

## **Militant Femininity in Southern African Poetry: A Discussion of Selected Poems by Micere Mugo and Gladys Thomas**

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### **Abstract**

This paper is based on selected poems by Micere Mugo and Gladys Thomas that were written during the apartheid period but were unavailable for critical evaluation because of apartheid circumstances. Focusing on the exigencies of the period, it discusses how context helped to emphasize the militant disposition of the female characters. It analyzes their contribution in the domestic, public, and in-between spheres as well as their visioning of contemporary Southern African and global calamities, showing intersections shaped by gender, class, and postcoloniality in their personalities.

### **Introduction**

Any quality may appear in any human being and should be evaluated on its own merits, not in terms of gender of the person in whom it appears. (Hunter College Women's Studies Collective 2005, p. 6).

The above quotation that emphasizes the non-gendered nature of human traits is important in appreciating militant femininity. Militant femininity may sound contradictory because militancy is usually excluded in traditional virtues of femininity that often connotes the temperate, submissive, and inactive (Hlatshwayo 1998, Chisholm 2003). These virtues are usually valued for their cooperative cum communal stance. However, in embattled settings where hostility is part of life, militancy is imperative

because of its role in antagonism. In this essay, “militancy” implies more than the dictionary definition of the term as “the use of force or strong pressure, or supporting their use, to achieve one’s aims” (Webster 1999), because it goes beyond the external experience described in this definition to include the internal one evoked by the wrangling within the soul. It is the internal militancy that supports the external one seen in the use and endorsement of force. African engagement of colonial domination and apartheid in South Africa were the background of militancy in the feminine identity poetically endorsed by Gladys Thomas and Micere Mugo.

Micere Githae Mugo was born in Kenya in 1942. While she was growing up in preindependent Kenya, the Mau Mau liberation struggle nurtured notions of engagement and freedom on young Mugo. She attended Makerere University in Uganda, and was a Dean at the University of Nairobi, Kenya. Her personal space was politicized as an African who lived the reality of colonial domination in Kenya, a woman with an understanding of traditional and colonial patriarchies, as well as an intellectual who used poetry and drama to query repression. Her situation was frequently fractured by brushes with the police and detentions occasioned by her progressive political stance. Her passion for freedom and justice are shown in her antiapartheid, American civil rights, pan-African and African gender literary engagements. Mugo’s play *The Long Illness of Ex-Chief Kiti* explores the legacy of self determination and struggle. The Mau Mau resistance is central in the play *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, which she co-authored with Ngugi wa Thiong’o, who also has a long story of being victimized and detained because of his progressive political views. With the confiscation of her Kenyan passport in 1982, Mugo went into

exile with her two daughters and assumed Zimbabwean citizenship in 1984. She accepted a position at Cornell University in 1991 and later moved to Syracuse University. Her passion for pan-African liberation has continued to grow, as we shall see from this discourse.

Gladys Thomas's career has elements comparable to that of Mugo, since she is also a woman poet and playwright inhabiting a politicized space. Born in 1934, Thomas engaged in wage labor at fifteen when she left school, but did not stop writing and later made it to the International Writing Program in Iowa City. Living in apartheid South Africa with the nightmare of violent encounters, her poems and plays are critical of apartheid. Like Mugo, she also had encounters with the police and was detained. Her three plays were banned in South Africa. Like Mugo, she coauthored a book with a notable writer, James Mathews, who was well known in South Africa and who, like Ngugi, was a victim of police harassment and brutality. The work of Mugo and Thomas may differ in their details, but a compelling understanding of oppressive structures resonates in their poetry, especially in their representation of a liberative militant direction. They invest their poems with images that show the violence of bondage and represent the perspective of the oppressed through a style of retelling stories of African inferiority and suitability for bondage written by colonialists. When Mugo talks about generations in "Rhodesia" and Thomas talks about caged animals in "Haunted Eyes," they engage in what Mae Gwendolyn Henderson (1989) might call "revisioning" the dominant story, which is the story of the white man, but they rewrite the story with the agenda of a dream for the present and future of Africa.

