



Searching for the silenced memory

Literary studies in Zimbabwe embark
on the search for alternative narratives

By Tanaka Chidora

The history of a country has many narratives. In Zimbabwe, officialdom propagates a certain direction, while other directions are silenced. But it is not least literary studies that are embarking on the search for a more holistic memory for this nation.

In 1980, the international community recognised Zimbabwe as an independent state. The period that followed was marked by a fight about its history. In the debate about who did what and when, power, affiliation and ownership, such as land possession, played a key role. The historical narratives that arose from this and recur in society's memory again and again allow the ruling political caste in Zimbabwe and its elites to appear the winners. A very specific narrative about the beginnings and present of the Zimbabwean nation and how the efforts of those in power helped lead the country out of colonial rule and into independence thus dominate history curricula in schools. The idea of nationhood is closely linked to the endeavours of certain great men and women, who are commemorated by a monument called Heroes' Acre in Harare. This idea is exclusionary because it allows only a few individuals to be remembered as agents of freedom; all others are to be eternally grateful and permit those who fought for the country to govern and to enjoy the fruits of independence. Only at the university are such narratives subjected to scrutiny. There, historians are exploring how these narratives came about – and what the endgame is.

National consciousness has its pitfalls

After 1980, literary studies departments were established at universities, beginning with the University of Zimbabwe, where the respective modules and texts also adhered to the described narrative of the nation. The nationalism of Zimbabwe's ruling party was often depicted in them as part of the anti-imperialist struggle. Most texts were read from an Afrocentric perspective; anyone choosing a different approach was attacked, whereas those who supported this singular narrative were showered with praise.

However, national consciousness by all means has its pitfalls, and the failure of the ruling party's nationalism, for example, triggered a debate on the national question; historians saw themselves compelled to rethink the common narratives and concentrate on the silence they created. Historians such as the late Terrence Ranger have initiated debates about what he calls "patriotic history", a particular version of history that is supposed to support the ruling party despite its failures, misrule, corruption, violence and dictatorship. Today, many Zimbabwean historians are no longer dealing only with *what* happened but also with *why* there

Police operation against its own people: on 20 November 2019, a crowd had gathered in Harare to listen to a speech by Nelson Chamisa, leader of the MDC Alliance (Movement for Democratic Change). But police use force to break up the gathering – shown here is a policeman kicking a woman with his boots.



Photo: Jekesai Njikizana/AFP

are certain versions of history and what their objective is.

In literary studies, the re-reading of dominant literary texts in Zimbabwe has opened up the possibility of questioning the idea of nationhood and the memory that shapes this idea. With the publication of *Versions of Zimbabwe* (2005), scholars such as Robert Muponde and Ranka Primorac have triggered discussions that allow a re-reading of Zimbabwean literary texts in a way that deconstructs the prevailing patriotic discourse that thrives on silence about the violence inflicted not only on people but also on narratives. But it is not only literary critics who are contributing to this reassessment of the nation and its past but also creative writers whose narratives keep alive the memory of a silenced past.

Government violence is still a taboo subject

Novuyo Rosa Tshuma's *House of Stone* (2018) recalls the ruling regime's violence against the civilian population between 1982 and 1987, violence that is estimated to have cost the lives of 20,000 people. This is a part of Zimbabwe's past which is silenced in public discourse. Novels such as *We Need New Names* (NoViolet Bulawayo, 2013) and *Harare North* (Brian Chikwava, 2009) focus on recent manifestations of



