

# Imagining the nation: Autobiography, memoir, history or fiction in Peter Godwin's writings

**A B S T R A C T** This paper locates autobiography and memoir within the broad definition and study of identity formation and narrating the nation. The validation of autobiography and memoir is to inscribe identity and project voice, through recourse to selective memory, so that the (re)positioning of the self emerges not only as interrogating the period of becoming but also revealing the fragility and elusiveness of that identity. In examining Peter Godwin's two memoirs – *Mukiwa* and *When a crocodile eats the sun* – this study insists on the elusiveness of mediated identity relative to the privileges, authority and systems of power articulated by the nation state. In narrating a genealogical self and inscribing its position relative to social, power and political spaces, autobiography and memoir insist on transitory rather than permanent identities that cumulatively shape the narrative identity. This narrative and mediated identity is crucial in its very ambivalent location relative to the nation and those that wield and regulate authority in the same nation space. What emerges is a conflicting version to the grand and authorised narratives of the nation. *Mukiwa*, for instance, interrogates white Rhodesia – the colonial and colonised space – its legislature and war against the black liberation movements. In this period, power and privilege reside in whiteness because of colonial appropriation. At the end of this autobiography, independence emerges to erase and sanitise the colonial disease; dissenting voices take to reconciliation and prosperity and enterprise are celebrated. In the sequel, *When a crocodile eats the sun*, the inexorable struggle for independence has shifted power and privilege to black majority. Peter Godwin inserts himself into the political furore of land acquisition in Zimbabwe and adopts a voice and identity whose difference with those in *Mukiwa* is phenomenal. This paper therefore seeks to examine the (in)consistencies of imagining self and the appropriation of identities in autobiography and memoir. It re-conceptualises the critical dimension of the selectivity of memory in scripting self and seeks to interrogate the multivalent identities that emerge. The dictum that history is scripted from the position of those in power and authority is explored to establish the dynamics of domination and subordination: the spatial, moral, social and political location of the dissident narrator relative to the constituent events of the narrative is crucial to an understanding of the veracity and historicity of autobiography.

**Keywords:** mediated identity, domination, subordination, negotiated space, ideological becoming, dynamics of privilege, developmental narrative, marginality, agency, cultural tools, appropriation, double consciousness/ duality, gaze/surveillance, access, dialogue, subject, reciting/re-telling

## 1. Introduction

This paper underscores that memoirs and autobiography are records of facts and events in connection with the particularities and peculiarities of defined historical periods. In situating and contextualising Peter Godwin's memoirs within autobiographical discourse, this study also examines therefore the processes of constructing identities that is evidently the protocol of the memoirist. I submit that the basic values expressed in both texts, *Mukiwa* and *When a crocodile eats the sun*, emanate from the pre-eminence of individualism, an unbending sense of superiority and the legacy of property.

In 'Autobiography, allegory and the construction of self' Herman (1995) chastises 'the fictiveness of discourse that purports to describe the history of a self'. He argues that autobiographies are not bare chronicles of fact but 'artful manipulation of details and events ... in the construction of a particular persona as a self'. The fictive enters the domain of fact and history in this instance: identity becomes a construct serving particular cultural and historical contexts. There is the ideal self in each context, which is defined by the appropriateness conditions of that time.

This implies the need to revisit and re-imagine certain constructs of identity that might have been appropriate then and (re)inventing them. I submit here that Godwin constructed an ideal scheme of identity in *Mukiwa*, appropriate to the democratic processes that led to Zimbabwean political independence, and inserted a liberal inscription that had to be revoked and (re)invented in the latter memoirs, *When a crocodile eats the sun*. I argue that in *Mukiwa* Godwin attempts to inscribe an identity that attempts to sanitise historical processes of appropriation, dislodging in the process the dominant white supremacist historical memory of the Rhodesian nation in anticipation of a more inclusive vision. In *Crocodile*, the same memoirist reneges on the sanitisation project and embarks on a retaliatory poetics that dithers on the precipice of racial polarities.

Herman (1995:2), writing of an entirely different context, observes with insight, that the point of autobiography is to make us

re-evaluate the possibilities and limits of strategies for creating a self ... Fictional personae encode a wider gamut of possible selves ... because of their distance from any self that we might be inclined to call actual or actualisable ... Autobiographies (on the other hand) compel us to evaluate the construction of an optimally functional self.

He ends by submitting that autobiographies enrich the corpus of exemplary selves; fictions constitute a corpus of possible identities (op.cit.). The construction of 'an optimally functional self', an 'exemplar self,' propels the narration in *When a crocodile eats the sun*. This delineation is critical in locating the processes of mutation and metamorphosis that Godwin undergoes in the period between the first and second memoirs. For Godwin, the colonial period is insecure from the nationalist assault; the postcolonial is equally tenuous and insecure in the wake of a land re-appropriation process.