Their dream resonates with the dreams and actions of other women and men who were actively engaged in the struggle against the domination of Africans. Like men, women were killed, maimed, incarcerated, and exiled (Aidoo 1998, p. 41). Sibongile Mkhabela was jailed because of her role as a student in the Soweto riots of 1978. Winnie Madela was detained and jailed a number of times for antiapartheid activities. The activities of many other South African women, such as Zodwa Sobukwe and Albertina Sisulu, testify to women's involvement in the struggle for South African liberation from apartheid (Musiker 2000). Zimbabwean women were also active participants in the struggle for liberation. They were recruited as freedom fighters in guerrilla warfare and fought as combatant soldiers (Gann 101). Ingrid Sinclair's feature film *Flame* reenacts women's experience as combat soldiers and her research reveals that many women ex-soldiers are disillusioned with their postwar reality of struggle and poverty. Tsi-tsi Dangarembga's writings, such as *Nervous Conditions*, are acclaimed for exposing the female plight in patriarchy when in fact their main canvas is the insidious effect of white domination on the African social system, including gender structure and relations.

The political climate of engagement was the background that informed Southern African poetry in both African and English languages. Literary examples included the works of Nontsisi Mcqwetho, who wrote in Xhosa, and Mabuza Lindiwe, whose poems derived from Zulu praise poetry. Some of the poems portrayed qualities that invoked the militant environment, but they were not easily accessible for critical appraisal during the apartheid period, largely because of the politics of muzzling Southern African voices by

limiting the publishing and marketing of such writings. A survey of the few poems by women poets that were available for international view during the apartheid period revealed that the poems tended to limit portrayal to politically safe personae. Writing in 1979, during the heyday of apartheid, Rushing (1979: 18-19) showed that the few available texts tended to portray female personae through their biological role as mothers, as well as their relationships with men as wives and lovers. This was limited when compared to the broad fictional portrayal of West African women discussed by Smith (1986) as strong mother-figures and activist cum militant women who contributed to their societies under colonial siege. The present study therefore goes back to the apartheid period to show that there were forceful and active poetic characters in the fight against apartheid domination, but since they were not readily available, it seemed that they did not exist.

Focusing on poems by Gladys Thomas, writing from South Africa, and Micere Mugo writing from Kenya and Zimbabwe in the sixties and seventies, this essay shows how their position in conflicted zones generated female poetic characters with militant anticolonial reactions as well as incisive gender consciousness. A comparative approach couched in postcolonial feminist thought easily lends itself to the discussion, by engaging the power hierarchies and relations of racial, gender, and class power in postcolonial experiences, as elucidated by African women writers (Daymond 1996). Janmohamed's explanation of "death-bound subjects" (2005), in terms of how the threat of annihilation contributes to the psychology of Richard Wright's protagonists, is important in our appreciation of Mugo and Thomas's construction of militant characters overwhelmed by

the threat of annihilation. The sociopolitical context of Mugo and Thomas called for different “death-bound” options such as complacency, allying with the powers, and opposing the powers. The poets chose the opposition camp, particularly a rebellious cum subversive standpoint, from which their militant poetic characters emerged.

This standpoint provides a crucial perspective, or what Spivak (1993: 15), may refer to as “strategic essentialism,” whereby the poets connect with other strategists with similar agenda. This stance connects them with male counterparts such as Ngugi and Mathews and explains their intersections with many others, but gender provides extra strategic space for the two women and places their work within a space of heightened engagement. Linda Alcoff’s view of woman as “a position from which a feminist politics can emerge rather than a set of attributes that are objectively identifiable” (Alcoff 1988: 435) is important in understanding how gender provides another axis for appreciating their poetry. As their female characters traverse the spheres, they see no safe space even in their bedrooms. With a threat that recalls “death-bound” mentality (Janmohamed 2005), they struggle as wives, mothers, fighters, strategists, and instigators; and through these roles reveal their militant disposition toward the struggle against subjugation. Mugo’s and Thomas’s use of the poetic persona is exceptionally feminist; if we understand feminism to include a commitment to women’s spaces and positions, opposing the devaluation of women and other oppressed groups, as well as supporting their development by engaging oppressive systems. Their female characters are not just feminist because of their gender, but also because of their understanding of gender oppression and its unity with other hierarchies of power, such as class and race.