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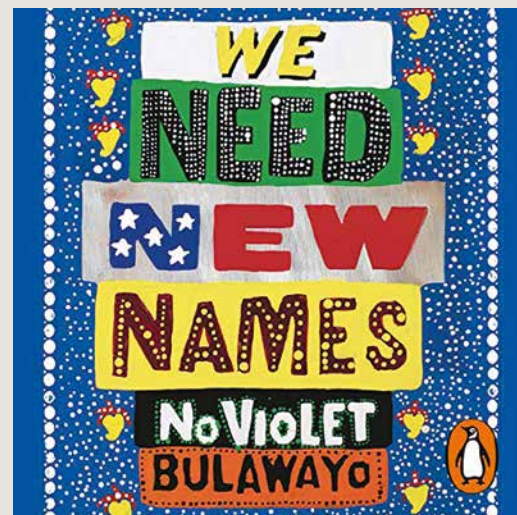
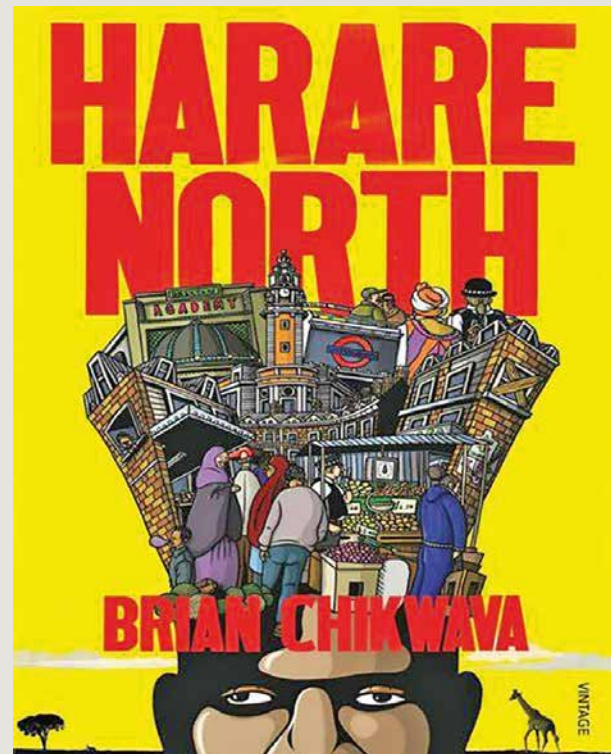
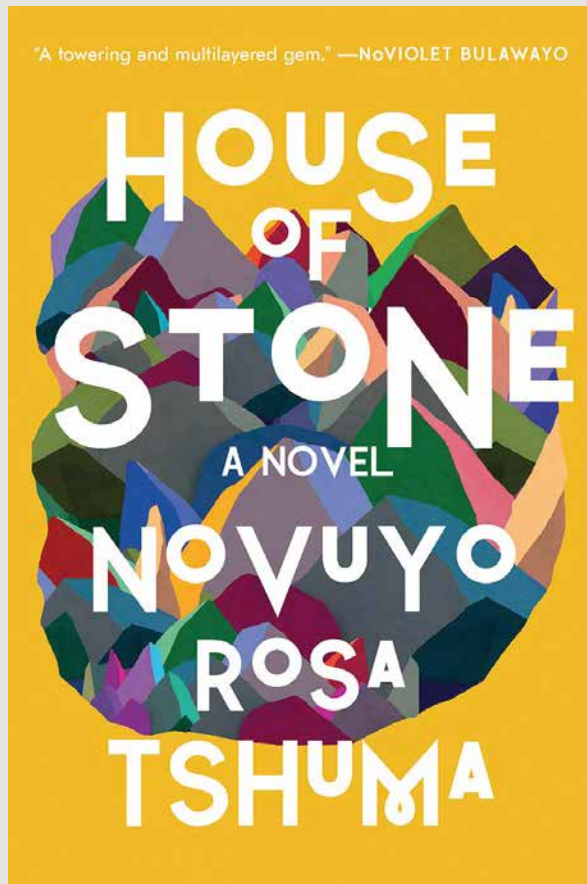
- Since Zimbabwe became independent, an official image of history has asserted itself: the ruling class and elites are worshipped as freedom fighters.
- Universities also initially dealt exclusively with texts that adhered to this narrative.
- Meanwhile, however, historians have triggered debates about what is known as "patriotic history" and are revealing what happened and for what reasons.
- Even today, literary figures who broach the topic of governmental acts of violence can still only do so with the help of certain narrative styles.
- But history and literary studies are working hard to question the official historiography – out of which a new field of research is gradually developing.

violence by the ruling regime, events of the more recent past (the violence that marked the decade after 2000) which have been suppressed to such an extent that some people, when they hear from others about the atrocities that occurred, cannot believe that such a thing could happen in Zimbabwe.

Recent manifestations of violence – the most atrocious of which claimed the lives of 23 people in 2018/2019 when state apparatus opened fire on protesting civilians – still remain a taboo subject in public discourse. Anyone openly recollecting such acts of violence invites the wrath of the regime. By using various narrative styles, including "unreliable narration" or humorous or child narrators, the novels listed above, and many more, steer attention to aspects of Zimbabwe's past and present that have been forgotten – not least through the state's active intervention. This intervention took the shape of censorship and violence against those wanting to speak out or by focusing on narratives that glorify the state at the expense of those who expose its iniquities.

The place for memory studies in Zimbabwe

Even if memory studies is not yet a coherent field in Zimbabwe, the current focus of history and literary studies scholars and creative writers on questioning the state's narratives shows that memory studies could become an important field in Zimbabwe. My own current project looks at violence, memory and literature in Zimbabwe. The literary texts that I have selected



Zimbabwean literature
as a place for alternative
historiography.

for this project are part of an emerging canon that seeks to provoke alternative remembrances of Zimbabwe's past. In my research, I have seen how emerging writers as well as historical and literary scholars in Zimbabwe have already paved the way for these alternative remembrances: they bring to the fore narratives that have so far been silenced, thereby reactivating discussions on the kind of nation we have and the foundation on which it is built. These scholars are already performing some kind of memory studies, even if they themselves are not calling it that. Perhaps these energies ought to be bundled together into something that can be referred to as Zimbabwean memory studies and

in this way create a more powerful focus. My own project is a step in this direction and itself embedded in existing debates on memory and violence in Zimbabwe and the role of literature in remembering a silenced past. Perhaps specific steps should be taken to cement the place of memory studies in Zimbabwe. Conceivable are, among others, interdisciplinary academic seminars, conferences, research projects and the establishment of an association for memory studies in Zimbabwe that networks with international associations for memory studies. ●