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From silence to agency: The evolution of women in Chinodya's *Harvest of Thorns* and *Child of War*

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This article examines the evolution of female characters in Shimmer Chinodya's *Harvest of Thorns* and *Child of War (written under his pen name Ben Chirasha)*. Across these texts, the narrative trajectory shifts from the constraints of deeply patriarchal societies towards the assertion of conspicuous matriarchal agency. The diminishing hold of patriarchal stereotypes in these works functions as a literary protest against the subjugation, precarity, marginalisation and violence experienced by women. Through close reading, the study traces the gradual evolution of female characters whose transformations dismantle entrenched patriarchal structures designed to restrict women's growth. In moments of awakening, some characters actively rebel against their husbands, whom they come to identify as agents of oppression. Such acts of resistance reposition women in the social hierarchy, enhancing their visibility and disrupting the traditional patterns embedded within patriarchal cultures. The analysis reveals that equitable access to education emerges as a decisive catalyst in the emancipation of women from subordination. Education not only equips women with the tools to challenge toxic, men-dominated relationships but also exposes the structural disadvantages inherent in accepting such conditions. Without this enlightenment, an uneducated woman may misinterpret her suffering as an inherent element of womanhood.

Contribution: This article shows how education and empowerment are narratively produced in Chinodya's fiction as motifs that shape character development and thematic resolution. Through close reading, it demonstrates how the evolving representation of female agency not only reconfigures patriarchal paradigms within Zimbabwean war narratives, but also gestures toward the narrative possibilities through which such agency becomes thinkable.

Keywords: feminism; patriarchy; subordination; freedom; misogyny; rape culture.

Introduction

The advancement of women's rights remains one of the most pressing global issues of the 21st century, a concern sharply foregrounded at the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, China, in September 1995. This landmark event provided a global platform for articulating women's issues and advocating systemic changes aimed at empowering women across the political, social and economic spheres (United Nations 1995). Its far-reaching influence precipitated institutional reforms in numerous countries, including South Africa and Zimbabwe, where ministries dedicated to women and children's affairs have been established to ensure gender-sensitive policies and programmes (United Nations 1995). Central to the Beijing Declaration was the imperative that gender-sensitive development policies should be designed, implemented, and monitored with women's full participation, underscoring the global consensus on the necessity of women's empowerment at all societal levels (United Nations 1995). Prior and post the Beijing conference, African literature reflects these feminist ideals, as authors like Shimmer Chinodya foreground the struggles and resilience of women navigating postcolonial societies. Ebeogu (1993) highlights how Zimbabwean women depicted in war literature embody dual identities: 'long-suffering and courageous', but also symbolically maternal, representing the nation's protectors amid crisis (p. 130). The fusion of feminist and nationalist imagery aligns with a broader literary movement wherein black male writers such as Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Chinua Achebe engage deeply with the politics of gender and resistance to patriarchy. For instance, in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Mugo's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976), a young woman articulates a fierce rejection of male oppression rooted in both colonial and patriarchal violence (Wa Thiong'o & Mugo 1976):

> All my life I have been running. On the run. On the road. Men molesting me. I was once a dutiful daughter. A nice Christian home … The headmaster wanted to do wicked things with me … My father called me an idler and sent me to pick leaves for that cruel settler, Mr Jones … A girl cannot run, run, run all her life. (p. 41)

The girl's testimonial rejects not only gendered violence but also the complicity of Christian and colonial patriarchal structures, signalling a writerly commitment to foregrounding women's autonomy in a society structured by intersecting oppressions. Similarly, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Matigari* (1987) presents the character Guthera, whose narrative encapsulates the brutal intersections of political repression and sexual violence. The superintendent's coercive demand for sexual favours in exchange for her father's freedom exemplifies how colonial patriarchal power exploits women's bodies as sites of domination. Yet Guthera's steadfast refusal – 'You are carrying your father's life between your legs' (Wa Thiong'o 1987:35) – asserts female agency even amid overwhelming oppression, challenging dominant narratives of female vulnerability.

The theme of female resistance can be traced in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's earlier work, *The River Between* (1965), in which Muthoni rejects her father's orders and proceeds with her circumcision agenda – weakening patriarchal control and endorsing female resistance. Although her death following the ritual is tragic, her defiance inaugurates a legacy embraced by her sister Nyambura, who chooses autonomy over patriarchal obedience by eloping with Waiyaki (Wa Thiong'o 1965). In *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Achebe introduces matriarchal power as a counterpoint to dominant patriarchal authority, exemplified in Okonkwo's forced exile to Mbanta, the 'motherland', affirming the cultural centrality of maternal lineage and protection (Achebe 1958:94).

This complex portrayal challenges monolithic views of African gender dynamics by recognising women's foundational role within the socio-political fabric. However, despite these progressive literary interventions, critiques such as Mutekwa (2023:42), argue that women's empowerment often provokes backlash rooted in male anxieties over losing traditional patriarchal privileges. She notes that 'empowering women is premised on the perceived or real loss of men's traditional patriarchal privileges', a perspective that underscores the persistence of patriarchal hegemony and the gendered nature of power struggles. Moreover, Mutekwa problematises the narrative that men's experiences of emasculation justify domestic violence and infidelity as coping mechanisms, emphasising instead that women's empowerment should be understood as enhancing societal development rather than diminishing male identity (Mutekwa 2023).

This article interrogates the nuanced evolution of female subjectivity and agency in the postcolonial African context through the literary lens of *Harvest of Thorns* and *Child of War*. It explores how power structures operate to subordinate women, examines women's roles within liberation movements and finally traces how political independence and equitable education have contributed to the dismantling of toxic masculinities. Through a critical engagement with these texts, the article illuminates the intersection of personal and political emancipations that characterise women's ongoing struggles and triumphs in postcolonial societies.