While many, not all, Southern African male writers of the period such as Dennis Brutus, Yakhai 'Inkomo, Korapetse Kgositsile, and Lyson Tembo depicted women as bearers of pain and burden, Mugo and Thomas went beyond the assemblage of pictures of anguish to present female personae that represented diverse emotions. Although under severe threat, the characters expressed great emotional, psychological, and physical wellbeing that made them all-rounded personalities with the full range of human emotions from gentleness to militancy. This is concordant with modern feminist epistemology, which rejects the prescription of roles and behaviors according to constructed gender, and values human traits in all individuals where they exist (Hunter College Women's Studies Collective 2005, p. 6). What modern feminism articulates was already demonstrated by Mugo and Thomas in the early seventies through their poems interrogating patriarchal gender biases. Their poems depict women with rounded human attributes women who can weep and fight heartily and who can bow in deference even as they proceed to their goals. The poetic characters therefore demonstrate the complexity of women as subjects with empathy and assertiveness as they navigate the maze of multiple oppressions.

In this discourse, references will be made to a number of poems that contribute to the enunciation of our concerns, but the focus is primarily on six poems: "From A Zulu Mother's Diary," "Rhodesia," and "Mother Afrika's Matriots" by Micere Mugo, and "To Live In Fear," "Hunted Eyes," and "Fall Tomorrow" by Gladys Thomas. Their assessment will show that women personae are the main voices that communicate understanding of the tiered structure of oppression and strategies for transcendence, as

well as continuity of violence, in postindependent Southern Africa.

### **Engaging violence through militant femininity**

Micere Mugo's "From A Zulu Mother's Diary" (1976) is an antiapartheid poem in which the persona, a wife and mother, recounts the story of the dispossession of black Africans by the white South African regime, personified in the poem as *bwana*, the white man/master. *Bwana* entered into a pact with the black husband of the persona at a meeting in which the woman was excluded. The *bwana* "composed and dictated the pact/ they signed" (Mugo 1976, p. 7), but the treaty pushed the African to an inferior position where he became the servant or "boy" to *bwana*. The poem therefore is a poetic rendition of the colonization of Africans. What is presented as a friendly encounter between two races is shown to be a dubious pact of gender exclusion that turned into a sinister relationship of class and racial subjugation. Gender in the poem is totalizing and does not query the role of white women "as wives of colonizers and collaborators with colonialism" (Ogundipe 1996, p. 499). Centering on gender, the lyric is rendered in the form of an address by a wife to her husband and reveals the woman's awareness of her marginalization by her husband, who excluded her from men's secret meetings. The arrangement of the pact was men's affair, as it did not involve black women or white women. Only the white man, his son, and the black husband participated in the brief action that had farreaching consequences for women, as well as men, and the future represented by the woman's child. It is the injustice of jeopardizing the future that propels the woman's militancy.

Impatient with her husband, she is also apprehensive of questions that may be raised in the future. Her feeling calls to mind similar sentiments expressed in “Notes From No Sanctuary,” by her male contemporary, Kgositsile, who is concerned about the possibility of children questioning their parents’ complacency and inaction under apartheid:

“Knowing your impotence why/ Did you bring me here?” (Kgositsile 1968). It is a similar possibility that inspires Mugo’s poem, in which the persona feels that she may be faced with queries and accusations of cowardice and docility. She, therefore, records her story in a diary for posterity and in the process releases the fire that has raged within her since the pact was made, a fire that supports her intention to take up arms. Micere Mugo’s expertise as a dramatist is used to great advantage in her employment of three voices to characterize the persona and to reveal the inner wrangling of her soul baking in the heat of the triple yoke of racism, gender, and class. The first is the main voice addressing her husband and narrating the story of how she will show her son the story of their marginalization as recorded in her diary. The second voice is that of the diary (enclosed in quotation marks in the text) containing the tale of her exclusion from men’s affair and her man’s reduction to the status of “boy.” The third voice comes from the woman’s innermost soul (in parenthesis within the text) and functions as a dramatic aside that discloses the militant feelings of the character. The voices effectively delineate her emotions of disgust and disappointment for her man, contempt for his betrayal and cowardice, and her rejection of the status quo. Her readiness to fold her wrapper and become a man in order to fight indicates great anger.

