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## **Modernist Aesthetics as Anathema to National Patriotic Culture: The Case of Nyamfukudza's *The Non-Believer's Journey***

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### **Abstract:**

*The paper critically analyses the depiction and significance of national patriotic culture in Stanley Nyamfukudza's *The Non-Believer's Journey* (1980). The writer's depiction of national patriotic culture is examined in the context of Africa's struggles for political and economic emancipation both past and present. The research examines whether or not the writer's portrayal and understanding of national patriotic culture helps in Africa's political and economic liberation. In that regard, the paper assesses the extent to which the writer's vision of national patriotic culture is progressive and liberatory. The paper contends that Nyamfukudza's *The Non-Believer's Journey* draws people's attention to some of the contradictions inherent in the Zimbabwean liberation struggle. Nyamfukudza seems to centralise these weaknesses than to generate ideas that help Zimbabweans in their struggles against a hostile environment and a hostile people.*

**Keywords:** *Existentialism, national patriotic culture, nihilism, modernist aesthetics, war literature*

### **1. Introduction**

Nyamfukudza's *The Non-Believer's Journey* depicts the Zimbabwean Second Chimurenga war. In the novel, Nyamfukudza exposes the contradictions in that struggle. He questions the commitment of nationalist leaders to the armed struggle itself and to the ideals of that struggle. He also exposes the internal struggles that characterized the African camp. The paper views this approach as a positive development in war literature since writers occupy the chair of history and as such must mask no facts. However, Nyamfukudza embraces some modernist aesthetics to project art that encourages African people to be defeatist at a time when their politics, economics, culture and dignity are threatened by imperialist forces. It is the argument of this paper that such art is a negation of national patriotic culture since it subverts the African people's efforts to liberate themselves from foreign economic, political and cultural subjugation.

### **2. Designation of Modernism and National Patriotic Culture**

Modernism and national patriotic culture celebrate virtues that are different and conflicting. Nihilism and existentialism are modernist tenets that contradict national patriotic culture. Nihilism is a doctrine that espouses a disbelief in religious philosophies and a belief in nothing. The society is perceived as providing nothing for the realization of the goals of the individual. The individuals are seen as living at the fringes of society each responsible for his problems. Lewis Gordon (ed) (1997:3) argues that existentialism is fundamentally a European historical phenomenon. Existentialists posit that people are entirely free and therefore liable to the decisions they make for themselves in life. Existentialists believe that because of this freedom man has a profound responsibility that brings a lot of agony and suffering upon him. Nihilists-existentialists elevate the individual and see him as solitary and unbound. Their approach to life is pessimistic and cynical. Nihilists-existentialists reject the existence of communal ethos and to them everything in society is permissible. Modernism therefore celebrates the meaninglessness of life and fragmentation of society.

In this research, national patriotic culture is conceptualized as a body of principles, value systems and attitudes that constitute a people's worldview in matters that relate to political, economic, cultural and social survival and security. National patriotic culture hinges on commitment to and identification with the will and quest of oppressed people in the past, present and future. It facilitates active participation and contribution to the mass popular struggle to liberate humanity from socio-economic, political and cultural structures that seek to thwart that which defines humanity, that is, freedom.

National patriotic culture does not only mean identifying with aspirations and hopes of the generality of the struggling African people. It also means believing in the ability of ordinary African people to take control, determine their destiny and transform the world to make it a better habitat for all. National patriotic culture is founded upon and celebrates dialogue, communication, mutual respect and equality among those who seek to participate in the altruistic struggle to transform their society for the better. Patriots respect and approach one another as defenders of the limitless possibilities represented by the human spirit.

National patriotic culture is therefore the basis for struggle against a morbid kind of awareness which stultifies the creativity of the African masses fighting against a hostile system. It means assuming responsibility which in turn creates commitment to life-giving

and life-affirming attitudes which engender fulfillment. It enables people to participate in the struggles of our times against imposed identities, enslaving restrictions and incapacitating mythologies created about oppressed people by their conquerors.