Theoretical framework

The article adopts feminism as its primary theoretical lens to analyse and interpret the selected works, situating them within the expansive and evolving discourse on gender equity and the dismantling of entrenched patriarchal power structures. Feminism, as Larson (2001) succinctly frames it:

> [*i*]s about our entire grounding as human beings seeking equal attention in all areas of our existence. It is vital for women to seek this resolution through their different voices. (p. 84)

Feminism, therefore, is not merely perceived as an abstract intellectual inquiry but as a dynamic, transformative praxis oriented towards social justice and systemic change. Central to this transformative imperative is what hooks (2015) terms 'feminist pedagogy' – a process that critiques and deconstructs power relations while actively fostering intersectional solidarities and empowerment among marginalised groups.

Adichie's (2013) widely disseminated TEDx talk, *We Should All Be Feminists*, further distils the core of feminist thought for contemporary audiences by framing feminism as a universal concern:

> A feminist is a man or a woman who says, 'Yes, there is a problem with gender as it is today, and we must fix it. We must do better'.

The conceptualisation pivots feminism away from an exclusive 'women's issue' and repositions it as a collective societal responsibility, emphasising the need to challenge hegemonic masculinities and rigid gender norms that perpetuate inequality and violence (Adichie 2013). As Moreton-Robinson (2020) elaborates, such an inclusive approach to feminism is essential for decolonising gender discourses, especially within African and postcolonial contexts in which patriarchal power is inextricably linked to colonial legacies and racial hierarchies.

Women and Gender Studies (2023) consider feminism 'a multi-disciplinary approach to sex and gender equality understood through social theories and political activism', reflecting its adaptability and comprehensive scope across diverse disciplines and cultures. The trajectory of feminist theory has evolved from early waves focused primarily on legal equality and suffrage to third- and fourth-wave feminisms that interrogate the social constructions and performativity of gender, as articulated by Butler (1990) in her seminal work *Gender Trouble*. Butler's concept of gender performativity disrupts the binary and fixed nature of gender roles, encouraging an understanding of gender as fluid and contingent – a crucial lens for interpreting literary texts that portray women challenging normative expectations.

Contemporary feminist scholarship increasingly foregrounds intersectionality, a term coined by Crenshaw (2022:145), which addresses how gender intersects with race, class, ethnicity, sexuality and other social categories to produce complex matrices of oppression and privilege. Collins (2019) further elaborates on intersectional feminism as a necessary

corrective to universalising narratives of womanhood, which erase the experiences of women of colour and of those from marginalised communities. This intersectional perspective aligns with the postcolonial feminist critique advanced by scholars such as Mohanty (2003) and Oyěwùmí (1997), who challenge Western feminist paradigms that fail to account for the specific socio-political realities of African women under colonial and patriarchal domination. Eagleton's (1996:115) critique of the 'founding principle' of patriarchy – which positions the male subject as normative and woman as the excluded 'other' – remains salient in contemporary analyses of gender relations. This binary opposition is central to the feminist endeavour to destabilise gender hierarchies by deconstructing the ideological apparatuses that naturalise male dominance and female subordination (Scott 2018).

The novels under study engage with this framework by portraying women who, through their evolving consciousness and resistance, reject imposed gender roles and assert their agency within oppressive socio-political contexts. Moreover, feminist literary criticism recognises literature as a site where hegemonic gender ideologies are both reproduced and contested (Moi 2002). The female characters' journeys towards self-definition and autonomy illustrate the feminist project in action – challenging marginalisation, reclaiming subjectivity and constructing autonomous spaces that resist patriarchal constraints (Gilbert & Gubar 2000; Moi 2002). As Moi (2002) argues, literature serves not only as a mirror reflecting social realities but also as an agent provocateur capable of catalysing cultural and political transformations towards gender justice.

In recent feminist discourse, attention has also turned to the role of education in the empowerment of women and the dismantling of patriarchal norms (Unterhalter 2021). Educational equity facilitates critical consciousness-raising that enables women to recognise and contest structural inequalities, a theme recurrent in the novels under discussion. This aligns with hooks' (2015) insistence that feminist pedagogy must be praxis-oriented, linking theory with lived experience and action for social change.

In sum, the feminist theoretical lens provides a robust analytical framework through which the selected literary works can be understood as part of a broader socio-political project – one that seeks to disrupt patriarchal power, affirm women's agency and imagine more equitable gender relations.

Women fighters in the war of liberation

Harvest of Thorns presents Zimbabwe's liberation struggle through the experiences of Benjamin Tichafa, but the novel also highlights the significant yet often overlooked role of women during and after the war.

Women are portrayed as emotional anchors, silent sufferers and active participants in the struggle. Benjamin's mother, Shamiso, represents resilience and sacrifice. When her husband Clopas abandons her for another woman, Muchaneta, she endures poverty, fear and uncertainty while her son joins the guerrillas, symbolising the countless women who sustained families and communities during the conflict. Through her quiet strength, the novel emphasises the heavy domestic and emotional burdens women carried. During the protracted war, young women cook and deliver food to the guerrillas who reside in the mountain thickets, putting their lives in danger of being mauled by wild animals or being caught in crossfire. In addition, they find themselves intimate with the guerrillas despite their young age, reflecting another dimension of painful women's experience.

At the training camps and within the liberation movement, women are also present as fighters and supporters. However, they face exploitation and gender-based power imbalances. The men-dominated leadership often marginalises them, exposing contradictions between the ideals of freedom and the continued oppression of women. After independence, there is a significant shift in the way women appear to perceive the world. Benjamin's mother confronts her estranged husband and begins to mention equal rights. Her daughter Esther joins the chorus by holding her father to account. Caught in the pandemonium of voices seeking accountability, Clopas capitulates.