I will fold up  
this my *wrapper*

I will rise  
and be  
a man! (Mugo 1976: 14)

The persona's use of wrapper (italicized in the text) is deliberate. It is an emblem of femaleness that underscores the gender question of the poem. It demonstrates that it is not the external sign such as wrapper or sex that is the essence of a human being who is a fighter, patriot, or "matriot" (a word that Mugo uses in another poem, "Mother African's Matriots"). She shows that what delineates a person's significance lies within, as seen in the concern, boldness, and determination of the character. The poet uses simple words to draw a picture of the fighting persona that squeezes her womanly face in rage and folds the wrapper in order to fight like a man. The wrapper is a symbol of femaleness in the poem, and folding it signifies engagement of a gender boundary. It is similar to the traditional *bopoto* discourse of the Shona (Zimbabwe), which in practice is a subversive theatrical action of an oppressed subject aimed at transcendence. *Bopoto* usually takes the form of a woman contravening the normal order of communication by remaining silent or making noise (Okafor 1999, p. 61).

In her empathy for her adopted country, Zimbabwe, it is not surprising that Micere Mugo also echoes the traditional *bopoto* element of disruption in expressing anger at the extreme domination of Africans by colonial power. Unlike the traditional *bopoto*, which engages one level of oppression, her *bopoto* engages colonial oppression that is complicated by double gender ideologies, namely colonial gender with its Victorian ideology and traditional African gender. Fighting is often delineated as a male activity in the traditional mainstream discourse of both colonialists (Hunt 1997; Shear 1997) and

Africans (Ratele 2002; Hlupo 2005), yet the Zimbabwean reality is that both genders participated in colonial military engagement, because women fought as combatant soldiers and rear personnel in the liberation war. Mugo subverts the mainstream delineation of fighting as male preserve by applying the traditional feminine emblem (wrapper) to dismantle that thinking and show that gender can be a malleable identity.

However, this femalecentered Madonna needs not cross the boundary to “be a man” in order to fight. Her all-inclusive femininity, with strong and gentle principles that reveal moderate cum submissive as well as aggressive cum combative qualities, is shown to be better at fighting, caring, and thinking than a personality that is incomplete. Since the publication of the poem in 1976, the poet has developed beyond her Zulu persona’s delineation of warfare as a manly affair. Her feminist stance has changed in the eighteen years between the publication of “Zulu Woman” and her adumbration of feminism in her 1994 publication of “To Be A Feminist Is,” which contradicts the Zulu woman’s attitude of crossing a boundary because military combat was gendered as masculine. Woman is a multifaceted being whose space is as large as life, because she can freely soar to any height without inhibitions. She is an achiever who should

Hug the female principle  
and the metaphors of life  
that decorate my being (Mugo 1994: 36)

This new perspective, in fact, questions the delineation of warfare only in masculine terms, because she shows how women use it to engage violence. This is clearly seen in the poem, “Mother Afrika’s Matriots,” in which she calls up images of revolutionary women such as the Igbo women of Aba in Nigeria (Orji 2000), who emphasized their

womanness by securing their wrappers with a second one in order to fight against colonialism. She also invokes Muthoni wa Kirima, who was a general in the Mau Mau liberation war against colonial administration in Kenya; women of Mozambique and Angola; and a host of other fighters for African liberation. Mugo alludes to these combatant women to show that valor and courage are feminine characteristics. She uses such words as “herstory” and “matriots” as contrasts to male-inspired “history,” and “patriots,” as she sings the praises of women from “Zimbabwe and South Afrika,” through the continent to Egypt and the African diaspora. The main voice of the poem is militant like that of “Zulu Woman” but shows a divergence in its celebrative mood and joyful tone.

