Article

Mapping the city space in current Zimbabwean and South African fiction

Irikidzayi Manase

Introduction

Refentse, child of Tiragalong and Hillbrow, Welcome to our Hillbrow of milk and honey and bile, all brewing in the depths of our collective consciousness. (Mpe 2001:41)

The above description of Hillbrow is given in the early part of Mpe’s Welcome to our Hillbrow (2001). It immediately places the centrality of the city’s alluring qualities and its importance in the lives of most, if not all, people in southern Africa and indeed in the rest of the continent. The description, however, represents the ambivalent nature of the current South African city. It is inhabited by a number of African dwellers, whose identity is split between the rural area, in which colonialism and apartheid placed them permanently, and the city – where life mirrors the paradox of being able to achieve success and failure at the same time. This is emblematised in the above quotation, by reference to the existence of milk and honey as well as bile. Kurtz, in his discussion on the writing of the Kenyan city, postulates that this urban paradox depicts the African city as a ‘venue for fundamental conflicts and contradictions on all levels of the social formation’ (2000:103). The ambivalent urban condition, which I will argue is represented in current Zimbabwean and South African fiction, is noted in the dialectical links between poverty, wealth, life, death, home and homelessness which result in the constitution of restless and dislocated identities for a majority of the urban dwellers. The existing life conditions and the constituted identities are a result of structural influences such as the impact of European and American social and economic domination, and the legacy of colonialism and apartheid, as well as individual responses to personal circumstances and to the city.
The urban lower working class, the poor and the invisible, such as prostitutes and vagrants, as well as the professionals, such as university professors and corporate employees, are portrayed in the fiction under consideration as vulnerable and alienated. The idea of a fragmented society will be considered in the first part of the paper where I focus on the representation of a fragmented city in South Africa and Zimbabwe. Furthermore, the urban dwellers are portrayed as victims of a displaced psyche and schizophrenia while harbouring suicidal tendencies. On the whole, personal relationships are fractured. A lack of mutuality and communication characterises most of the male-female, husband-wife and family relations in general. The portrayal of the individual’s social dislocation within these cities as well as how this comes about through broader structural forces of apartheid, colonialism and globalisation will be examined in the second part of this paper.

I will study Phaswane Mpe’s *Welcome to our Hillbrow* (2001) and Ashraf Jamal’s ‘The Black Bag’ (2002) set in Johannesburg and a nameless South African city respectively. I will also focus on Shimmer Chinodya’s ‘Strays’ and ‘Can We Talk’ (1998), Nhamo Mhiripiri’s ‘The Lodgers’, ‘No More Plastic Balls’ and ‘Elista’ (2000) and Charles Mungoshi’s ‘The Hare’ (1997), which are set in Harare, Zimbabwe. This fiction portrays an urban bleakness that is signified by the use of various tropes. These tropes include the migrant, violence, poverty, disease and death. However, this fictional representation of the southern African urban space also shows that the cities are not entirely rigid but still offer the potential for the inhabitants to reconstitute their identities and lives and redefine their alienating city spaces in accordance with their needs. This possibility resonates with the concept of the soft city as articulated by Raban (1974). He argues that while the urban dweller is to a large extent alienated in the city, he or she is still able to ‘remake’ the city and ‘consolidate it into a shape you can live in’ (1974: 9-10). This idea of the possibility of the agency of the characters and their ability to rewrite the urban spaces and their lives will be considered in the last part of the paper. I will also follow up on this possibility of agency with De Certeau’s ideas on how the invisible urban dwellers can walk in the city using different footsteps that redefine and remap it (1993).

**Mapping the ‘two cities in one’, in southern Africa**

The contemporary southern African urban space represents ‘two cities in one’, an idea discussed by Westwood and Williams (1997) in their analysis of the post-second world war spatial configuration of London’s inner city.
This is an urban spatial paradigm characterised by the symbolic existence of two worlds in one city. On the one hand, there exist affluent and glamorous low density and up-market suburbs, while on the other, there are an impoverished, neglected and often over crowded high-density suburbs and slums. In that way they mark the fragmented nature of the city. The southern African region’s two cities in oneness, is noted in the existence of an open CBD, with high rise buildings and post-modern shopping and office complexes\(^2\) surrounded by an overcrowded, violent and poorly facilitated inner city residential area, and far away but equally overcrowded and neglected high-density suburbs (Christopher 1994, Lemon 1991, Lester 2000, Morris 1999). This segmented mapping, though typical of all cities in the world, is more defined in the third world and southern Africa in particular due to the impact of colonial and apartheid city planning which was aimed at racial segregation.