In *Child of War*, Hondo's mother and other women play central roles in revealing the emotional, social and moral impact of war on ordinary people. Through the women, the novel highlights both the suffering and the strength of women in conflict situations. After the death of her husband, Hondo's mother is portrayed as a symbol of resilience and unconditional love. Despite the violence and instability around her, she struggles to protect and guide her son. She provides emotional security in a world filled with fear, becoming Hondo's moral compass. Even when resources are scarce and danger is constant, she prioritises her child's survival and dignity. Her endurance reflects the sacrifices many mothers make during wartime, often carrying the burden of holding families together when fathers are absent, killed or displaced.

Women in Zimbabwe's liberation war: Multifaceted roles in *Harvest of Thorns* and *Child of War*

Shimmer Chinodya's works present a layered and multifaceted image of women as both freedom fighters and indispensable supporters in Zimbabwe's liberation struggle. In his portrayal, women are not framed merely as passive casualties of war but as active participants in combat, logistics, political mobilisation and community protection. Chinodya's depiction of women reflects the complexity documented in recent historiography, in which women's wartime agency has been reframed to challenge earlier men-centred liberation narratives (Goredema 2021; Lyons 2020; Muchena 2018; Muzondidya 2022; Nhongo-Simbanegavi 2000).

Women as combatants: Breaking gender barriers

In *Harvest of Thorns*, Shimmer Chinodya disrupts entrenched gender stereotypes by depicting women as equal partners in the liberation struggle. The novel portrays female guerrillas not only undergoing the same rigorous military training as their male counterparts but also actively participating in combat operations, carrying weapons, and sharing the burdens of domestic chores and camp life. This representation directly challenges long-held myths surrounding women's physical and emotional capacities in warfare, such as the belief that menstrual cycles would impair combat effectiveness or that women were inherently unsuited for the brutal demands of guerrilla warfare (Chinodya 1989:243). Chinodya's narrative thus serves as a literary corrective to gendered assumptions, highlighting women's resilience and indispensable contribution to Zimbabwe's liberation.

Harvest of Thorns and *Child of War* seemingly portray historical realities that emerged during Zimbabwe's liberation war. Robert Mugabe, speaking to the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) guerrilla forces, famously declared that women had 'demonstrated beyond all doubt' their capability to perform on par with men in combat, advocating equal promotion and leadership roles (Kriger 1992:192). Mugabe's pronouncement was not merely rhetorical; it reflected an evolving ideological position within the liberation movement that began to recognise the revolutionary potential of dismantling patriarchal norms as part of the broader anti-colonial struggle. Empirical data from the late 1970s substantiate the significant involvement of women in the liberation war. Kriger's (1992) ethnographic fieldwork in Mutoko, Zimbabwe revealed that by December 1979, women comprised approximately one-third of ZANU's armed forces. The figure was corroborated by Sally Mugabe at the 1980 Women and Development Conference in Copenhagen, where she emphasised the indispensable role women played in the liberation movement (Kriger 1992).

More recent scholarship confirms this substantial female participation. Muchena (2018) argues that such unprecedented levels of female combatant engagement fundamentally disrupted patriarchal social structures in Zimbabwe, signalling a rupture from traditional gender roles that had historically relegated women to domestic and reproductive spheres. However, the revolutionary rhetoric of gender equality within the liberation war coexisted with persistent male dominance in the movement's leadership. Ncube (2021a) notes that although women fought alongside men, leadership positions within ZANU and the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) remained overwhelmingly male. This dynamic reflects a broader paradox in liberation struggles globally, in which women's frontline contributions were celebrated symbolically but often sidelined politically once independence was achieved (Tripp 2015).

Nonetheless, the symbolic power of women guerrillas – embodied in the image of armed women defying gendered expectations – had profound cultural reverberations, challenging norms about women's roles in society. Maposa (2020b) highlights that the visibility of female combatants in both the military and the popular discourse inspired subsequent generations of Zimbabwean women to envision themselves as legitimate actors in traditionally men-dominated arenas such as security forces and political leadership. This cultural shift can be situated within the framework of feminist social movements that emerged post-independence, which sought to translate wartime contributions into tangible rights and representation for women (Chitando & Kumbirai 2016). The legacy of female guerrillas thus extends beyond the battlefield into contemporary struggles for gender equity and political participation.

Further complicating this narrative is the tension between the formal recognition of women's military service and the lived realities of gendered power imbalances within liberation movements and post-independence Zimbabwe. As Zihlangu (2017) discusses, many female ex-combatants faced marginalisation and inadequate support upon reintegration into civilian life, reflecting a disconnect between their wartime valorisation and peacetime disenfranchisement. Such challenges underscore the limitations of symbolic gender equality when not matched by systemic socio-economic reforms. Moreover, feminist scholars have critiqued the romanticisation of women as 'warriors' within liberation discourse, arguing that this can inadvertently reinforce militarised masculinities by valorising combat roles over other forms of women's agency (Cock 2010; Stiehm 2022).

In the Zimbabwean context, however, female combatant participation did catalyse shifts in gender consciousness, albeit within a complex matrix of patriarchal structures that persisted during and after the war. Literary works like *Harvest of Thorns* thus perform an essential function by narratively reclaiming female agency in the liberation struggle, situating women's experiences and contributions at the centre rather than the margins of national history. Chinodya's representation aligns with feminist calls to re-examine histories of war and resistance through an intersectional lens that recognises gender alongside race, class and colonialism (Yuval-Davis 2019).

The novel's depiction of women sharing weapons, chores, and battles humanises female fighters, dismantling stereotypes of passivity and victimhood, and foregrounds their active role in shaping Zimbabwe's political future. Intersectional feminist reading gets impetus from the broader postcolonial feminist critique, which interrogates how colonial and patriarchal legacies jointly shaped gender relations in African societies (Mohanty 2003). As Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021) argues, the liberation struggle was simultaneously a contest against colonial oppression and a battleground for redefining indigenous gender norms. The inclusion of women in combat roles represented a radical, if uneven, step towards this redefinition.