### **Apartheid violence and postapartheid repression**

In a manner similar to Mugo’s representation of the fighting persona raging under multiple antagonisms, Gladys Thomas portrays women characters who confront racial, class, and gender oppressions. Like Mugo in “Zulu Woman,” she centers her poem “To Live In Fear” on a persona who is a wife and mother and uses this persona to focus on “fear.” Although it was a central phenomenon of the apartheid context, fear still plagues the postapartheid world. During the apartheid period, pass laws, police harassment, and other elements of repression created such an atmosphere of panic that people seemed to be afraid for no reason. This situation did not quickly disappear at the end of apartheid. Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela reports how she was overtaken by fear on her visit to postapartheid Pretoria because of the historical monuments that evoked horror. She said that “even jacaranda blooms — trade mark of Pretoria’s beauty — lining the streets”

could not calm her (Gobodo-Madikizela 1992, p. 3).

Fear is no longer a phenomenon of war or postwar regions, because the global world is engulfed by fear of imagined and real terrorists, insurgents, weapons of destruction, missiles, and psychological charlatans. This is a kind of “mean world syndrome” (Gerbner 2003) similar to what the Noble Laureate Wole Soyinka describes as a “mental bunker” (Soyinka 2005), whereby our environment has become charged with terror that controls our psyche. Thus, Thomas’s focus on “fear” as an overwhelming phenomenon speaks to the world today as well as the apartheid context of the poem. The persona communicates the frustration and humiliation of her husband who works for a master, and is subjected to inhuman treatment that makes him afraid. The husband’s greatest fear is that of being caught with his wife and it is this fear that enrages the persona.

The poem represents the plight of workers in apartheid mining locations where they were housed in halls called “single men’s quarters,” because their wives were not allowed to stay with them. Men who were seen with their wives were subject to job loss, jail time, or worse. Men in such quarters, and the wives barred from such quarters, suffered emotional and psychological pain as a result of the separation. It is this situation that triggers the reaction of the persona in Gladys Thomas’s poem, “To Live In Fear” (Thomas 1972). Thomas’s intention is to query the situation and, in doing so, she reveals the persona’s forceful personality through a depiction of her awareness of the nature and source of fear. Her world is influenced by fear because her husband is dominated by fear. He is afraid to live in a house, walk on the street, and “swim god’s sea” (Thomas 1972, p. 72). To show

the intensity of the fear, it is personified as a companion that lives with her husband.

The persona's plight is comparable to the poetic characters of other South African poems, such as the lonesome woman of 'Inkomo's "This Old Woman" ('Inkomo 1972) who works very hard in a life that offers no recompense, as well as the suffering personae of Lyson Tembo's "To My Mother" (Tembo 1972). There are also comparable elements in "Fear" by the Trinidadian writer Samuel Selvon (Ramchand 1996, p. 80). The protagonist of Thomas's poem, however, differs from these suffering female characters created by male poets, because the gender question does not end with suffering, but transcends anguish to show women's dynamism in oppressive situations. Ramchand (1996, p. 80) argues that Selvon goes into the psychological state of the character to reveal a personality that is dominated by fright without knowing its source, since it seems to be "coming from nowhere and lodging everywhere." On the contrary, Gladys Thomas's persona is aware of the source of her problems and so is able to plan her strategy and engage the situation. She defies the injunction by visiting her husband in "men's quarters." This increases his fear:

Fear of a knock on his door  
 Hide your wife  
 Or she must go on that long train ride (Thomas 1972, p. 72)

Like the persona of Mugo's "Zulu Woman," she is invoking the apartheid repression that has made her husband what she calls "half-a-man." The fire burning within her soul surfaces in the act of rebellion that is depicted in her show of disgust for fear in the first stanza. The repetition of "Fear" and "This fear" in the first stanza draws attention to the phenomenon of fear. Repetition of "They say you don't need . . ." underscores the

inhumanity of the oppressors, who make the rules that deny workers the opportunity of expressing basic human feelings. The woman is frustrated by the influence of fear in her life, but she is not a helpless victim. She tackles the situation by taking up the role of a commander who directs her husband:

Don't run  
 Spread your feet  
 Be fearless  
 Be fearless for your wife  
 Be fearless for your children (Thomas 1972, p. 72).