This spatial division is clearly represented in *Welcome to our Hillbrow* (Mpe 2001). The South African post-apartheid city is depicted as still reeling under the legacy of the ideology of separation. And at the same time, Johannesburg inscribes the new openings arising out of the advent of democracy as well as those openings associated with the country’s entrance into current global social and economic linkages. In Mpe’s novel, the trope of walking in the city, which resonates with De Certeau’s discussion of walking in the streets of New York (1993), is employed. It is through the depiction of Refentse’s walking in the city of Johannesburg that the current mapping of the inner city is portrayed. Refentse walks from the unexpectedly quiet area around Vickers Place in Hillbrow where he is staying with his cousin, into the overcrowded and noisy space in the inner city. The inner city’s commercial and entertainment centre in Kotze Street has big retail and financial corporations such as Spar, OK Bazaars, Standard Bank and First National Bank juxtaposed with noisy pubs, streets overcrowded with fruit and vegetable vendors, prostitutes and drug dealers. The streets are also depicted as home to vagrants and street children. Mpe describes this mapping here:

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\text{Vickers Place struck you as a fairly quiet building. You never expected any quietness in our Hillbrow. But then, Caroline Street, where Vickers was situated, was not at the centre of Hillbrow. The center was Kotze Street, where OK Bazaars shared the pavement with the rather quiet pub, *The Fans*, and the louder one, *The Base*. Cutting across the Kotze at right angles was Twist Street. Enclosed by Twist and Claim Streets, Kotze and Pretoria, was Highpoint, the biggest shopping}\]

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center in Hillbrow. That was where Clicks, Spar, CNA and other stores were housed. It was in this center that you would find Standard Bank, with its cash machines flashing ‘Temporarily Out of Service’ on Sundays and public holidays, as well as on weekdays after eight in the evening. Trying to save you from being mugged?...The concrete pavements here, like those of inner Hillbrow, teemed with informal business, in the form of bananas, apples, cabbages, spinach and other good-looking produce at low prices that rendered the buying of such produce from Spar, Checkers or OK ridiculously wasteful. (2001:7-8)

The current spatial division of the inner city can be interpreted in terms of urban soundscapes, the idea that the city possesses noisy and quiet spaces. Titlestad succinctly discusses this concept at length in his study of the representation of sound, identity and place in the writing of apartheid Johannesburg (2003). Furthermore, the impact of the commercialisation of the current city space is hinted at through reference to the multinational companies, which are however placed in a chaotic space where they have to compete with informal traders.

As Refentse gets out of Hillbrow, on his way to Witwatersrand University, the cartographical portrayal represented in the text, indicates contrasts on the economic and social level. The central inner city is portrayed as a crowded and chaotic space, which also supports the existence of antisocial behaviour such as prostitution and the consumption of illegal drugs. Morris (1999) describes this aforementioned mapping of the inner city as depicting the bleakness and light of Hillbow. Yet, as Refentse walks further into the city center and towards the northern suburbs, the city’s state of order characterised by the presence of social and economic superiority is portrayed. There exists a well-structured and post-modern CBD and up-market low-density suburbs, signified in the brief reference to Hyde Park during one of Refentse’s walks as well as a high density, impoverished inner city and far-away townships. This is indeed a fictional representation of the current city’s post-apartheid mapping, where both the legacy of apartheid and the post-apartheid democratisation process is signified. One also senses the nature of the currently democratised urban space as Refentse walks uninhibitedly since the apartheid restrictions on movement have been repealed. At the same time, we sense the problematic segmentation of the city between overcrowded, almost chaotic inner city spaces and the orderly, spacious northern suburbs. This division thus confirms the concept of the two cities in one which currently exists in Johannesburg.
The contemporary city in Zimbabwe exists along similar lines as the South African. We are made aware of the differences in spatial design and social worlds between the upper class suburbs, the CBD and the residential areas of the middle and lower classes in Chinodya’s ‘Can We Talk’ (1998). The urban upper class’ social space, once reserved for whites only, is located away from the city centre and the lower class residential areas. As a result, the black upper class urbanites that moved into the former white areas feel separated from the collective life to which they were so used. For instance, the narrator in the story rarely spends much time in Harare’s CBD when coming from his home. He skirts the city centre and then goes to the jovial collective life of the lower middle class and working class high-density residential areas. Life in these residential areas that were defined as African townships during colonialism is characterised by braais and beer drinking at popular places such as Mereki in Harare’s Warren Park. This is represented in Chinodya’s ‘Strays’ where we note the urban middle class experiences of Sam, an architect and his high school teacher wife, Ndaizivei. They own a spacious home, keep a dog and live a private life in one of Harare’s up-market suburbs. This apparently lonely life is contrasted with that of the working class suburbs of Harare, where the inhabitants frequent nightclubs, bars and bottle stores and are always keeping company in large crowds. In fact, Sam, like the narrator in ‘Can We Talk’, drives from his upper class and affluent residential space into the low class (but full of life) high-density space of nightclubs and bars. This indicates the alienation suffered by most members of the urban African middle class who moved into the often fenced, gated and impassive up-market suburbs of Harare.