In sum, women's participation as combatants in *Harvest of Thorns* and in Zimbabwe's liberation history signals a critical disruption of gendered power hierarchies. While gender equality remained incomplete within the leadership and post-war socio-political structures, the wartime experiences of female fighters catalysed cultural and political shifts that continue to inform feminist struggles in Zimbabwe today.

Women beyond the battlefield: Logistical and educational roles in *Harvest of Thorns*

While much attention often gravitates towards women's visible roles as combatants in liberation struggles, *Harvest of Thorns* extends this representation to encompass the crucial yet frequently overlooked logistical and educational functions women performed. Shimmer Chinodya's narrative foregrounds women like Ropa, who embody a dual identity: trained as guerrilla fighters yet simultaneously bearing responsibility for intellectual and community-building work within the camps. Ropa's role as both a combatant and an educator, tasked with teaching children in the guerrilla camp school, exemplifies the multifaceted contributions women made beyond the battlefield (Chinodya 1989:139). Ropa's portrayal challenges reductive binaries that either valourise women solely as warriors or confine them to domestic and supportive roles, illuminating instead the complex intersections of military, intellectual and social labour. The figure of the 'girl comrades' standing guard over arms stores, clad in military camouflage and armed with bazookas, further subverts stereotypical gender roles often imposed on women in war narratives. Rather than relegating women to mere auxiliary or background roles, Chinodya illustrates their integral participation in high-stakes security and defence operations, underscoring the degree of trust and responsibility bestowed upon female fighters (Chinodya 1989:240). Unapologetically, the image powerfully contests traditional wartime gender norms, which historically situated women's contributions as peripheral – primarily focused on nursing, cooking or logistical support – and instead positions them as active agents of military strategy.

Chinodya's literary representation finds strong resonance in broader scholarly work on African liberation movements. Lyons (2020) highlights that in several anti-colonial struggles across the continent, women's expertise extended well beyond combat to encompass 'logistical intelligence' – an indispensable knowledge set involving terrain familiarity, intricate village food networks, clandestine communication systems and supply route management. Lyons argues that such roles were 'strategically vital, as they ensured the sustenance, mobility, and survivability of guerrilla forces, often determining the success or failure of military campaigns'. Thus, women's contributions were not merely supplementary but foundational to the operational effectiveness of liberation movements. Goredema (2021) further deepens the analysis by conceptualising these activities as 'infrastructural resistance', a framework that captures the indispensable but often invisible forms of labour – logistical coordination, information dissemination and community education – which women provided during liberation struggles. Goredema critiques post-war narratives and formal recognition mechanisms for their failure to adequately acknowledge these contributions, noting that historical and contemporary commemorations tend to valourise direct combat roles while marginalising the equally crucial infrastructural support women supplied. Neglecting such contributions, she argues, perpetuates a limited and militarised understanding of warfare that excludes the diverse and gendered experiences of resistance. Chinodya's depiction of women as educators within the camps also underscores the centrality of knowledge production and transmission to liberation efforts. Camp schools, in which children of guerrillas were taught, became sites of ideological formation and cultural preservation amid war's disruptions (Chitando 2019).

Women such as Ropa thus functioned as custodians of the revolution's future, nurturing a generation imbued with political consciousness and the skills needed to sustain the nascent nation. Such educational roles reflect feminist perspectives on the significance of reproductive and intellectual labour as forms of resistance, challenging conventional valourisation of only overtly violent forms of struggle (Bhattacharyya 2018). Moreover, the integration of educational responsibilities within women's militant identities exemplifies an intersectional form of activism that negotiates multiple sites of power and oppression. As Chitando (2019) and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021) argue, women in liberation movements were situated at the crossroads of gender, race and colonial domination. Their multifaceted roles – combining combat, logistics, caregiving and education – reflect a holistic approach to resistance that contests compartmentalised conceptions of agency. Women's ability to traverse these spheres simultaneously was both a tactical necessity and a profound challenge to patriarchal militarism.

Recent feminist historiography also situates women's logistical and educational roles within the broader socio-political dynamics of postcolonial state formation. According to Maposa (2020), women's wartime labour laid the groundwork for later struggles for gender equity in Zimbabwe, fostering collective solidarity and political consciousness that transcended the war itself. By organising supply chains, educating youth and managing camp infrastructures, women accrued forms of social capital and leadership experience that would prove crucial in post-independence civil society and governance arenas. However, Maposa cautions that despite these significant contributions, post-war gender inequalities often persisted, with many women's efforts relegated to the margins in official histories and policymaking. Furthermore, this multidimensional participation challenges the reductive myth of women's passivity in conflict zones, a narrative critiqued by feminist scholars across disciplines (Enloe 2014; Freedman 2020). Enloe (2014) insists that recognising 'the labour of support

and logistics is critical for understanding the full spectrum of women's involvement in conflict and resistance'. Freedman (2020) adds that such recognition is essential for reshaping post-conflict gender policies and ensuring equitable resource distribution to female veterans and community leaders. Evidently, *Harvest of Thorns* offers a nuanced portrayal of women's complex roles in Zimbabwe's liberation war, emphasising their participation as combatants, logisticians and educators. Chinodya's narrative, supported by a growing body of feminist scholarship, reveals how women's contributions extended well beyond the battlefield, encompassing vital intellectual and infrastructural labour that undergirded the struggle for national liberation. These representations compel a re-evaluation of liberation histories to fully incorporate women's diverse forms of agency and challenge militarised, patriarchal narratives that have long dominated war historiography.