“Be fearless,” repeated three times toward the end of the poem, is an anthem that aims at expunging fear from the psyche. It is a contrast to fright, which dominates the first stanza of the poem, and acts as a refrain for liberation. The repeated words and phrases show that Gladys Thomas favors repetition as an element of style that focuses attention on the persona's liberating and assertive stance.

The forceful style of the fighting persona is further developed in “Haunted Eyes” (Thomas 1972) in which she instigates external and internal revolt. The plight of Africans is skillfully portrayed through the image of animals imprisoned in white cages. This echoes a similar imagery in Paul Lawrence Dunbar's poem “Sympathy” (1970), which deals with the oppression of African Americans represented by the caged bird that cries and flaps its wings because it cannot be part of the beauty and freedom outside the cage. Like Dunbar, Thomas also writes about repression in “Haunted Eyes” and uses the caged animals to query bondage. In the cage, animals run wild with “Hunger for food/ Hunger for freedom” (Thomas 1972, p. 79), while the world enjoys the beauty outside the cage. It calls to mind the feeling of separateness in time-out, but this is a collective and dangerous one that touches the soul of the persona who is aware that beauty is “. . . not for me.”

Unlike the persona in Dunbar's poem, Thomas's protagonist has solutions and outlines tactics for destroying the oppressor through the twopronged attacks of external and internal struggle. The external one works through her contact with the tourist, whom she shows the animals with hunted eyes inside the fences and the malnourished children who search for food in the muck. The visitor is requested to tell the world about the plight of the caged animal: "Tell them about this jungle/ And the animals you did see (Thomas 1972, p. 79). Hope therefore lies in the persona's involvement of the outside world in the struggle. This approach is not accidental. Involving the outside world in the South African struggle through protest literature is an option that the poet and her coauthor, James Mathews, see as a realistic engagement of apartheid. According to Mathews, they use poetry to protest, reach the outside world, and "show our contempt for white man's two-faced morality" (Mathews and Thomas 1972, p. 1).

In addition to instigating external pressure, there is the alternative of an internal war through resistance, as portrayed in the third stanza, in which the persona reveals that the oppressor is afraid of what the brutalization of the animals has produced. She suggests that the possibility of retaliation by brutalized animals disturbs the oppressors and makes them continue to cage the animals. But in spite of the caging, the warlike persona is confident that the animals will be freed by revolution. In "Fall Tomorrow," the warlike persona calls all her internal resources, including men, children, and domestic animals, to action. The domestic animals, such as dogs and roosters, are requested to bark and crow. Children are told to "Ruin and take," and destroy things. The sons who are already "dazed in eye" because of anger are commanded to "Rape and steal/ For they are not

allowed to feel.” The men should drink and fight and live up to the reputation that the whites have created for them. The persona climaxes her admonition with this exhortation of violence:

So bark, howl, crow,  
Chop, break, ruin,  
Steal, drink, fight,  
Let what’s made of us be right (Thomas 1972, p. 74)

The destruction venerated in the six stanzas is followed by a concluding stanza that paints an image of the calmness that will come when the enemy falls. This is very prophetic indeed, if we can recall the drastic situation of underground insurgency by South Africans, supported by independent African governments and people, as well as the input of international pressure through economic sanctions and other boycotts (Lowenberg and Kaempfer 1998). This prediction extends to the postapartheid situation, because the atrocities enumerated in her poetry echo the litany of social plagues of contemporary South Africa.

RIP UP THEIR HOMES  
TEAR THEM APART  
RAPE THEIR DAUGHTERS  
KILL THEIR MOTHERS  
CASTRATE THEIR BROTHERS (Thomas 1972, p. 76).