Despite the image of an exciting and collective social life, the Zimbabwean high-density space is mapped as another world or city when considered in relation to the affluent parts of Harare. The high-density areas are dominated by poverty and social decay, characteristics that are similar to the representation of the Johannesburg inner city as depicted in Welcome to our Hillbrow (2001). Nhamo Mhiripiri clearly portrays the existing poverty in the two stories entitled ‘The Lodgers’ and ‘Elista’ (2000). In ‘The Lodgers’, the bleakness of the city is represented through the hellish life of poverty lived by Mangwiro and his family: ‘The family had long out-grown renting good houses and graduated into lodging in back-yard shacks’ (2001:161). And the social and economic decay is seen in the way Elista degenerates into prostitution like her mother. This is due to financial problems which arise after the imprisonment of her mother’s boyfriend. For Elista, and especially
her mother, survival in a high-density house which has electricity, water and food meant selling one’s body to different and frequently violent men like Bad Boy Joel who abused her. Mhiripiri cynically describes the moral decay:

And all the time Elista’s mother never seemed concerned about her daughter’s new sordid lifestyle. The mother just brought man after man home from the pubs, and her electricity and water supplies were never disconnected again right up to the time I left the depraved neighbourhood for a more respectable location. (2000:159)

Nevertheless, the current southern African high density and inner city space, though mapped as bleak, still has another side that offers possibilities and opportunities for some of its dwellers. The opportunities existing in the city are reflected in the self-transformation of Sara, who resided in one of Harare’s impoverished high-density suburbs, as depicted in Charles Mungoshi’s ‘The Hare’. Sara develops into a cross-border trader in an attempt to rescue the family from poverty. Her husband had just been retrenched from his middle management job at a local textile company. The fact that her husband, Nhongo, loses his job signifies the possibility of one losing an opportunity in the city. In the South African city, the possibility of opportunities is noted in the way Refentse, Tsepo and Refilwe who were born and raised in the Northern Province’s rural areas are able to further their education, find jobs and reside in Johannesburg (Mpe 2001). Ironically, some characters also become losers at the end of the novel as especially seen through the use of the trope of death and disease. Refentse, a lecturer at Witwatersrand University, commits suicide after seeing his girlfriend in bed with his best friend and Refilwe, who rises to become an editor of a prominent publishing company and wins a post-graduate scholarship to study publishing at Oxford University, is diagnosed with HIV/AIDS and ends up being taken back to her rural home. Hence, despite the specificities of each country, both southern African cities are dominated by similar social and economic conditions, which map the urban space as a largely bleak and fragmented one. Yet the same urban space still offers the capacity for individual and societal transformation.

**The representation of dislocation and restless urban identities**

There is also another strand in the fictional mapping of the current urban spaces, whereby the urban dwellers’ lives are characterised by dislocation and restlessness. Most of the urban dwellers’ lives have been disrupted socially or economically. In most cases the characters are portrayed as
feeling estranged from their families and homes as well as showing elements of anxiety. Various factors contribute to the assumption of these dislocated and restless identities. These include pressures impacting on their life experiences in their different urban spaces as well as vulnerabilities, which are associated, in one way or another, to colonialism, apartheid and the shifting global economy. It is evident in the fiction that the southern African city is portrayed within the background of global socio-economic influences, whose impact dislocates and fragments the inhabitants. Harvey (1989), in his first chapter, examines the post-modern Western city’s development after the 1960s and postulates that the urban planning philosophy was based on asserting global capitalist domination. Knox (1993) also shows that post-modern capitalist developments and the globalisation of economies that has been occurring since the 1970s have, to a large extent, resulted in the creation of urban fragmentation and restlessness. The urban dwellers’ life is characterised by constant movement and disruptions as well as anxieties due to the heavy demands involved in connecting to places of employment, keeping steady jobs, meeting personal and family demands and relating to the alluring consumerism, which is associated with the capitalist and global economies.