While modernism celebrates fragmentation of society, national patriotic culture eulogizes societal cohesion. National patriotic culture believes that all members who constitute a particular society should form a common front in confronting challenges that threaten their existence. While modernism elevates the individual above the society, national patriotic culture accepts individualism when it correlates with societal aspirations. It puts at the center active participation by all members of the society. National patriotic culture does not analyse an individual outside his problems because his problems are also the challenges of his society.

While modernism believes that the individual is free and unbound, national patriotic culture believes that the individual is bound by the aspirations and projected goals of his society. Where modernism sees everything in society as permissible, national patriotic culture believes that society has values and taboos that govern human action according to the philosophy of life lived by that society. Where modernism's approach to life is skeptical and cynical national patriotic culture approaches life's challenges in an optimistic way. Modernism believes that life's challenges are perpetual and so modernists celebrate human problems. National patriotic culture believes in the ability of people to surmount hostile systems that stand in the path of their existential agendas. In view of these arguments, this research views modernist aesthetics as anathema to national patriotic culture.

### 3. The Non-Believer's Journey

Stanley Nyamfukudza and authors like Charles Mungoshi fall under generation two writers of Veit-Wild (1993)'s classification which she labels a "lost generation" because its works reflect an unpatriotic tone. Sam, the protagonist in *The Non-Believer's Journey* is skeptical of the capacity of Africans to dislodge imperialism. Nyamfukudza is of the view that it is foolhardy for anyone to even think of challenging the colonial structures. Sam is a wanderer and does not contribute to the struggle of the Zimbabwean people to liberate themselves. Through Sam, Nyamfukudza suggests that it is futile to wage an armed struggle against foreign domination. In this work of art, Sam's disillusionment with the war explains why he does not join it, why during a *pungwe* meeting at his rural home in Mutoko he is alienated from the masses and from the proceedings. Sam condemns his father for not advising his young brother, Maki, not to join the liberation struggle.

Nyamfukudza's disillusionment with the liberation war contradicts national patriotic culture whose purpose during the colonial epoch was to inspire Africans to dismantle the imperialist exploitative structures. His disenchantment with the struggle is a case where a disparity with the works of writers like Ngugi can be drawn. Ngugi's characters in his works are judged in the light of their involvement in the struggle for the well-being of their communities. They are examined by the extent to which they comply with the celebrated moral values, worldview and philosophies of life of their communities. Ngugi lambasts his characters' detachment from their society for example Mugo in *A Grain Of Wheat*. He underscores the importance of unity and martyrdom during the struggle of the Kenyan people. Sam, the protagonist in Nyamfukudza's *The Non-Believer's Journey* asserts his right to die by his own choice and not by the demands of his society's imperatives:

- No, I'll choose my own way of letting them sort out their problems, before they call on me to die for their rivalries. We have two armies fighting Smith's army and they sort each other out when they meet, forgetting their common enemy, bloody Ndebele, bloody Shona bang bang. No, I won't, I want to be sure I don't go that way (p.23).

Nyamfukudza puts to prominence the internal struggles between the Zanla and Zipra forces. The internal struggles that Nyamfukudza intonates actually camouflage the importance of sacrifice in the liberation war as Sam does not want to be a victim of the tribal-fighting. Nyamfukudza's approach waters down the spirit of resilience and encourages division instead of cohesion. The emphasis on the tribal division especially between the Shona and the Ndebele is a colonial invention meant to advance the divide and rule policy whose objective was to keep the Shona and the Ndebele divided. Frantz Fanon (1963:57) correctly posits that "By its very structure, colonialism is separatist and regionalist. Colonialism does not simply state the existence of tribes, it also reinforces it and separates them". Nyamfukudza's *The Non believer's Journey* weakens the resistance movement in Zimbabwe by compartmentalizing the resistance forces. Nyamfukudza further weakens the liberation struggle by stressing the struggles within the Zanu camp that led to the death of some of the nationalist leaders. In a discussion with Raina, Sam wonders whether his friend Simba, who had joined the liberation struggle is still alive. If he had died Sam asks:

- Was it a worthwhile death, did he die fighting the enemy or was it one of those stupid death, our own people fighting among themselves in the training camps because this or that commander comes from this or that part of the country---- Chitepo is dead, and who knows how many others? (p.21).

