mazwi.net/reviews/the-trial-of-robert-mugabe-a-review>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.mazwi.net/reviews/the-trial-of-robert-mugabe-a-review>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1025949/Wife-Mugabe-rival-burned-alive-having-feet-hacked-off.html>

important in “the construction of an illusion of reality and credibility (Windt 2006: 114). Though *Erica Maidai* may not be the name of an identifiable historical person, it remains familiar and realistic. In both cases, Chielo also uses the women characters as symbols of women victims of political supporters of the opposition and the violence of the 2008 Zimbabwean presidential elections. The two speak on behalf of all the other women victims.

The first testimony comes from Emerson Manyika, who died in exile as an economic fugitive. He accuses Robert Mugabe of forcing him (and others) into foreign lands during the “lost decade” (the late 1990s to early 2009). The name *Emerson Manyika* is not of a well-known person in Zimbabwe, but his story could be retold by many other ordinary Zimbabweans who were forced into exile during the Third Chimurenga crisis. The name is also a manipulation of two important ZANU PF members: the first name, *Emerson*, is also the current Vice President’s first name (*Emerson Mnangagwa*) and the surname, *Manyika*, also belongs to one of ZANU PF’s popular late politician (*Elliot Manyika*). A Google search of the name *Emerson Manyika* gave 23,800 results. Most of these results focused on Emerson Mnangagwa and Elliot Manyika. A combination of “Emerson” and “Manyika” could be Chielo’s subtle way of constructing a fictional character close to a ZANU PF cadre. One of the other witnesses whose identity sounds similar to Emerson Manyika is Chenjerai Shiri. Chenjerai Shiri is a war veteran who gives testimony as a criminal, acknowledging his moral failings. He narrates how he died of AIDS contracted through raping political victims. At the beginning of his narrative he explains that he is “not Hunzvi, not Perence” (74). However his name is clearly adopted from names of real persons Chenjerai Hunzvi and Perence Shiri. Chenjerai Hunzvi died in 2001 and was the Chairman of the Zimbabwe National Liberation War Veterans Association, while Perence Shiri is the Commander of Air Force of Zimbabwe Air Marshall. However, in the name and personality of Chielo’s Chenjerai Shiri, there is more of Chenjerai Hunzvi than Perence Shiri. Ideologically, both Emerson Manyika and Chenjerai Shiri’s recitations “dovetailed into Mugabe’s narrative of Zimbabwe” (77) and place emphasis on whites as the real enemy of black Zimbabweans. Both also recreate Mugabe as a hero, but go beyond to rebuke some of his failings.

“Saluting the postcolonial idea that writers are also historians, and fictions are often truer than the ‘truth’, Chielo Zona Eze borrows many of his characters from Vera’s novel”<sup>7</sup> and establishes some kind of intertextuality that is not just limited to the thematic connection but extends to use of characters’ names, with Vera’s *The Stone Virgins* (2002). In part two of Chielo’s novel, the “fictional” Vera retells the story of *The Stone Virgins*. Vera rewrites her novel and adds more characters to the original characters in *The Stone Virgins*. Interesting to note is how the original names of characters in Vera’s texts are re-invoked in Chielo’s narrative as if they were historical persons. Thenjiwe and Nonceba are central characters in Vera’s *The Stone Virgins*. At the beginning of *The*

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.mazwi.net/reviews/the-trial-of-robert-mugabe-a-review>



*Trial of Robert Mugabe*, a character called *Thenjiwe* sings a song. The fictional Vera recognises her, and “Mugabe too, recognised Thenjiwe. He remembered that she was the decapitated one of the two sisters of Yvonne’s story” (23). At this point it sounds as if Thenjiwe, a fictional character in Gukurahundi articulation, was transformed into a real historical person. The significance of the other character names added to the story of *The Stone Virgins* as the subtext of *The Trial of Robert Mugabe* deserves more space than what can be afforded in this discussion.

Use of names of historical persons to name characters is one of the strengths of Chiello’s narrative. Even though he informs us at the beginning of the text that the historical names are used fictitiously, we continue in our reading of his text to identify the fictitious characters with the real historical persons. We cannot imagine any other Robert Mugabe referred to in his narrative besides the one we know.

## Conclusion

Selected texts for this discussion belong to the genre of historical fiction and rely on the fictionalisation of historical persons among other strategies. Both Gappah and Chiello create characters who resemble historical persons and also fit into the time and place of their narratives. A reading of Gappah’s “At the Sound of the Last Post” has confirmed that a human being is more than a name. She exploits known behaviours of prominent figures in society and talks about them in her story without using their real names. She exploits political and social titles to signify character anonymity and presence. The temptation when reading Gappah’s narrative is to perceive the unnamed characters as prototypes, yielding to that temptation however means the story loses its chronotopic essence. When, for instance, Gappah uses the title *President* to refer to one of her characters, she does not simply talk about any president, but about a specific president of a specific time and place. Gappah used (mainly social and political) titles to refer to Zimbabwean political figures, and in a simple exercise real names were picked to match the descriptions. An identifiable pattern in the use of historical names in *The Trial of Robert Mugabe* involves the accordance of names of historical persons with a symbolic meaning in the figurative systems of the literary world. Chiello also skilfully coined names like *Chenjerai Shiri* and *Emerson Manyika*, which are adopted from different historical persons to create new identities.

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