The restlessness and dislocation portrayed in the southern African city is, however, strongly linked to its early establishment as a colonial space for capitalist exploitation, the influence of apartheid and the current placing within a shifting global economy. The influence of these historical forces in the current city is signified by the existence of spatial iconographies such as colonial city and street names, transnational companies’ headquarters, the city’s linkages with global institutions such as the International Monetary Finance and the existence of other globalised social linkages such as migration and involvement in world sports competitions, characteristics of globalisation clearly articulated by King (1993). In addition, space, time and distance have been reduced due to modern economic developments (Harvey 1989:284-306). The fiction under study portrays a seemingly global quality in that the current city accommodates different cultures, the indigenous from the rural areas, symbolised by those from Tiragalong – a village in the Northern Province (Mpe 2001) and Chivhu – a village outside Harare – in Mungoshi’s ‘The Hare’, alongside regional as well as European migrants. Most of these characters have been displaced from their rural, urban or national homes and are struggling to belong in their different urban spaces or are enduring disjointed social experiences in their different cities.
In fact, the narrator in *Welcome to our Hillbrow* depicts Johannesburg’s Hillbrow, as an overcrowded space, which also accommodates African migrants from Nigeria, Zaire and Zimbabwe, looking for or engaged in different jobs. Others are involved in informal and sometimes illegal activities such as street vending, prostitution and drug dealing. The migrants are labeled as ‘kwerefrica’. These migrants have also appropriated and made a South African city, such as Johannesburg, their home and thus show how the current city is mapped as a cosmopolitan space. Furthermore, as Gunner (2003) puts it, such a mixing interrogates the conception of a national home, especially when an inner city such as Hillbrow becomes ‘home’ for other African (and European) nationals. Hence, the city is portrayed as a space inhabited by different characters each uprooted from his or her home and family – where colonialism and apartheid placed them and all contesting for different opportunities.

This global cultural mixing engenders feelings of anxiety, vulnerability and hatred in some urban dwellers. The various and multicultural urban dwellers anxiously compete for opportunities such as jobs, accommodation and other social needs and are therefore likely to run into conflicts with each other. I will however focus on the depiction of the restlessness and social dislocation that is suffered by some urban characters as they relate to their specific conditions in South Africa. The tropes of the migrant and of disease are used by Mpe (2001) to portray the urban social dislocation and anxieties felt by some of his characters. Refilwe, a childhood girlfriend of Refentse, the main character in the novel, migrates from her rural home in Tiragalong to Johannesburg to fill the post of commissioning editor at an international publishing company. She then tries to rekindle her old relationship with Refentse, now a lecturer at Witwatersrand University, but to no avail. She is stressed by the failure and thus becomes jealous of Lerato, Refentse’s new girlfriend who hails from Johannesburg. She uses the trope of the evil seduction of the foreign and urban woman to justify her failure to rekindle the old relationship. This is evidenced by the self-deceit and spreading of the story that the lost love of her life had succumbed to the seduction of a ‘kwere kwere’ – a foreign woman. On the contrary, the reason why the relationship had ended in the first place was that Refilwe had been unfaithful and Refentse could not risk his current relationship for a girl who had broken his heart earlier on in his life. Refilwe’s false accusations depict a commonly stereotypical and contemptuous view held by most of the local urban dwellers that foreign men and women are decadent and were
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responsible for the spread of HIV and AIDS in South Africa. In fact, Mpe shows the existence of tension between the local and migrant urban dwellers of Hillbrow over this issue. The local urban migrant and permanent urban dwellers are constantly accusing foreign migrants of introducing the virus and the disease to the locals as well as other moral and social decay. This is clearly evidenced by the comments made by Refentse’s cousin, a policeman, on the streets of Johannesburg while he was accompanying Refentse to university. The policeman cousin ‘complain[s] about the crime and grime in Hillbrow, for which he held such foreigners [those seen milling around in the streets] responsible; not just for the physical decay of the place, but the moral decay’ (Mpe 2000:17). The South African city is therefore fictionally mapped as fragmented socially: it pits the community as segmented between the perceived diseased and dislikeable foreign migrants and the suspicious and contempt-filled local migrant characters.