One can contend that Nyamfukudza is highlighting one of the reasons why it took Zimbabwe so many years to be liberated. These struggles –within-the struggle affected the liberative powers of national patriotic culture. Nyamfukudza is capturing history as it happened and is therefore drawing people's attention to some of the weaknesses among Zimbabweans that continue to threaten national patriotic culture even in the contemporary dispensation. However, Nyamfukudza's weakness is that he seems to centralize these divisions than to generate ideas that go beyond mere dichotomies. One then wonders why and how the war was won in the end if these squabbles were the order of the day. By emphasizing them, the author invites readers to distance themselves away from the struggle for independence. He creates revulsion and repugnance towards the struggle. He therefore demobilizes potential recruits and participants in the struggle. To that extent, he undermines a liberative national patriotic culture.

Sam regards the hope for freedom from the white man's rule as an 'intoxicating dream' which is in fact 'the longings of drunken itinerants'. These are discourses that decry participants in the struggle for liberation not as visionaries but as deluded, irrational and misguided insurgents, irredeemable victims of illusions. Nyamfukudza's attitude towards the struggling people of colonized Zimbabwe is not different from the official attitude of the colonial times in which liberation fighters were described as 'small groups

of malcontents and insurgents' bent on spoiling the 'peace' prevailing in Rhodesia. Nyamfukudza therefore, contributes in the creation of incoherence, fragmentation and discomfiture.

Nyamfukudza does not believe that the revolution will bring any fundamental transformations because of the neocolonial order. Sam tells Raina that "If we escape political enslavement, they won't mind so much, as long as we take good care of their invested monies, working for peanuts, exporting all the profit back to them. I can't see anyway out of that one, that's the real trap..." (p.19). Nyamfukudza's work teaches society to conform to its subordinate position and to be content with that order. Unlike Ngugi who believes that everything is in motion and Africans have the capacity to alter the world order to suit their requisite. Nyamfukudza believes the African condition cannot be improved and he is of the view that African struggles have reached a ceiling. He is sceptical about the post-independence situation in Zimbabwe. Nyamfukudza, therefore, suggests that it is futile to wage a war against imperialists because even if they win politically, they will not win economically.

Rino Zhuwarara (2001:134) posits that Nyamfukudza has been influenced by the subversion of the goals of liberation movements in African countries that attained liberation ahead of Zimbabwe. This would explain the disillusionment and non-committal stance that one observes in Sam. During the 1970s when the armed struggle had intensified in Zimbabwe, some African states had become independent and writers like Armah, Odinga and Achebe had already published works depicting the betrayal of the revolution by the petit-bourgeoisie leadership. Zhuwarara concludes that Zimbabwean writers of the 1970s might have predicted a similar course for Zimbabwe.

However, authors should not be weighed down by negativism to the extent of retreating into self-effacing nothingness. By opting for disillusionment and futile protests, Nyamfukudza actually suspends the quest for better life prospects that his readers yearn for. It is the submission of this study that Nyamfukudza's vision is oppressive because it clamps a people to incessant servitude. It would be a betrayal of one's responsibilities as an artist to scheme art that advocates surrender on the bedrock of the negative transformations of some independent African societies. Instead of preaching capitulation, writers should draw lessons from the shortcomings of those independent African states and strive to impart alternative pathways of development that will guarantee progressive transformations of the societies. The prerequisite to that effect is the attainment of the political space that will ensure the formulation and implementation of progressive policies.

Sam questions the nationalist leaders' commitment to the armed struggle itself. In a discussion with his father, Sam points out that while the children of the peasants were fighting and perishing in the bush, the nationalist leaders were sending their children to study abroad. Referring to the children of the nationalist leaders, Sam says "They are all in England, America, West Germany and so on getting fine education while they sit the war out there---and there you sit, like every other peasant, your children getting killed, and you will probably end up with nothing". (p.98). The author does not see that the peasants are not fighting for the leaders but for themselves. They understand very well that by participating in the struggle they are in fact asserting their humanity. They are not worried about who has contributed and who has not. They are driven by the national patriotic culture to serve and liberate. They see themselves as liberators fighting for the freedom of their nation. Nyamfukudza's vision of national patriotic culture in Zimbabwean liberation struggle is therefore, conformist and retrogressive. He downplays the positive role of a national patriotic culture during national struggles.