It must be emphasized that postapartheid South Africa is afflicted with a lot of violence and other problems whose origins lie in the socialization of brutality and violence during the apartheid period (McCann and Yluisa. 2001), and Gladys Thomas prophesied how the violence of the oppressor created an “enraged wild animal.” The animal has become a symbol of the violence that still plagues the independent nation. The animal symbolism dominates the ideology of the poem, because everything centers on it. When the persona asserts that there is an animal within her, that animal is a metaphor for the rage that the

incarceration (caging) of Africans (animals) has produced; and which can only be eradicated by liberty, when “the animal will be out of me/ For then I will be free.” This indicates the seemingly contradictory connection of oppression and insurgency (cause and effect). This kind of link is often untold in texts of oppressors whose perspectives hardly implicate their actions in the counteractions such as liberation struggles or “insurgency.” The poem suggests that the link of both—cause and effect—will lead to the birth of freedom. The poet’s use of animal as a symbol is therefore appropriate in delineating the effect of oppression on the persona’s character.

It is clear that the militancy of Thomas’s persona results from the oppression that she suffers, and not from love of chaos, because it is the caging of the animal that makes it tear the cage. This kind of scenario is not only true of South Africa but also of other postindependent African countries in which the governments try to suppress opposition. Indeed, the metaphor is not limited to Africa, but applies as well to the spread of new forms of postcolonial and global dominations that give rise to insurgencies. The metaphor is transformed in “My Burden” as the “Stern man of law with red face/ Brass buttons and gold stripes on his coat of grey” (Thomas 1972, p. 74). The man of law has a “bloody” face that symbolizes death, and wears gold stripes which are a symbol of war, money, and militarism. This is a picture of an ugly capitalism that benefits from the blood of its victims.

This poetic picture of violence resonates in the reality of postapartheid writing such as Farida Karodia’s *Against an African Sky*, which focuses on the dilemma of the new state

faced with violence and insecurity. Privileged South Africans buy big houses, drive posh cars, and live in the twenty-first century while the majority still live in a warlike nightmare. According to Jahan, the hero of Farida's text, "The rules have changed, but the game goes on as before . . . . The violence, which is confined mainly to the townships, is ignored by the white population, as long as it remains black-on-black violence" (3).

This kind of situation resonates in Zimbabwean literature. For example, *Without a Name and under the Tongue* by Yvonne Vera is a depiction of the insecurity, violence, and eclipse of values in the postwar landscape of Zimbabwe. This is similar, though not analogous, to the current Zimbabwean example described by Linndgreen (2002) as a situation in which there is strong cultural resistance of state violence that Chipungu connects with postcolonial contradictions and exclusions (2005).

The point here is that the ugliness of today's Southern Africa sounds like an echo of the brutality that made the persona of "My Burden," resign to sorrow because ". . . there is no tomorrow" (Thomas 1972, p. 76). The purposeful violence of Thomas's poetic characters is comparable to those of Mugo in "Rhodesia," which supports armed struggle because of the freedom that it will bring. "Rhodesia" (Mugo 1976, p. 15) is a song of support for warriors fighting for the liberation of Zimbabwe from colonial power, represented in the poem as Ian Smith, who used military power to suppress African resistance to white domination. The persona adopts a historical approach by reviewing the background of the present conflict. In the first three stanzas, she focuses on the brutalization and domination of three generations of Africans by colonialists, and recounts the death of the great-grandfather in war against the colonials. In the second stanza, she dwells on slavery and

the slave trade, represented by the sale of the grandfathers and their enslavement in “enemy land.” The third stanza recalls the exclusion of the father from the affairs of his land. The fourth and last stanza concerns the offspring, who represents the present generation that refuses to succumb to the colonialist.

This kind of imagistic account of the African colonial story has become a recurrent motif in Mugo’s writings. In a 2004 poetry reading in Madison, Wisconsin, where she was the keynote speaker at the Women’s Caucus of African Literature Association (WOCALA) luncheon and award ceremony, she eulogized the African American recipient, Professor Mildred Hill-Lubin, as a Maroon intellectual and expanded the Maroon imagery to evoke Mother Africa. She gave it the Micere Mugo stamp by focusing on the connection of precolonial African enslavement and resistance with postcolonial struggles of Africans in the continent and the diaspora. This received wide ovation and ululation from the mixed audience of Africans, African Americans, and others. She not only chanted the epic like a traditional African griot, but employed the traditional African theatrical technique of audience participation to great advantage by making her audience chorus the refrain and affirm their unity in the continued struggle for the emancipation of ebony kins in different parts of the globe. This poetic performance calls to mind a similar account executed dramatically through mime by Micere Mugo and her coauthor, Ngugi wa Thiongo, in the play *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. An exchange between a rich-looking black chief and a white hungry-looking slave trader. Several strong black men and a few women are given away. . . . A labor force of blacks, toiling on a plantation under the supervision of a cruel, ruthless fellow black overseer. A white master comes around and inspects the work (wa Thiongo and Mugo 1981, p. 5).