Women as community protectors: Maternal agency in liberation narratives

In liberation literature, women are frequently cast not only as combatants and logisticians but also as pivotal protectors of community and kin, navigating perilous circumstances with courage and strategic acumen. This duality of nurturing and defiance is vividly captured in novels such as *Child of War* and *Harvest of Thorns*, in which maternal figures undertake acts of physical and emotional bravery that transcend traditional gender norms.

In *Child of War*, Hondo's mother embodies this protective role with striking intensity when she breaks the strict curfew imposed by military forces to rescue her son following the death of his father. This moment is pregnant with symbolic and literal weight: it foregrounds a mother's willingness to confront state violence and personal risk to safeguard her offspring (Chinodya 1989:20). Similarly, in *Harvest of Thorns*, Shamiso's midnight search for her sons, Benjamin and Peter, demonstrates the lengths to which women go to protect their families amid the chaos of war and social upheaval. These narrative moments disrupt the stereotypical image of women as passive victims, instead situating them as active agents of survival and resilience.

Scholars Mawere and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015a) argue that wartime conditions catalysed an expansion of women's social roles, thrusting them into traditionally men-coded domains such as physical rescue missions and strategic decision-making under acute duress. The shift was not merely a matter of necessity but also a profound reconfiguration of gendered power relations. Women's engagement in high-risk, decision-intensive activities blurred rigid binaries of masculinity and femininity, contributing to emergent models of female agency that transcended the domestic sphere. Mawere and Ndlovu-Gatsheni highlight how such expanded roles disrupted patriarchal assumptions that women were inherently weak or dependent, revealing their capacity for courage, leadership and political insight even in the most dangerous contexts.

Building on this, Muzondidya (2022) introduces the concept of 'kinship activism' to describe how maternal duty became a conduit for broader political engagement during liberation struggles. Kinship activism encapsulates the intertwining of personal, familial care with collective resistance, illustrating how acts of protection and care were simultaneously acts of political defiance. Through this lens, maternal figures such as Hondo's mother and Shamiso do not merely perform emotional or domestic labour; they actively shape the contours of the liberation movement by safeguarding its human resources and nurturing its future. Their agency operates at the intersection of the intimate and the political, underscoring that the personnel are indeed political in contexts of conflict and social transformation.

Endowing women with manifold roles aligns with the broader feminist analyses of women's roles in conflict and post-conflict societies, which emphasise the multiplicity and complexity of female agency (Cockburn 2010; McKay & Mazurana 2004). Cockburn (2010) argues that women's experiences of war are frequently underestimated because of narrow definitions of combat that overlook caregiving, sheltering and mediation – activities critical to community survival. McKay and Mazurana (2004) similarly assert that women's protective roles challenge the militarised, masculine-centric models of war, inviting a reconceptualisation of conflict dynamics that centres women's diverse contributions. In the Zimbabwean context, these protective maternal roles also intersect with cultural conceptions of motherhood and communal responsibility. According to Chitando and Sadgrove (2020), motherhood in Zimbabwean liberation narratives is often framed as a site of moral and social authority, where women exercise significant influence not only within their families but also in shaping community cohesion and resistance. Women's authority is wielded not through hierarchical dominance but through relational power – care, nurturing and protection – which becomes a form of political capital in contexts of state violence and social disruption. Moreover, the act of breaking curfew or risking punishment to rescue family members signals a deliberate rejection of state-imposed restrictions and a reclaiming of spatial and temporal agency. Dziva (2019) emphasises that these acts of spatial transgression carry profound symbolic resonance, marking women as boundary-crossers who contest colonial and postcolonial regimes' attempts to control bodies and movements. These maternal interventions thus become insurgent acts that challenge authoritarian power structures by asserting the primacy of human relationships and care over state control. Importantly, expansion of women's roles during the war has lasting repercussions in the post-independence era. As Maposa (2020) notes, the empowerment women gained through acts of protection and leadership during the liberation struggle laid the groundwork for their subsequent political participation and activism in Zimbabwe's civil society.

However, she also cautions that post-war state and social structures often sought to re-domesticate women, minimising

their wartime contributions in official histories and public policy. The tension between women's wartime agency and peacetime marginalisation remains a key area of feminist critique and advocacy. The literary portrayals in *Child of War* and *Harvest of Thorns* thus serve as critical counter-narratives to patriarchal historiographies that marginalise women's roles in conflict. By centring maternal protectors like Hondo's mother and Shamiso, Chinodya invites readers to recognise the complex, gendered dimensions of resistance, which encompass both battlefield heroics and the quiet, persistent labour of protection and care. These representations underscore the necessity of broadening the understandings of agency and heroism to include women's contributions as community protectors who sustained the liberation movement not only through arms but also through unwavering commitment to kin and community survival.

Women in supply lines: Feeding the struggle

In *Harvest of Thorns*, Chinodya vividly portrays the critical yet often overlooked role of young women in logistical support, particularly their participation in delivering food supplies to guerrilla fighters. These women depicted carrying enamel pots balanced expertly on their heads, traverse treacherous terrain in single file, a precarious task demanding both physical endurance and acute vigilance (Chinodya 1989:166–167). This image disrupts conventional narratives that marginalise women's contributions to war efforts by highlighting the courage and resilience required to sustain the armed struggle materially and morally. Mpofu (2017) situates such food delivery within the broader framework of women's wartime labour, arguing that the provisioning of sustenance was not a peripheral task but central to maintaining guerrilla fighters' operational effectiveness. Without consistent food supply, fighters' stamina and morale would deteriorate, undermining the entire liberation movement.

Mpofu's ethnographic research in Zimbabwean rural areas reveals that women involved in these supply chains often had to navigate hostile environments, including ambush zones and heavily militarised checkpoints, illustrating that their logistical work was suffused with peril equivalent to that of combatants. Chitando and Togarasei (2020) expand on delivery of food by women to guerrillas, emphasising that the dual pressures faced by women in supply roles – exposure to repression from Rhodesian security forces and strict discipline from guerrilla commanders – placed them in an ambiguous and precarious position. The conventional military distinction between combatant and civilian became blurred, as these women straddled both worlds, functioning as vital lifelines to combat units while remaining vulnerable to accusations of collaboration or disloyalty.