Jamal in the story ‘The Black Bag’ (2002) also confirms the existence of a class of European migrants in the South African city, some of whom are also dislocated. He shows the main character, a French professor at a local university, behaving in a paranoid way both at the university office and at his home. He is always moving around with his black bag, full of video-cassettes of pornographic films, which he wanted to hide from his wife and, possibly, his secretary. His professional and personal life has been disrupted because of his obsession with pornography and the impending divorce from his African wife. The wife could not stand her husband’s obsession with pornography. He feels alienated from his family and work to the extent that he begins to think about emigrating from South Africa. Hence, while the disrupted and restless urban lives of the urban characters are generally a result of the larger historical forces such as colonialism, the alluring qualities of the city and the reduction of national borders due to the growing global social and economic integration, which force people to migrate from their homes into an alienating and overcrowded city like Johannesburg, other factors specific to the characters’ experiences should also be considered. It is clear that the way some of the urban characters specifically related to their urban spaces, as noted in the French professor’s destructive obsessions with certain consumerisms such as pornography (Jamal 2002), and Refilwe’s degeneration into self deceit and succumbing to commonly held myths due to the pressures associated with the competition for opportunities in the city (Mpe 2001), also contributed to the overall creation of urban displacement and anxiety.
The Zimbabwean city is also shown within this image of global connections and an ensuing angst. This is achieved through the depiction of the linkages and movements to the metropolitan cities such as Johannesburg and others in Europe that is done by some of the urban characters. Sara, the wife of Nhongo – who is retrenched from his post as a middle manager at a local textile company in Zimbabwe, frequently goes to Johannesburg to buy household and clothing items that she resells in Harare (Mungoshi 1997). The main character and narrator in Chinodya’s ‘Can We Talk’ (1998) recounts that he has brought expensive presents to his wife from his various trips to other African cities and from Europe. While some of the urban dwellers, such as Sara’s family, seem to be benefiting from their linkages with other world cities through getting foreign clothing and other household items, an element of restlessness is noted in some of the characters. There is a way in which the families are unsettled due to these movements between the home city and regional cities as well as the home and the overseas city. A good example is noted in the way Nhongo assumes a restless identity (Mungoshi 1998) over the trips made by his wife to buy some goods in Johannesburg. He feels left out when his wife goes on her frequent cross-border trading trips. He also feels vulnerable as a husband because his wife has assumed a new identity, that of the breadwinner, now that he is no longer working. More importantly, he harbours suspicions: he thinks that Sara is having an affair with a fellow cross-border trader, Mr Magaso, who is always visiting his home to discuss travel plans and pick his wife up for the various trips to Johannesburg. Therefore, certain specific experiences and the resultant cultural mixing obtaining in the globalised southern African city, have an alienating effect on the inhabitants of both the host city, as noted in Hillbrow, Johannesburg, and from where they are coming, as in Nhongo’s case in Harare.

The trope of violence and death is also used to signify urban restlessness and social dislocation. The urban characters in both the Zimbabwean and South African cities are depicted as having been put out of place by the looming violence and death either from accidents or disease. As a result, most of the urban characters are portrayed as suffering from fears and stress as they contemplate the effects of such experiences and eventualities. Families, social relationships and the individual psyche are disrupted due to violence and death. In the South African city, violence and death are closely related with the urban bleakness existing in places such as inner city Hillbrow. Mpe (2002) shows how the overcrowding of the streets, especially
at night, with drug dealers, roaming illegal immigrants and prostitutes, is closely related to the violence and moral decay that is experienced there. Refentse’s first night in Hillbrow on the eve of his registration at the university appears traumatic in that he is awakened by gunshots and the cries of a woman in the streets. Later on in the novel, he is nearly attacked by thugs on his way to visit his aunt, a domestic worker in Park Town. In another incident, Sammy, a friend to Refentse, becomes a victim of drug related violence while walking in the streets of Hillbrow. The violence is symptomatic of the urban restlessness in the South African city and, more importantly, dislocates the victims socially. For instance, the relationship between Sammy and his girlfriend, Bohlale, drifts apart. Bohlale is disgusted by Sammy’s degeneration into drugs, prostitution and violence to the extent that she seeks counsel from friends. This restlessness is worsened when Bohlale is killed in an accident on the streets of Hillbrow while coming from the hospital where she had been visiting Sammy. Thereafter Sammy degenerates into dementia due to the trauma of his girlfriend’s death. Other deaths in the novel include the suicides of Refentse after he had stumbled upon Refilwe in bed with Sammy, and of Refilwe herself. She commits suicide, blaming herself for causing Refentse’s death. This shows how the experiences of violence and death plaguing the South Africa city lead to the dislocation of some characters’ relationships and the psychological displacement of some individuals.