The notion of autobiography sharing with history the reliance on statements that purport to be factual and not fictional becomes problematic in the latter memoirs. Through a deployment of events into the story of a life, through wilful structuring of a coherent self that endures turmoil after national liberation, through its dramatisation of the conflicts born of the emergence of a dominant black legislation, *Crocodile* betrays forms and techniques that smack of the literary, the fictional self more than it does of the actual and actualisable. What features in *Crocodile* is not just the self but the anti-self: what were heroes in *Mukiwa* become villains. In short, the latter memoirs recuperate the satyrs that had been sanitised into heroes in *Mukiwa* through a re-framing of separateness and a powerful revision of personal dissolution. Sidonie Smith maps the terrain of argument that I follow:

Purporting to reflect upon or recreate the past through the processes of memory, autobiography is always multiple, storytelling: memory leaves only a trace of an earlier experience that we adjust into story; experience itself is mediated by the way we describe and interpret ourselves to others and ourselves; cultural tropes and metaphors which structure autobiographical narrative are themselves fictive... (1990).

It is to these processes of invention, dramatisation and inversion that I now turn.

I read Peter Godwin's memoirs as attempts to chart the intersection of multiple, contradictory viewpoints of the colonial and postcolonial Zimbabwean nation, differing concepts of community and levels of social and political (dis)integration, and a persistent pattern of both resistance and accommodation inside/outside the state. We have to face the questions: how race, tradition, cultural tropes and class play out in the personal life of Peter Godwin, what it means to be a member of a family and how the diversity of historical experiences can be documented in what aspires to be both subjective and objective. To speak on behalf of family and to represent a multiplicity of perspectives that accurately represent a generation's beliefs, goals and values will always be contested space. Each autobiographical text seems to be constructed with a specific political and personal agenda in its very effort to define a generation's identity, and therefore that of the author. In assuming the prerogative of narration, the author offers a testimony that defies marginalisation and even the traumatic accounts are rendered in such a way that fortitude and courage become the hallmarks of familial identity in order to invigorate continuity. As Wertsch (1991) argues, the writer 'chooses, on particular occasions, to use one or more resources from a cultural toolkit to appropriate 'ideological belonging' because writing in itself is always a particular way of viewing the world, one that strives for social significance.

Bakhtin (1981) distinguishes between two different types of discourse: *authoritative discourse* and *internally persuasive discourse* which rests on the degree of ownership. Bakhtin (1981:342) develops a typology through the analogy of teaching children how to master texts in school since in these events one discerns the appropriation and transmission – simultaneously – of another's words; 'reciting by heart' and 'retelling in one's own words'. Authoritative discourse is 'encountered with its authority already fused into it', it demands our unconditional allegiance; it is distanced and cannot be changed or altered: we learn it by heart. Authoritative discourse is, so to speak, the word of the fathers ... it cannot be profaned. It is embedded in tradition and cultural tropes that have, invariably, been transmitted through the generations. In contrast, when another's words are retold in 'one's own words', they become internally persuasive, the

words are open, flexible and dynamic. More than that, 'in one's own words' enters into an intense interaction, a struggle with other internally persuasive discourses ... a struggle within us for hegemony among various available verbal and ideological points of view, approaches and directions, and values.

In short, Bakhtin conceptualises 'in one's own words' to entail gradually coming to authorise and claim authority for one's own voice where self is dialogical and therefore speaks in a polyphony of voices. One's identity involves positioning and re-positioning in relation to others' words, language, and the performance of power and privilege. I submit that domination and privilege always result in oppression of subordinate group members. Brantlinger (2003) affirms this observation in submitting that 'the power, privilege and status of the dominant group are predicated on the existence of subordinate group members'. Zimbabwe has had two different dominations: white domination in Rhodesia and black domination after independence. Godwin belonged, by dint of birth, to the dominant group in the period narrated in *Mukiwa*. That privilege slipped away and went through a process of fragmentation and eventual rupture in the period narrated in *When a crocodile eats the sun*. The sense of self-understanding and the role of agent/actor in the world are therefore cast in both negative and positive ways, and this renders the prototypical self problematic.

We encounter in the two memoirs a crisis that can be mapped thus:

- Unveiling the world of colonial oppression in Rhodesia
- Expelling the myths and images created and promulgated by colonial Rhodesia, that is, rejecting the oppressive images of white culture and therefore aligning with the positive cultural tools and voices of the liberation movements
- Recuperating and replacing old myths and images that resonate with backlash, superiority and reciting the discourse of master in a nation space that is 'implosive'
- Unveiling the world of black oppression, economic recession, (dis)empowerment and depravity in postindependent Zimbabwe.

In essence, Godwin writes *Mukiwa* from a dominant position of power and privilege that is, literally and metaphorically, under siege from the liberating movements. In this recognition, he mediates a course towards identity formation that does not jeopardise opportunity for space in the possible nation state: a nation state where there would be dramatic paradigmatic shifts and a new accent to power and authority. In the sequel, *When a crocodile eats the sun*, Godwin is writing, again under siege from a regime that he anticipated and almost subtly accepted. His position verges on subordination and marginalisation. In the dominant culture of postcolonial Zimbabwe, Godwin has experienced a slippage from dominant culture to subordinate.

Tappan (2004) succinctly submits that the intersectional and interactional processes of identity formation must always recognise that differences in power, privilege, authority and access to social and cultural resources play a huge part. This 'twoness' (DuBois, 1905), this feeling of belonging and not belonging should help in appreciating the ambivalence that emerges in the latter memoirs. What is disturbing is the way the gaze of the memoirist turns condescending, legitimising the fetish and colonial institutional choreography that renders whiteness meritocratic and blackness deficient. It is Hall (1998) who submits that reality is not experienced directly but through the lens of culture, through the way human beings represent

and tell stories about the world in which they live. From this submission, it becomes feasible to see how the memoirs in this study interpolate reality and become critical in the process of storytelling and narrating the Zimbabwean experiences.