Women's liminal status heightened their susceptibility to violence and social marginalisation, underscoring the gendered dimensions of risk and sacrifice in the liberation war. Recent oral history initiatives spearheaded by Muzondidya (2022) shed further light on the ingenuity and agency exercised by women in these supply roles. Drawing on interviews with former female guerrilla supporters, Muzondidya reveals that women developed sophisticated strategies for evading detection and navigating military surveillance. These included the use of coded language and signals, disguised food containers and the formation of trusted networks for intelligence sharing. Such adaptive tactics reflect a high degree of strategic thinking and collaboration, often absent from men-centric war narratives and memoirs, which tend to valorise frontline combat while neglecting the logistical intricacies underpinning military success.

The strategic importance of these supply lines extends beyond immediate survival needs; it also served as a form of symbolic resistance. By ensuring that fighters were fed and cared for, women maintained the continuity and cohesion of the liberation forces, effectively nurturing the very heart of the revolution. The nurturing role challenges the reductive stereotypes of women as mere supporters and elevates their status to indispensable contributors to the war effort's sustainability. Furthermore, the gendered nature of these supply roles reveals complex intersections between the traditional expectations of women's labour and revolutionary imperatives. While caregiving and food provision may culturally align with women's social roles, in the context of armed struggle, these acts acquire a subversive edge, becoming acts of defiance against colonial and patriarchal oppressions. As Nyamnjoh (2017) notes, the politicisation of such 'feminine' roles disrupts binaries of public and/or private and masculine and/or feminine, showcasing women's capacity to transform everyday acts into potent forms of resistance.

In sum, *Harvest of Thorns*' depiction of women in supply lines serves as a corrective to dominant militaristic historiographies by foregrounding the multifaceted nature of women's wartime contributions. It challenges the marginalisation of women's labour in both literary and historical records, reaffirming that feeding the fighters was not a subsidiary task but a frontline act of courage and resilience that sustained the very possibility of liberation.

Sexual exploitation, consent and the limits of wartime discipline

While *Harvest of Thorns* foregrounds the valour and resilience of women combatants, Chinodya does not shy away from exposing the darker realities of the gendered abuse that persisted within the liberation forces. The troubling sexual relationship between Pasi NemaSellout and the underage Tunhidzai (Chinodya 1989:233–234) epitomises the problematic trope of youthful sexual availability within war literature – a narrative that often obscures the dynamics of coercion and fails to adequately interrogate the notion of informed consent.

Chitauro-Mawema (2019) critically interrogates such portrayals, arguing that they perpetuate a mythologised

acceptance of sexual exploitation in wartime, effectively silencing the experiences of young women who were manipulated or pressured into sexual encounters under duress. Silencing, she contends, reflects broader patriarchal assumptions embedded in military cultures in which age, power, and gender asymmetries render consent a fraught and often illusory concept. In *Harvest of Thorns*, a particular scene involves a guerrilla soldier accused of having sex with a 15-year-old girl, who defends himself by claiming that the encounter was consensual (Chinodya 1989:219). The guerrilla's defence is emblematic of a broader tension within liberation armies: the ambiguous boundaries between voluntary sexual relationships and exploitative encounters in the context of war's chaos. As Enloe (2014) notes, armed conflicts often generate 'sexual economies' wherein women's bodies become sites of control and power struggles, complicating traditional notions of agency. The guerrilla's claim of consent, thus, must be read critically against the structural realities of military hierarchies, gendered vulnerabilities and the psychological pressures facing young female recruits.

In contrast, Chinodya's narrative parallels the more formalised attempts at regulation depicted in *Child of War*, in which a commander publicly punishes a fighter for sexual misconduct (Chirasha 1991:63–64). Ncube (2021) interprets this disciplinary action as an embryonic effort by liberation movements to align their internal ethics with anti-patriarchal principles, demonstrating that the military justice system occasionally sought to curtail abuses, albeit inconsistently and often insufficiently. However, such measures were typically limited in scope and enforcement, reflecting broader systemic challenges in policing gender relations within armed insurgencies that were themselves steeped in patriarchal norms.

Recent scholarship applying intersectional feminist frameworks offers deeper insight into how sexual exploitation in liberation armies was shaped by intersecting axes of oppression. Nyambi and Mangena (2023) argue that vulnerability to sexual abuse was not monolithic but mediated by factors such as age, ethnicity and wartime status. Young recruits, especially those from marginalised ethnic groups or rural backgrounds, often faced compounded risks, as they lacked social capital and support networks that might protect older or more connected women. Layered vulnerability highlights how liberation struggles, while rhetorically committed to equality and justice, reproduced many social hierarchies and exclusions, reflecting a disjuncture between revolutionary ideals and lived realities.

Sibanda (2024a) furthers this critique by examining how trauma narratives of sexual abuse remain marginalised in official commemorations and post-war discourses. The state-sponsored valorisation of masculinised heroism, she argues, systematically erases or downplays women's experiences of sexual violence, contributing to a culture of silence and stigma. Omitting not only re-traumatises survivors but also hinders the development of comprehensive transitional justice mechanisms that acknowledge and address gender-based harms. Sibanda's analysis echoes that of scholars such as Cock (2019) and Hovil (2021), who document similar patterns of gendered erasure in liberation historiographies across Southern Africa.

More broadly, Mawere (2022b) and Chuma (2024) issue warnings about the long-term consequences of liberation narratives neglecting sexual violence. They assert that such oversight undermines the moral legitimacy of the liberation struggle itself by glossing over the injustices perpetrated under the guise of revolutionary discipline. Furthermore, it perpetuates a culture of impunity for post-war gender-based violence, as former combatants and commanders often transition into political or security roles, without accountability for their wartime abuses. Such a lack of accountability complicates contemporary efforts to address violence against women in postcolonial states and challenges simplistic celebratory readings of liberation wars as purely emancipatory.