Similarly, the trope of violence and death is used to show the existing restlessness and dislocated social relationships and displaced individuals in the Zimbabwean city. As in the case of the South African urban space, these conditions are shown as directly or indirectly influenced by the miserable conditions obtaining in some parts of Harare. The symptoms of this urban bleakness include rampant urban poverty, disease, death and the looming fall into the sector of the unemployed. This is evidenced by the experiences of Mangwiro and his family in Mhiripiri’s ‘The Lodgers’ (2000). Mangwiro, the main character, a lowly paid worker at a local milling company and father of eight children, wallows in poverty and the effects of his landlord’s exploitation. He lives in a backyard shack for which he has to pay a relatively high rent and at the same time struggles to cater for his big family’s needs considering that he earns a very low salary. The landlord is also callous, typified by his order that the funeral proceedings of Mangwiro’s son, who died in a fire accident, must not proceed at his place. This results in Mangwiro’s displaced psyche, which is noted in the way he ‘walked all the way into town thinking nothing and seeing nothing’ (Mhiripiri 2000:163).
Furthermore, Chinodya in ‘Can We Talk’ (1998) shows how the urban characters’ social relations and outlook have been disrupted by the disease and death plaguing their lives. The main character and narrator in the story meets a former high school classmate, Alice, at a popular drinking place in Harare’s southern suburbs. The anxiety over the rampant deaths and the dislocating effects of HIV and AIDS are shown through their talks. A deathly atmosphere is created in the story as one senses the fears and vulnerability felt by the characters as they mention the many funerals they have attended and how HIV and AIDS have ravaged their families, friends and community in general. The writer even juxtaposes the social gatherings at the popular drinking place with the description of how one of the city’s graveyards which is just close by, is always busy and quickly filling up. It will soon be without space to bury other people. Hence, the effect of disease and death in the Zimbabwean city is also shown as another underlying factor leading to the disruption of families and the peace of mind of most of the urban dwellers as they feel threatened or stressed by the effects of the pandemic.

The existing urban psychological fragmentation is also related to the represented dwellers’ condition of fear and the way they handle their memories. Most of the dwellers are engulfed in a sense of fear, as they imagine themselves socially excluded or victimised in the current city. As a result of this perceived victimisation, some urban dwellers develop self-hatred, anxiety and even schizophrenia. One can easily link Refilwe’s self-deceit and blaming of foreigners for her failed reconciliation with Refentse and Sammy’s dementia after Bohlale’s death (Mpe 2000). And the narrator’s feelings that his wife is excluding him from her life probably because of her obsession with her top management job (Chinodya 1998) is also evident of the existing self-hatred and psychological displacement seen in some urban characters. There is also ample evidence of various forms of memory and fear in the texts under consideration. In the first instance, the use of the first person narrative appropriately portrays the fear and memory felt. For instance, both narrators, in Chinodya’s ‘Can We Talk’, and Mpe’s Welcome to our Hillbrow, retell their painful memories to the readers and also depict elements of fear as they think about their present and future. There is so much fragmentation, detachment, loss and death to contemplate, as especially noted in Welcome to our Hillbrow. The narrator in ‘Can We Talk’ is thinking about the rift that has developed in his marriage – his wife is obsessed with personal success. As he remembers, he fearfully realises the painful emptiness and vulnerability in himself:
Your life is crowded and mine is empty. Seemingly empty. I have kicked
down my ladders and deluded myself that I am in search of simplicity;
but the vacuum is killing me. (1998:130)