## **2. Ambivalence in the construction of the nation: Through the lenses of *When a crocodile eats the sun*.**

*Crocodile* is a meditation on racial tensions, political leadership, economic dispossession of white farmers and a revelation of the legacies of 'the words of the fathers'. In David Lewering Lewis' terms, it is 'fireworks going off in a cemetery ... sound and fire choking the spirit of those already despairing ... capturing the pathos and tragedy of an era'. It compresses huge tracts of history into single paragraphs, images or metaphors with an intensity of remorse and despair that amplifies the 'failure' in the story of land redistribution in Zimbabwe. Betrayal and haunting images of strife define the terrain and blind maze that the emerging nation has followed since the land seizures. There is little if any neutrality in the text: the omnipresence of the writer is evident in the deployment of the first person narrative voice to lend authenticity and spontaneity to the events that go to shape the imagination of the nation in fragments rather than a hermetic whole. This negativity in the narration of the nation lends both paradox, emotional outburst and a manipulated impressionability that subsumes a realist ontology expression and is deliberately nuanced by the frustrations of the eye/I and therefore the contraption of the objective and subjective into one expressive representation that anticipates ultimate chaos.

Linstead (2004) argues that there is an analytical eye/I, in which the experiencing subject is distanced from the data, often historically in time and space, in the 'etic' moment of constructing categories, analysing features and thinking itself in a different relation to the data, as outside rather than part. *Crocodile* misses this component in the sense of its immediacy and connection to the data and the experience, and its rawness in the process of its construction. In many ways one reads the experiences as they happen, the way in which experience, record and history are quasi simultaneous processes and therefore the very tangible way in which they come through to the reader. The lenses of time, reflection and memory are bitterly clouded by the immediacy of the events and the 'eye' selects those outrageous experiences for the purposes of constructing an 'I' that emerges as destined to exclusion and occlusion by the nationalist/essentialist leaders of the nation: 'the grief is raw and fierce and unmediated' (*Crocodile*, 13).

Published in 2006, *Crocodile* trivialises inter-subjectivity - that set of understandings sustained from moment to moment by participants in interaction. Principally it binarises the nation into two conflicting camps: the 'insistence of the new government' pitted against the 'adult ... upper class British ... authoritative command' (2006:14; 20). The other is located in primitivity and rendered illegitimate under a gaze that polices power and institutions of governance from a 'memorised' position. As early as the initial pages the black nurse is ex-guerrilla and therefore, bush nurse'. Linnen in the government hospital has been 'stolen'. The liberation fighters are 'black insurgents' in a 'civil war' against 'white rule' (2006:21). Godwin's father had suggested that the son should 'train to be a district commissioner'. When he reneges on this to train as a lawyer, he 'was happy to be home in the new multiracial Zimbabwe' defending seven guerrilla officers who happen to be 'Matabeles, the southern Zimbabwean tribe which was an offshoot of

Prince Biyela's Zulu' (2006:21). Godwin finds himself at the centre of ethnic-driven nationalist conflict and controversy when he submits 'reports' to *The Sunday Times* on the Matabeleland 'massacres' and he earns himself the status of *persona non grata*. His father is unrelenting in stoking the embers of the 'horrors of history' and seeks the opinions of his son on 'the full scale massacre in Matabeleland, whether Cuba could survive the Cold war, how dangerous Eastern Europe's nuclear stations are to the West and how long apartheid would survive ... whether the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Indonesia is inexorable'. These 'familial' questions about (un)safety and (in)security take on a global dimension and therefore one sees the 'autobiography' moving beyond the fixity and fixedness of the eye/I towards the establishment of 'truth effects' that are in fact hierarchies of subject/authorial positions.

The exchange between father and son revolves on 'moving the centre' (Ngugi, 1997), repositioning 'traditional sites' of power and authority relative to the challenges and threats of change that are apparently inexorable. There is tacit suggestion of insecurity throughout and a sense of doom that overwhelms the family. There is also evidence in the text that Godwin refuses to be 'accountable for the sins of my fathers' (2006:28), hence the insistence that 'Chimanimani is my true north, the fixed point by which I situate all other points, the closest place I have to a spiritual home' (2006:33). It is ironic that the same 'home' is protective and accommodating in the narrative of *Mukiwa* but upon renaming after national independence the place becomes 'a space too small to turn round in'. There is no doubt about the nostalgic element here: there is a confession that 'Melsetter' – taken from a town in the Orkney Islands – provides decency, safety and continuity as opposed to the rapturous dimensions and limitations of the renamed same. When Godwin has catalogued the challenges and fissures in the new nation, from the presidential condemnation of homosexuality to the despatch of Zimbabwean soldiers to fight the Congo war, he sums up his convictions about Zimbabwe and Africa in general:

I think of Prince Biyela's Zulu impis cutting out the gall bladder of a brave adversary and sucking on it to ingest his courage, shouting, 'Igatla!' (*sic*) I have eaten! And I realise that maybe not so much has changed as we all thought, that maybe the whole idea of progress is a paradox, a rocking horse that goes forward and back, forward and back, but stays in the same place, giving only the comforting illusion of motion (2006:49).