While it is true that a national patriotic culture masks diverse interests of different classes, during the liberation struggle it is necessary to create a unified force against political domination, economic marginalisation and oppression in general. African art should make society aware of its potential in its struggles to survive and not to teach docility and resignation. Ngugi in Lindfors and Kothandaraman (2001:163) rightly posits that "In my view the key thing is continuing to struggle all the time and not to be educated into accepting defeat, into accepting that very negative view of human nature that things never change". Identification with the struggles of society is the essence of African art and of national patriotic culture. Nyamfukudza's cynicism with the Zimbabwean liberation war is therefore anathema to the responsibilities of African writers and to national patriotic culture. Donald Crosby in L. Gordon (ed) (1997:25) notes that:

→ The existential nihilist judge's human existence to be pointless and absurd. It leads nowhere and adds to nothing. It is entirely gratuitous, in the sense that there is no justification for life, but also no reason not to leave. Those who claim to find meaning in their lives are either dishonest or deluded. In either case, they fail to face up to the harsh reality of the human situation.

Nyamfukudza's cynicism is shown by his portrayal of the ugly side of the liberation war. He compares political activists in Highfield to tribal thugs and he paints a picture of guerrillas as fighters who caused suffering in the rural areas by murdering people who were labeled 'sell-outs'. Sam's uncle Mr Machi and later Sam are killed by freedom fighters. Nyamfukudza incorporates the nihilist-existentialist aesthetics which are not at one with African art.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study has argued that Nyamfukudza invalidates a patriotic culture in *The Non-Believer's Journey*. His statement is that it is futile to wage an armed struggle against colonialists since nothing changes in a positive direction even after winning the war politically. Nyamfukudza projects a hopeless future because of the manipulative and capitalist temperament of African leaders. Sam is cynical about township politicians who do not go out to fight and is also sceptical of the guerrillas. Sam is critical of the colonial Governmentality and pessimistic about the ability of African nationalist leaders to positively transform their countries along the road to socialism for the benefit of African masses. He is suspicious of the white racists and equally so of the African politician and the struggle. Sam therefore does not believe in the possibility of a better African future. It has also been argued that Nyamfukudza undercuts national patriotic culture and portrays characters that are anti-cultural, solitary and vulnerable, characters that stand

peripheral, detached and remote in a state of precarious isolation, characters who are not reconciled to their society and who see their community as trapped and doomed to live a life of futility. To Nyamfukudza the potential of the African leaders to hijack the revolution acts as a permanent obstruction to the African revolution. He conceives the betrayal of the revolution as the end of the struggle.

This research has argued that African art should portray Africans as active participants with the cultural, physical and intellectual dexterity to surmount barricades and challenges in life. Good art from an African point of reference is not an end in itself but should constitute the basis for the struggle of the masses. It has been argued that to teach society defeat and surrender is a negation of national patriotic culture. It has been contended that Nyamfukudza's approach discharges art of its responsibility in African societies. It places a ceiling to the capabilities and potentialities of the African people to concoct a better habitat for themselves, a habitat in which the aspirations of the people direct the pace and path of development. It has been attested that African art should reveal to the African people possibilities and potentialities in real life. Nyamfukudza's disillusionment with the Chimurenga war removes his work of art from the rhythm of African life because African art must be part of African struggles. It has also been argued that Nyamfukudza seems to be informed by modernism which partly disconnects him from the aspirations of his community. He is a non-believer whose work lacks African foundation. The modernist aesthetics that Nyamfukudza embraces, therefore, stand in contradiction to national patriotic culture. His vision in *The Non-Believer's Journey* is accordingly bleak and retrogressive.

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