Therefore I argue that the fiction discussed suggests that the current
fragmented and detached Southern African city leads to dysfunctional
personal and societal relationships. In the fictional works assessed, a
majority of the urban inhabitants’ relationships are plagued by silence,
hatred and detachment. The dislocated relationship between husband and
wife as in Chinodya’s ‘Straws’ where the husband Sam, spends most of his
time frequenting high-density bottle stores and nightclubs, while the wife
Ndaizivei, suffers in loneliness in one of Harare’s up-market suburbs, is a
clear example of the condition in the Zimbabwean city. Even the families
suffer as parents’ relationships become cold. For instance Nhongo, in ‘The
Hare’ becomes short tempered with his children as depicted during their
drive to their rural home in Chivhu. The journey typifies his symbolic and
restless search for a way to reclaim his lost manhood and refuge in the
company of his assuring traditional and rural parents while his wife had
gone on one of her frequent trips to Johannesburg. And Franklin in
Mhiripiri’s ‘No More Plastic Balls’ becomes rebellious as he sneaks out of
the fenced yard to play with his neighbourhood friends on the streets. This
is despite the fact that his parents had instructed their domestic worker to
keep Franklin inside their fenced yard. While playing outside, he learns
important township skills such as making plastic balls and this leads to a rift
between parents and son as well as between the master and mistress and the
domestic worker. In the end, one witnesses the complexity of urban alienation
that exists on the individual, family and societal level in the Zimbabwean city.

Similarly, dysfunctional personal and family relationships are also
witnessed in the South African city. Residents whose divergent life
experiences are dominated by a social and moral decay, occupy densely
populated spaces such as Hillbrow. As a result, the personal relationships
of most of the inhabitants are undermined. The impact is noted in the
unfortunate and sometimes accidental situations where a partner gets
entangled in the widespread urban immorality and anti-social behaviour
leading to the dislocation of the relationship. This is best represented in the
accidental way in which Sammy (Mpe 2001) gets into drugs and prostitution
in Hillbrow’s bars and streets, which undermines his relationship with
Bohlale. Ironically, Refentse who tries to bring the couple together ends up
betraying his friend Sammy by sleeping with Bohlale. This is repeated again
when Sammy sleeps with Refentse’s Lerato while trying to console her from the pain of being shut out by her partner. Refentse was under pressure from his rural mother that they should separate. The city space is here shown as frighteningly trapping its inhabitants in a vicious cycle of immorality and betrayal, leading to unstable relationships. Added to this, is the current spread of Western global cultural practices valorising individual glory and satisfaction.

Finally, these feelings of vulnerability, restlessness and self-hatred, should also be viewed from the specific history of each country’s colonial urban development, the impact of racial discrimination and that of apartheid. In addition, the constitution of the urban experiences and the resultant identities should also be considered in relation to the influence of the post-independent (Zimbabwe) and post-apartheid (South Africa) social and political developments in the lives of the urban characters. The city in both countries evolved and assumed its characteristics due to the impact of European colonialism, white social, political and economic domination, and, currently, the policies of the ruling majority and nationalist governments as well as the impact of changes in the world economies. The fact that the city is always in a state of continuous flux means that new identities are always being created. It must be noted that these emergent identities are always at loggerheads with old ones, to take the Williams (1977) concept of the contestation between residual and emergent cultures and ideas. This contestation between the present perceptions and those from the past seems to effect an element of restlessness in some urban dwellers. For instance, the self-hatred and anxiety seen in Lerato as she contemplates her failed relationship with Refentse (Mpe 2001) can be explained from the impact of shifting world views associated with the social and political trajectories of society. One can assume that with the democratisation of the urban and national space in South Africa came the widening up and transformation of perceptions from the localised or ‘homeland’ mentalities that had been instilled by apartheid. Hence Refentse could afford to have a relationship with Lerato, a girl from Johannesburg, even though the people of Tiragalong would stereotype her as immoral. This is because urban imagination and views of the self and society are no longer localised but have become broad, and even global, depending on one’s experience. Hence those characters that seem to have held steadfastly onto old ideas and have not changed their views while society’s imagination has been changing are likely to suffer from social and sometimes psychological displacement.
Possibilities of agency and subversion
Despite these shifting identities, which are largely influenced by agony and bleakness, there still exist attempts and desire by the urban dwellers to reconstitute themselves and their lives in the city. The city, as already noted, is represented as a paradoxical space of opportunities and failures and, at the same time, facilitating diverse cultural mixing. More importantly, however, is the fact that it enables one to engage in various forms of agency. These forms of agency represented in the fiction include: the remapping of the city, remaking personal relationships and making pragmatic decisions depending on one’s conditions. Harvey (1989:4-6), in his comprehensive analysis of the post-modern condition, refers to this potential for reconstitution in the city and acknowledges this as resonating with the Raban concept of soft city. This is how Raban (1974:9-10) defines the soft city:

But this is where you live: it’s your city – London, or New York, or wherever – and its language is the language you’ve always known, the language from which being you, being me, are inseparable. In those dazed moments at stop-lights, it’s possible to be a stranger to your self, to be so doubtful as to who you are that you have to check on things like the placards round the news-vendors’ kiosks or the uniforms of the traffic policemen. You’re a balloonist adrift, and you need anchors to tether you down.