Godwin insists on reciting that Conradian imperial gaze over Africa in *Heart of darkness* to inscribe his disgust and horror with the situation in Zimbabwe: '*Nothing would happen. Nothing could happen.*' Here Godwin aptly fits the thesis in Linstead (2004):

In any recreation of a narrative self, we call upon previous narrative selves that we may have created, or have received from others in the form of attributions, archetypes or stereotypes. An autobiography is always a retrospective – prospective account, recreating who we were in terms of who we would like to be.

Godwin here displays an incorrigible disposition to name and label, to classify and categorise in the most conclusive of fashions. Historically, it has always been conclusions that have been the problem and Godwin seems unable to extricate himself from the trappings of the past. Pushed to the end of their defence, his 'tribe of white Africans' is 'humiliated, embarrassed

and mortified' because 'I am not used to being the one pitied. *I am the one who pities others*' (2006:59). The superiority of Godwin's gaze is uncompromising. His eye/I and self have become, in this moment, a problem to itself. There is an incandescent appeal to the suprahistorical myth of the inferior status of the other in a genre that putatively should be factual. This self that pities the others becomes at once a privileged theme and an instrument of critique of the choreographed crisis where 'wovits' (Godwin's term for the war veterans) 'sharpen their pangas' for a murderous assault on the white farmers. They are a 'mob' armed with 'rocks', chanting 'hostile slogans', 'perpetually drunk' and they 'squabble incessantly, contradicting themselves ... their behaviour plays to every colonial prejudice about the chaos and hopelessness of Africa' (2006:66-67). One incessantly hears the intrusive voice of Godwin declaring, 'my history, not yours', a voice narrating intensely family experiences, with the propaganda of the media cataloguing 'retrospect and prospect' in the fea(s)ts of memory.

The organisation of *Crocodile* throws into jeopardy the apparent intentions of the author through its seeming contradictions, surprising omissions and aberrant details. In identifying the moments of contradiction, one discovers the essential Godwin: autobiography is used for political ends and turns, with events (in)conveniently re-visioning it into 'autobiographical fiction'. Indeed we come to the question of what it means to be Peter Godwin, a white male, belonging to a tradition of power that is now only ante. Is identity something one can be or is it a role that a writer of the ilk of Godwin performs? One reads the text as a response to repression and dispossession, where place, space and identity are assaulted to such a degree that only an elusive and labyrinthine identity emerges in the process of articulation and enunciation. Autobiography in this instance obeys political and ideological rules. Carr (2005:6) makes a pertinent observation in his paper, 'History, fiction and human time':

Human beings live their lives by formulating and acting out stories that they implicitly tell both themselves and to others. Indeed, in this realm time itself is human, narratively shaped by beings who live their lives, not from moment to moment, but by remembering what was and projecting what will be.

The creative canvas that engages Godwin's selective memory is the postcolonial state, practices of nationalisation, and more seriously, the impact of the policies of nationalist domestic tyranny on the lives of the white farmers and their kith. The narrative is rugged and forthright: it is combative. The most daring of this literary pugilism derives from the cartographic distance between narrative space and narrative setting: he lobbies from the global safety of London and New York while the horrors of the account take place in Zimbabwe. He jets in and out to refresh memory, to *reboot* the savage images of self-destruction and implosion. Godwin is deft in re-naming: the ruling party becomes the 'ruining party', and the Marxist leader at independence has now become a 'pestilence and tyrant in state house'. Entrapment has become the ultimate metaphor in 'this house of stone' as Mugabe, 'just like Fidel Castro pulls on his old olive green army fatigues, the vestments of a battlefield he had never personally fought upon, to emphasise the victories of the past and distract from the failures of the present' (2006:58). He names the place 'mad and dangerous'. Each little bit of anything that Godwin picks at this moment in the narrative is sufficient to generate disproportionate antipathy to blackness and what the president represents. Picking on the chimera, a fire-breathing monster from Greek myth, Godwin extends this:

Maybe this whole country is a chimera: part developed, democratic; part ancient, *atavistic, authoritarian, and, in its very conception, a foolish, unworkable contraption destined to split* asunder along its very evident seams, a Frankenstein country where the crude structures are visible to all (2006:76, my emphasis).

Were it confined to the nationalist destructive energies of Zimbabwe, the autobiographical 'fiction' would be tolerable. But this overdetermined panoply of generalisation is extended to Africa south of the Sahara when in June 2000, there is a total eclipse of the sun, the moment and experience from which the title is derived:

In June there is a total eclipse of the sun ... at midday the moon blots out the sun and skies grow dark, the animals of the bush are confused ... the Shona say it is caused by angered ancestors. Some of Prince Biyela's people, the Zulus and the Venda too, believe that a solar eclipse occurs When a crocodile eats the sun...It is the worst of omens (2006:118).