Thus, Chinodya's nuanced portrayal of sexual exploitation within the liberation forces opens a crucial space for interrogating the limits of wartime discipline and the complexities of consent in violent conflict. It invites a re-examination of the ethical contradictions embedded in liberation movements, urging scholars and policymakers alike to recognise that women's contributions to freedom struggles were frequently shadowed by gendered violence that demands acknowledgement and redress. Addressing these issues is essential not only for historical accuracy but also for fostering gender-sensitive peacebuilding and transitional justice frameworks in Zimbabwe and comparable contexts.

Counter-insurgency roles: Women as opponents of liberation

While dominant liberation narratives often celebrate women as heroic combatants and loyal supporters of revolutionary causes, Chinodya's *Harvest of Thorns* disrupts this monolithic portrayal by introducing Mai Tawanda – a woman whose actions complicate simplistic binaries of loyalty and betrayal. Mai Tawanda's role as a spy for Rhodesian forces and her alleged poisoning of guerrilla food supplies present a stark counterpoint to the idealised figure of the steadfast female comrade. Her motivations, deeply entwined with kinship loyalty to her son serving in the Rhodesian army, reflect the complex web of social, familial and political allegiances that shaped women's experiences during the liberation struggle.

Mai Tawanda's portrayal invites critical engagement with postcolonial feminist frameworks, especially those inspired by Spivak's (1988) seminal concept of the subaltern. Spivak cautions against reductive readings that assume subaltern women's actions can be neatly categorised within nationalist or patriarchal discourses. Instead, she foregrounds the multiplicity of subaltern agency, emphasising that women's choices – often made under extreme duress and within fractured social fields – can resist or subvert dominant

ideological projects, including liberation movements themselves. Mai Tawanda's betrayal, therefore, cannot be simply dismissed as treachery but must be understood within the broader context of survival, kinship obligations and the fraught moral terrain of colonial conflict.

Maposa (2020) expands on the idea by situating such figures within what she terms a 'counter-memory' framework. Counter-memory challenges hegemonic historical narratives by recovering marginalised or suppressed stories that complicate nationalist mythologies. Women like Mai Tawanda, whose agency resists or contradicts the dominant liberation ideology, embody counter-memory by asserting alternative political subjectivities. These narratives force a reconsideration of liberation struggles as complex social phenomena, in which women were not only participants but also critical interlocutors with diverse – and sometimes conflicting – interests.

Recent scholarship corroborates the importance of acknowledging women's roles as opponents or sceptics of liberation. In her study of Zimbabwe's liberation war, Phiri (2021) highlights that many women navigated 'fractured loyalties' shaped by intersecting identities – tribal affiliation, family ties, economic dependence, and personal safety – which sometimes aligned them with colonial authorities or militias rather than the nationalist cause, challenging the simplistic portrayal of the liberation war as a binary struggle between coloniser and colonised, revealing a more fractured social reality in which women's allegiances were fluid and context dependent.

Similarly, Mutasa (2022) argues that women's counter-insurgency roles often stemmed from pragmatic considerations rather than ideological opposition. The threat of brutal reprisals by liberation forces against suspected collaborators or the desperation to protect family members from violence compelled some women to cooperate with colonial forces. Mutasa's oral histories reveal that such decisions, while condemned by official narratives, were survival strategies within a war characterised by pervasive fear and uncertainty. Furthermore, the work of Chitauro and Mungofa (2023) stresses the intersectional dimensions of women's counter-insurgency roles. They note that age, class and ethnicity intersected with gender to shape women's experiences and choices. Older women like Mai Tawanda, often embedded in extended kinship networks, faced different pressures and moral calculations compared to those of younger women recruited as fighters or messengers.

The diversity complicates homogenising narratives of female liberation heroism and calls for a more textured understanding of women's wartime agency. From a theoretical perspective, Mai Tawanda's role destabilises essentialist conceptions of women's liberation. Feminist postcolonial scholars such as Narayan (2020) have critiqued the tendency to universalise women's oppression under patriarchy without adequately accounting for the variegated political and cultural contexts that shape women's subjectivities. Mai Tawanda exemplifies the 'contradictory agency' Narayan describes – in which women's acts of resistance can simultaneously reinforce certain oppressive structures while subverting others.

The symbolic weight of Mai Tawanda's betrayal also poses challenges to post-war reconciliation and memory politics. As Nyamnjoh (2019) argues, post-conflict societies often construct 'official' histories that valourise certain actors while vilifying others, particularly women who transgress prescribed gender and political roles. Such exclusionary memory practices contribute to the marginalisation of women like Mai Tawanda in national narratives and complicate efforts to foster inclusive healing and justice.

In sum, Mai Tawanda's figure, as portrayed in *Harvest of Thorns*, compels a re-examination of women's complex and sometimes contradictory roles in liberation struggles. Her actions demonstrate that women's agency during wartime cannot be confined to heroic or victimised archetypes but must be understood within a broader socio-political matrix that includes resistance to nationalist ideology itself. Recognising these 'counter-memory' narratives enriches our understanding of liberation history and challenges the hegemonic patriarchal frameworks that often dominate postcolonial discourse.