A sociologist, I suppose, would see these as classic symptoms of alienation, more evidence to add to the already fat dossier on the evils of urban life. I feel more hospitable towards them. For at moments like this, the city goes soft; it awaits the imprint of an identity. For better or worse, it invites you to remake it, to consolidate it into a shape you can live in. You, too. Decide who you are, and the city will again assume a fixed form round it. Decide what it is, and your own identity will be relieved, like on a position map fixed by triangulation.

Perhaps the most significant form of agency is noted in the urban dwellers that appropriate the city’s space and restructure it to suit their own intentions and desire. In the texts under study, the restructuring occurs on the social level. Evidence of urban restructuring in the Zimbabwean city is noted in the way public spaces are remapped and used to construct a meaningful perception of the self and one’s condition. For instance, Mangwiro in Mhiripiri’s ‘The Lodgers’ (2000) appropriates a park in Harare and turns it into a space of reflection and recollection. He becomes acutely aware of his poverty-induced loss of pride, which is worsened by his landlord’s
callousness, to the extent that he decides to fight back. As soon as he returns home, later on, he punches his callous landlord in the mouth (2000:164-6). On a similar note, the narrator in ‘Can We Talk’ (1998) runs away from the alienating city centre and fragmented domestic space to find companionship with Alice, an old high school classmate, recent widow and fellow beer patron of the popular Harare high-density drinking and eating place called Mereki. This public space, usually associated with moral decay, is restructured into a place where the narrator and his female companion openly share views on family relations and fears on issues such as AIDS and death. Both characters even make important decisions such as resolving to abstain from casual sex and being faithful to safeguard their health and lives from the AIDS scourge (1998:149-51). In the South African city, Refilwe boldly decides that she would not give up on life despite the debilitating effects of HIV and AIDS related illnesses after her return from England. Hence, despite the dominant part of urban decay, the southern African urban dweller shows a tenacious character exemplified in his/her restructuring of a socially and morally disrupted space into one where meaningful relationships, decisions and views of the self and society are reconstituted. This can be linked, to some extent, with De Certeau’s (1993) idea of the fragmented New Yorkers’ remapping their alienating city so that it portrays their own desires, meanings and intentions. However, the specificities are different. The southern African remapping is located within the desire, and intended decisions, to reconstitute the individual and society from the socio-economic decay and the effects of HIV and AIDS, while the New York one is based on the walker’s desire to have a meaningful relationship with the post-modern city whose architecture and streets render him or her invisible.

**Conclusion**

Therefore the city is portrayed as a hybrid space influenced by the legacy of colonialism, apartheid and global social and economic influences. Here, the architecture and spatiality reminds us of these social and historical legacies and realities, and the entrenched exclusion of the majority of the urban dwellers who are mostly portrayed as wallowing in socio-economic decay. The overall impact of this decay, on the majority of African and Asian dwellers in the southern African city, has been the engendering of personal, social and psychological displacement and the effecting of shifting identities as they relate to this disconcerting space. Nevertheless the city is also shown as a site where failure and opportunities co-exist. As a result,
there are some urban dwellers who, in their search for opportunities, engage in a multiple restructuring of the city, make pragmatic decisions and reconstitute their identities as well, in the hope of achieving meaningful personal relationships and a sense of belonging as they walk and live in the city space.

Notes
1. The paper is based on an MA dissertation for the Department of English at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg. I express my gratitude to Professor Liz Gunner for the mentoring and overall assistance in the crafting of this paper.
2. Michel Foucault comments that architecture and space denote the dominant political hegemony of the period (Lolinger 1996:335-339). In this case then, Johannesburg’s architectural and spatial representations denote the dominance of capitalism that has characterised the development of the city.
3. David Harvey (1989:72-93) notes that the shiny skyscrapers, office and shopping complexes inscribe the iconography of international and historical memory associated with the post-1970s post-modern infrastructure and architectural developments.

References