At this point Peter Godwin has relapsed into an ignoble Western conceptualisation of Africa's people and there is a relentless insistence that truth and history can only be authored by him. Right from the onset of his autobiography Godwin has made relentless and insistent reference to the savagery of the Zulu army, and Biyela's people by extension, north and south of the Limpopo. One is immediately reminded of the sanitised version of the liberation war in Bruce Moore-King's *White Man, Black War*, where he cautions and insists that 'the power of selective memory and convenient myth' must ultimately recognise that 'we cannot adjust to the reality of our present and future if we do not acknowledge our past'. Without this recognition, we die hollow, ignorant and meaningless, with just our backsides showing to the rest of the world'. Moore-King says all this in the context of 'the selectivity of memory' where

the Elders are teaching the next generation of the white tribe of Zimbabwe the same things that were taught my generation...to believe in the Catechism of the High Priest's Temple ... not to question ... but believe implicitly in the values the Elders held when they sent their sons to war ... [that] war was a glorious adventure, an easy test of manhood ... that war was right and always honourable ... *where the good were the white and evil were black ... where only we, the white tribe suffered, only we lost anything of value during and after the war ... that the black tribes lost nothing, felt no grief, no pain because they are black and inferior ... This is not the Truth*' (1989:3-4; my emphasis).

Zimbabwean history is replete with evidence pointing to the sensitivity of the land question. Arthur Shirley Cripps, poet, priest and controversial historian observed that land grab by the settler community was an insult:

The insult continued ... delivered by the language of the law. Devised by ministers and commissioners ... in Southern Rhodesia it was always the same idea...the idea of the land ... land had brought the settlers, the missionaries, the war. Land held the stones, the iron, the gold. Land held the Africans' ancestors, their spirits and their myths. Land held the past of the country, locked in its earth ... its future too.

This explosive and often volatile issue of segregationist policy is critiqued in a clairvoyant, if terribly disturbing tone in the many letters that Shirley Cripps wrote to the government of Southern Rhodesia in the 1930s well into the 1950s:

To hold all natives down in a position of permanent inferiority will ultimately beget a deep and bitter race hatred which will aim, not at the autonomy of the black but at the extermination of the white. If once such a huge war of extermination between white and black broke out in South Africa, it is idle to argue that the white would win (*An Africa for Africans*, 1927; cited in Sheers, 2004:222-3).

In chapter thirteen of *When a crocodile eats the sun*, Godwin is at his most vitriolic condemnation of Africa and the ‘nations that were invented by the whites’. Ironically, he misses the lucid vision charted by Cripps: the ‘invented’ race bitterness now aims at the extermination of the white. Instead, Godwin seeks anonymity in invoking an unacknowledged authority that dismisses any trace of cause and effect protocols or rationality in Africa after the departure of the colonial master:

It is sometimes said that the worst thing to happen to Africa was the arrival of the Whiteman. And the second worst thing was his departure. Colonialism lasted long enough to destroy much of Africa’s indigenous cultures and traditions, but not long enough to leave behind a durable replacement (2006:153).

He sees Africa as ‘a byword for poverty, disease and underdevelopment; the Third World’s Third World’. He poses rhetorical questions to persuade and convince the reader into a reconceptualisation of the continent and its paradoxes: ‘do Africa’s problems reside principally in the continent’s underlying environment, or with imposed colonial distortions or with the travesty of Africa’s postcolonial leadership?’ He invokes the veritable authority of media moguls such as the BBC and CNN, together with the literary virtuoso of Jonathan Swift and Shakespeare in the portrait of Caliban to describe the ‘bizarre and the arbitrary’ that characterise the continent (156,157). Where he inserts the voice of Zimbabwean literary nomad, Dambudzo Marechera, to placate his version(s) of Zimbabwe, Godwin ironically finds himself mired in the clichés of binary oppositions: oppressor and victim, exotic and indigenous, evil and good ... history has proven that the white farmer, the Zimbabwean farmer, is a producer... (161). Godwin exhibits an intriguing handling of categories: the narrative permits and promotes the establishment of relationships between calendar time and historical time, between the Rhodesian ‘white liberal’ and the imperial understanding of Africa. This allows for the repetition and anticipation of categories that prefigure configurations of identity as private and public. The kinship between colonial categories of Africa and the ‘modern global’ definitions defies the inter-racial, polyphonic possibilities that are marketed by filmic, televisual and democratic discursive practices. What permeates the text is a cluster of images that appropriate modernity, accomplishment and governance as Western attributes that can only be trivialised in and by black Africa.

In the true spirit of the traditionalist, Godwin proffers, condescendingly that ‘it gives me a feeling of negative epiphany...a fear that we will never really surmount race here ... I will turn my back on the land that made me. Like Poland was to him (his father) Africa is to me: a place in which I can never truly belong, a dangerous place ... *A white in Africa is like a Jew everywhere – on*

*sufferance, watching warily, waiting for the next great tidal swell of hostility*(my emphasis): Godwin arrives at this conclusion about *white exclusion* after cataloguing in grand snapshots the *black* Zimbabwean crisis: recurrent war and drought, the AIDS scourge and the man-made problems – political polarisation, failed governance, food insecurity, manipulation of food and fuel for political ends and the hellhole economic meltdown.