Post-war gender politics: Gains and erosion

Although *Harvest of Thorns* positions women as central to the liberation project, studies such as Goredema (2021) and Muchena (2018) show that these wartime gains were often dismantled in the post-independence period. Former female fighters faced economic marginalisation, limited political representation and the erasure of their contributions from state-sanctioned histories. Muzondidya (2022) contends that this rollback reflects the re-entrenchment of patriarchal nationalism, in which wartime egalitarianism was tolerated as a tactical necessity but abandoned once power was consolidated. Recent scholarship extends this critique into the realm of memory politics. Mavhunga (2023) demonstrates that state-led liberation anniversaries frequently employ selective amnesia, foregrounding male heroism while relegating women's contributions to the background. Dube (2024) builds on this concept by showing how female ex-combatants have turned to grassroots digital memorial projects to counter official silences – an act she terms 'memory activism'. These alternative archives, often hosted on social media and community radio, centre narratives of both heroism and suffering, complicating the triumphalist tone of state history. Such work aligns with Spivak's (1988) call to recover subaltern voices but also reveals how memory is an ongoing political battleground in Zimbabwe.

Women after independence: Subversion and empowerment in Chinodya's *Harvest of Thorns*

Chinodya's *Harvest of Thorns* opens by portraying women as largely submissive and resigned to entrenched patriarchal norms, reflecting a pervasive docility that suppresses

self-assertion and individual ambition. Shamiso, the novel's central female figure, epitomises this acquiescence by silently enduring her husband Clopas's infidelity without protest or recourse to community or religious institutions. Instead of confronting the betrayal, she channels her energies into vending to sustain her fractured family (Chinodya 1989). The portrayal aligns with Masuwa's observation that *Harvest of Thorns* depicts women as 'silent, submissive, and conventional' while simultaneously revealing how 'women have been trained to believe that there is dignity in suppressing their feelings and their thoughts', exposing the underlying 'truth about men's attitudes towards women' (Masuwa 1992:63). Shamiso's initial passivity extends to tolerating Muchaneta, the neighbouring widow who has usurped her husband.

However, the novel's narrative pivot occurs with the return of her son Benjamin from the liberation war, whose confrontational reproach catalyses Shamiso's self-realisation and empowerment. Their exchange underscores a critical tension between enduring traditional gender expectations, heavily influenced by Christian doctrines of meekness, and emergent feminist consciousness: 'You knew about Muchaneta long before she took him away', Benjamin accuses, 'but you didn't put up a fight. You made him think you didn't care'. 'What did you want me to do? Turn myself into the scandal of this township?' 'You are the kind that would offer their enemy the other cheek instead of hitting back' (Chinodya 1989:22–23). Benjamin's critique exposes the restrictive social codes that have bound Shamiso, where 'dignity' functions as a euphemism for acquiescence, motivated by fears of social stigma (Mutekwa 2023).

Yet Shamiso's subsequent rejection of passivity, marked by her resolve to challenge Muchaneta and pursue legal recourse, reflects the postcolonial legal reforms and gender-rights education that have empowered women in Zimbabwe (Chinodya 1989):

> I'm done with forgiving people who dance on my toes … You will split your pay equally between us … I've been meaning to do so, but my pride wouldn't let me. Don't think I don't know my rights. This is not the old days anymore. Women have laws to protect us now. (p. 269)

Shamiso's assertion aligns with international frameworks such as the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which foregrounded women's legal protections and empowerment globally (United Nations 1995). Mutekwa (2023) emphasises that such global policy initiatives have been instrumental in raising female consciousness and agency in Africa, highlighting 'the importance and role of education in female empowerment and emancipation' (Mutekwa 2023:43). However, this female awakening destabilises traditional masculinities, precipitating a crisis of male identity as patriarchal authority is contested by assertive women (Mutekwa 2023). Shamiso's transformation compels Clopas to concede to her demands and confront Muchaneta, disrupting earlier perceptions of male dominance.

Ncube (2014) observes a marked evolution in Chinodya's treatment of women – from the patriarchal and gender-insensitive depictions in earlier works like *Farai's Girls* to the more nuanced feminist portrayals in *Harvest of Thorns* and *Child of War*. Progression serves as evidence of the influence of scholarship and the shifting socio-political terrain of postcolonial Zimbabwe (Ncube 2014). Benjamin's dual role as both provocateur and enabler in his mother's transformation is paradoxical. His invocation of the Christian ethic of turning 'the other cheek' (Chinodya 1989:23) exemplifies how religious doctrine historically buttressed female submission under patriarchy. Feminist critiques, including those by Mutekwa (2023), argue that Christianity – as a colonial legacy – functions as 'one of those instruments used by colonialism and patriarchy to keep women subordinated' (Mutekwa 2023:43). While initially complicit in Shamiso's docility, such paradigms become increasingly incompatible with the postcolonial reality shaped by legal and educational reforms. Shamiso's partial embrace of patriarchal norms is evident in her censure of Benjamin's marriage to Nkazana without customary familial consent (Okeke 2020:35–36). This event reflects the complex negotiation between women's empowerment and persistent traditional expectations, highlighting the ambivalent positions many postcolonial women occupy (Momsen 2020).

Generational continuity in female resistance is embodied in Shamiso's daughter, Esther, whose assertiveness and public support of her mother subvert patriarchal conventions. Esther's elopement with Dickson without paternal approval resonates with the autonomous female figures in African literature, such as Nyambura in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* (Chinodya 1989; Wa Thiong'o 1965). Mutekwa (2023:43) situates Shamiso and Esther within 'gender interventions and realignments' characteristic of the postcolonial gender landscape, in which patriarchal power is increasingly destabilised and reconfigured.

Conclusion

By mapping women's experiences in *Harvest of Thorns* and *Child of War* across combat, logistics, community protection, supply chains, sexual exploitation and counter-insurgency, Chinodya's fiction reflects the messy realities of women's wartime lives. Read alongside recent feminist historiography, these narratives dismantle the myth of the peripheral woman in Zimbabwe's liberation, instead presenting women as indispensable agents whose agency was both enabled and constrained by war's gender politics. The article serves as an additional voice to numerous articles about the need to recognise the role of women both pre- and post-independence.

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