The process of ‘normalising’ the depravity of the ‘Last King of Scotland’ is located in ‘the words of the fathers’, the recitation of grand narratives of tradition. The lunatic fringe in Zimbabwean political, economic and state power is fully described in these unflinching terms: ‘to rebuild new political capacity, maintain international pressure for change, stop the egregious economic mismanagement and mediate ‘generous compromise’ in compensating the ‘white farmer’(International Crisis Group, Africa Report No.97, 2007:ii).

### **3. Context and background to the construction of the memoirs of Peter Godwin**

Momentous changes in Zimbabwe have generated much debate on several fronts: the media, international organisations and the literary. It is a nation that has undergone (and still is) reconfiguration by a combination of local and global forces. Colonial domination and its replacement by a democracy are major interweaving experiences that have provided a representation of cultural difference and a dialectic that has evolved in a veritable cultural crucible on the African continent. While the policy of reconciliation enunciated on the attainment of independence is the acme of hybridity, evoking openness on questions of home and identity, the events that unfold in the aftermath prefigure a more volatile and dynamic contestation on aspects of subjectivity and belonging. Questions of cultural survival, identity formation and power have demanded a more inclusive interrogation of nationalist, ideological and ethnocentric histories.

There have been five major episodes and experiences that have intensified the country’s polarisation:

- The annunciation of reconciliation on the attainment of political independence
- Internal discontent that eventually led to military repression in operation ‘Gukurahundi’
- Disbursement of gratuities to war veterans that subsequently led to economic crisis and was the genesis of inflationary pressures on the economy
- The appropriation and redistribution of farms previously owned by white farmers
- ‘Operation Murambatsvina,’ a combined force of the police, army and youth militia to demolish illegal structures of informal traders, shanty homes of the poor and unauthorised residential extensions.

There have been other nagging national concerns such as corruption, financial indiscipline, the politics of patronage, shortages of foreign currency and a general paucity in policy implementation that have compounded the problems facing the nation. Each of these would warrant an in-depth study in terms of rationale, implementation, execution and consequences, and this study can only make general comments on them as they inform frameworks for analysis.

The land reform programme in Zimbabwe should always be seen in the context of colonial inequities. Without this hindsight, an easy blame game emerges, and the historicity of the problem disappears. There were white farmers who owned multiple farms. There were some

idle farms. There was a constitutional plan to finance the expropriation of such derelict and even productive farms, the concept of willing buyer-willing seller. Most significant of all these factors is the sensitivity to outside pressure, particularly from the west. There is no doubt that all factors considered, the implementation process was flawed and degenerated into chaotic patronage, silencing and elimination.

#### **4. Autobiography and (un)naming home**

Race is a social and economic construction and is always re-inscribing itself around the changing meanings of material and economic (dis)possession. This observation demands a critical examination of the dynamics of power and privilege and the concomitant ideological ramifications. Joe L. Kincheloe (1999) aptly submits that ‘the white privilege of universalising its characteristics as the “proper ways to be” has continuously undermined the efforts of non-whites in a variety of spheres’, Internalising the ‘shibboleths and values of any tradition, white or black, and universalising them can be strappingly irrational’. Giroux (1992) and Keating (1995) are convincing in submitting that ‘whiteness ... established itself as a norm that represents an authoritative, delimited and hierarchical mode of thought ... orderliness, self-control while non-whiteness is framed as chaos, violence and breakdown of self-regulation’. In order for whiteness to place itself in the privileged seat of rationality and superiority, it would have to construct pervasive constructs of ... Africans as disorderly and prone to uncivilised behaviour and therefore [imagine whiteness] as the rock of rationality in a sea of chaos and disorder ... Whiteness can render itself as pure, authoring home and professional history and autobiography in contrast to the oral mythologies of the other (Haymes, 1996).

Peter Godwin sets out to write his memoirs, *Rhodesians never die, Mukiwa, When a crocodile eats the sun*, right up to *The Next Generation* from a white historiographical perspective. He privileges the values, epistemologies and belief systems that ground the cultural practices of whiteness in Rhodesia and after. In the process he (un)consciously trivialises and undermines the values and epistemologies of the other. He does this in a historical and cultural milieu where the ‘revolt of the irrationals’ against white historical domination is on the rise. This ‘revolt of the irrationals’ takes on an unprecedented turn in Zimbabwe when the ‘nationalism’ of the party reinvents the land question and begins to apportion land to its privileged black membership.

As indicated earlier, the land question in Zimbabwe is not impervious to its cultural, economic and political context: the shifting and re-alignment of this material bloc begins to inform the discourse of white victimisation that emerges in the memoirs. From the nationalist perspective, with all its aberrations, the redistribution of the land is seen as compensation of the ‘other’ through preferential treatment of the blacks. This has profound material consequences for the whites and is imagined as a refashioning of power relations in the twenty-first century that leaves this community with a feeling of puzzlement increasingly expressed as anger. For the first time after the announcement of the policy of national reconciliation, the white ethnic grouping becomes not a marker of privilege but of victimage. The lived experiences and anxieties of these people cannot be dismissed; it is real.

The moment of dispossession becomes a moment of disempowerment, reversing the asymmetries of power and property. In the eyes of the former owners of the properties, it is an act of trespass and transgression. The inequities become, once more, embedded in racial

configurations that had been annulled in reconciliation. Reconciliation is re-read as a fatuous embrace of racial erasure: the genuine multicultural promise of that gesture is contested and the new ambiguous reality replays the different cultural and ethnic locales constituting the nation. Traditional loyalties and folkways take on an unprecedented reawakening. The canon, legislation, family values, work ethics are rebranded in an ethno-political hostility that is largely deterministic. Because its social and political importance revolves around its emotionality, this moment is crucial in figuring the whites under siege, and the consequent white anger.

A recovery rhetoric emerges in the process of the nationalist affirmative agenda. In equal vitriolic retort, the moral and political currency provided by marginality on the part of the dispossessed whites gains credibility and audience in Western eyes and ears. In this emerging conundrum of oppositional discourses, whiteness is reconstructed as a signifier of material deprivation, with a litany of grievances against the new oppressors.

The perception of white victimisation shapes the way Godwin reinterprets the war of liberation, and the private and public conversations that he has with family and acquaintances about political institutions in Zimbabwe and Africa in general. As hinted earlier, even the gesture of reconciliation and its timbre of inclusivity and social justice are reviewed as one of the multiple cunning fixations of Mugabe: 'in Shona he talks frequently of a *hondo* – a war – if his aims are frustrated. It's a schizophrenic performance' (2006:84). Even such 'objective' reports as Crisis Group submit that 'Mugabe's declarations at independence that whites remained welcome in the new state were intended to keep them earning foreign exchange...they were an important engine for economic growth...[and] would take a much lower political profile' (2004:11). Such fissures in interpretation of the gesture of reconciliation are justifiably disturbing.

The economic decline of the nation is not only attributable to government ineptitude but to blackness: the future looks dim because the whites left the country and handed over governance to a black leadership. All affirmative action, however commonsensical, are imagined as designed to punish the whites; for Godwin, the traditional victims of oppression become the causes of white society's problems. This construction intensifies Godwin's rage and resentment because it is a self-fulfilling prophecy: the socio-economic gains of black government functionaries have been at the expense of the whites. As Kincheloe argues, 'whiteness' traditional fear of blackness is re-articulated in more panic-stricken terms: whiteness in decline and under siege is represented as a universal loss of order and civility. This submission, the nostalgic effort to re-establish white hegemony, in whatever context in the twenty-first century, is menacing and insidious. It has become a rallying point for the nationalists and the southern African geopolitical grouping, the SADC. CNN and BBC and the mediascape that they control have been relentless in demonising the destructive forces in Zimbabwe that are 'intent on destroying white values and standards'.

Peter Godwin's attempt at a recovery of the whiteness agenda is not an isolated effort. The popular culture media, the film, has made some revealing motion pictures built on this contested theme. Gresson (1995) identifies the recovery theme in the five 'Rocky' movies (1976, 1979, 1982, 1985 and 1990) where Sylvester Stallone's heroic exploits always overshadow his anti-self and nemesis, the man of colour. Mr T is the exclusive underdog and does not match the intelligence and dexterity of the white supreme. In 'Soul Man' (1986) a white student (played

by C Thomas Howell) is denied entry to Harvard. He reinvents himself as African American and gains admission through affirmative action. The unequivocal emphasis here is that affirmative action is ruinous to the academy and the quality of education is compromised, putting the 'nation at risk'. In 'The Substitute' (1996) Tom Berenger comes home to his school teacher girlfriend in non-white Miami. To find the perpetrators of a violent crime in the school, Tom is an undercover investigator, he is the substitute teacher and he does not only accomplish the feat of locating the culprits: he uncovers a Latino/black gang related ring run by the African American headmaster. The very foundation of ethics in the school, the principal, is convicted and the message again is clear; the purity of Miami is under siege from barbaric non-whites. Even in 'Cry Freedom' Donald Woods (Kevin Kline) is memorialised more in the filmic version than is the protagonist of the film, fighter Steve Biko.

The same recovery battle is evident in 'A Dry White Season' (1989), 'Mississippi Burning' (1988), and 'The Last King of Scotland' (2006). Even in a BBC documentary 'RGM – Robert Gabriel Mugabe' (2005) the messianic racial role of 'the white man's burden' is rearticulated on a grand and obvious scale. There might be an assault on identity and property as articulated in *When a crocodile eats the sun*, but it is crucial to read the fact that Godwin is also privileged as foreign correspondent and writer and the memoirs are his struggle to control the representation of Rhodesian and Zimbabwean whiteness.

One of the most fascinating developments in the geopolitical ordering of the twenty-first century has been the manner in which conflict in Africa is documented. '*Blood and soil: land, politics and conflict prevention in Zimbabwe and South Africa*' is one of a myriad reports by the International Crisis Group whose avowed mission is 'working to prevent conflict worldwide'. In this report, the group interrogates the question: 'who bears responsibility for the current catastrophic situation in Zimbabwe?' There is an attempt to place the disputes over land ownership and use within the overarching social, political, economic and historical contexts. In the segment 'A Question of Justice', the report wrestles with the question of how best to 'broaden patterns of land use and ownership to include black majorities who were pushed to the margins during the colonial period, *without undermining investor confidence or negating the rule of law* (2004:3)(my emphasis). The land question in southern Africa, as indicated already, can only be viewed through the lens of historical injustice – and the Crisis Group Report acknowledges this fact. However, the report does not explicitly state who the investors are, nor does it specify a norm for its definition of 'rule of law'. Purchasing of land for purposes of redistribution is expensive, and the report acknowledges this point. It also tacitly understates that former colonial powers, Britain in particular, find domestic pressures far outweigh their intentions to sponsor the purchase of the land and offer it for redistribution. What it understates is the fact of former colonial powers reneging on the disbursement of funds for the express purposes of redistribution. The new global world investor is, invariably, an extension of the colonial power. To provide financial resources for the legitimate disempowerment of the same white power or government is, essentially, a *reductio ad absurdum*. There are great economic privileges in the land. When the liberation movements rallied around balanced land use they too signed 'a promissory note' that the black majority intend to cash, à la Martin Luther King. Any delays and prevarication in this regard is viewed as emblematic of unfulfilled promises in the independent African states. The unequivocal promise was that 'a majority rule government

would give peasant farmers more land'. Indeed, as the report submits, 'land redistribution and land reform efforts are, by their very nature, highly charged politically. Issues of land ownership often bring major commercial interests, public expectations, politics, the law and international concerns into direct and open conflict' (2004:4).

The commercial, economic significance of the agricultural sector, with its direct implications for wealth (in)equity has been dramatised by an increasing uncertainty among white farmers. The 1980s could be seen as a period of 'unrealised potential' with the early 1990s seen as 'the lost decade'. From 1998 to 2003 Zimbabwe was in a combative period and the 'fast track' programme adopted towards land reform remained aggressively and belligerently controversial.

The 'willing buyer-willing seller' approach was largely cynical as the commitment of the white commercial farmers was less than ideal. Economic and political crises in Zimbabwe led to a selective enforcement of the law to redistribute the land. The desperate urgency of the land question simply overrode fairness, justice and credibility, especially in Western eyes. White commercial farmers had themselves failed to realise that maintaining the status quo was fundamentally unsustainable. Most central to the debacle was the fact that the UK failed to put significant hard cash on the table to finance a credible land redistribution programme. These three factors cannot be addressed in isolation. The blame game that is current staple for the media and Western rhetoric helps little in resolving the fundamental problems embedded in this disruptive episode. International media scrutinises the plight of commercial white farmers and apparently turns a blind eye to the black victims of the political violence and economic malaise. This positioning plays into the government's nationalist rhetoric of 'them and us,' as the Crisis Group report states (2004:11). Godwin, in *Crocodile*, insistently etches Mugabe as the 'celestial crocodile' that eats the sun; the eclipse is experienced at a personal and national level in the autobiography.

The nationalist leaders, pursuant to their appropriation agenda, harp on the promises of Western aid assistance and how this has been reneged upon. The steady economic difficulties are projected as imperialist machinations and therefore the drive to nationalise the land without compensation gains credibility, troubling though it might be. Other exacerbating factors to the economic decline such as AIDS, unemployment statistics, poverty and corruption are therefore understood as palpably manipulated by the Western media to fan internal discontent and further polarise the impetus of redistribution. The discrepancy between nationalist promises to deliver the land and the capacity to actually parcel out the land looms into a kaleidoscope of localised, messy, megalomaniac practice that invariably allows for public and fiscal condemnatory reprisal in Western eyes. The commercial agricultural sector is, in a nutshell, multinational agribusiness: to tamper with its profitability in the manner that the Zimbabwe government has, is to invite the ire of its Western sponsors and shareholders. Visceral anxieties are precipitated by displacement and disempowerment. The consistent privilege of the space defined by the farm has been rendered precarious by 'fast track' redistribution and consequently, issues of governance, rule of law and democracy become provocative markers of difference in Western mediascape. This moment becomes over-politicised by a rugged white masculinity that informs the conservatism of recuperating white identities in the autobiographical writings of Peter Godwin.

Godwin reminisces on Winston Churchill who refers to Hitler and the Munich Pact as the 'act of feeding a crocodile, hoping it will eat you last (*When a crocodile eats the sun*: 326). In history,

the Munich Pact allowed Hitler to appropriate parts of Czechoslovakia; in Zimbabwe part of the Lancaster Agreement was manipulated to repossess white farms. As argued already, for Godwin this uncharitable act by the Zimbabwean regime reinforces the frightening representation of Mugabe as the wily despotic ogre that brings about a total blot out of the sun. For Godwin, history replays itself in cryptic cycles: the pathological and horrendous treatment of Jews is re-enacted in an African theatre where 'Rhodesians [N]ever Die'.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has argued fully that in the writings of Peter Godwin identity is elusive, the self is split and fragile and overtly threatened by disintegration. This same uncertain self that expresses its tenuous reality is deeply influenced by unconscious ideological allegiances and emotional investments that are driven by a fantasy hold over the past, a fantasy that Godwin himself continuously teases as remarkably Rhodesian in his historical account, *Rhodesians Never Die*. As that past slips and the place that he called home stubbornly recedes from individual and collective memory, as control is challenged, the new appeal of a marginalised identity renders the identity project in autobiography as nostalgic, forging tactical alliances with other perspectives critical of nationalist politics and poetics.

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Muchativugwa Liberty Hove**

University of North-West

Private Bag X6001

Potchefstroom

2520

Email: [muchativugwahv@gmail.com](mailto:muchativugwahv@gmail.com)