The mime dramatizes the slave trade and enslavement of Africans in America. It provides a basis for the armed struggle dramatized in the play, showing that the African freedom fighters are not terrorists, but people who are reacting to centuries of bondage and colonial violence. This view, which is shared by many Africans, is contrary to the perspective of the colonialists (Nwokeji 2000; Kenyatta 1965). Similarly, the provision of the background of conquest and enslavement in the poem “Rhodesia” offers a justification for the present conflict and fuels the determination of the fighters. The

background empowers the persona to affirm her determination as a fighter:

I am thirty  
and that or less, goddamit!  
I will not be  
ian smith (Mugo 1976, p.15).

The assertiveness and militancy of this character echoes in Mugo's "The Unknown Combatant's Poem" written "For South Afrika's Freedom fighters and other combatants. . . ." Here she gives the people no other alternative but the ultimate one:

It will be  
our motherland  
or death! (Mugo 1994, p. 64).

The defiance of the main voice echoes the sentiment of an African American poet, Claude McKay in "If We Must Die," in which he urges African Americans to fight because it is better to die while fighting nobly than to die shivering in fright.

If we must die, let it not be like hogs  
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot . . .  
If we must die, O let us nobly die . . .  
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back! (McKay 1970, p. 102)

McKay's poem was inspired by the suppression of Africans in America, and it encouraged the bold and rebellious spirit in African Americans during the riots of 1916. In a similar manner, Mugo was inspired by the colonial struggle in Zimbabwe and so encouraged militancy in "The Unknown Combatant's Poem." The persona has a defiant voice that shouts historical allusions to fortify the determination of soldiers engaged in the liberation struggle. The allusions show that the memory of tragedies in South African history informed the African personality of the poem:

The being in us  
is haunted

by the Sowetos

Of our people's ghettoization (Mugo 1994, pp. 63–64)

Memory in the poem has flowered into a symbol of salvation because it fuels the determination of the liberators. The use of memory as a symbol recalls similar uses by a male contemporary, Kgositsile (1968), in “The Awakening” and “Ivory Masks in Orbit,” in which memory dominates the vision of the persona. Memory also functions like the irresistible avenger of Kgositsile’s “Shotgun,” who is so possessed by memory of three hundred years of oppression of blacks that he resorts to violence. As in Kgositsile’s poems, memory in Mugo’s poem influences the African personality and drives it to positive action,—that is, the struggle in all its ramifications as military, diplomatic, poetic, spiritual, and so on.

### **Conclusions**

This discussion has shown that Mugo and Thomas created poetic characters who were threatened by apartheid and chose militancy as the route to liberation. This calls to mind Audre Lorde’s dictum, “may I never lose the terror /that keeps me brave” (“The Black Unicorn,” p. 108), [QUERY: ADD THIS TO BIBLIOGRAPHY] which evokes the image of a psyche under constant threat and in continuous engagement of oppression. Mugo’s and Thomas’s characters do not succumb to “terror” but use it for empowerment. They engage in reworking the colonial story through women’s voices or what Mugo calls “herstory.” The poetic rendition of the Southern African story and indeed African and all stories from the African women’s perspective enriches our understanding and fills a gap in our knowledge bank. In her review of women’s contribution to African creative

writing, Flora Nwapa while noting a number of exceptions, makes the point that many male writers have “played down the powerful role of women” (Nwapa 1998, p. 92). We need a more balanced representation of reality that includes the full picture of women, as Mugo and Thomas have done, especially since women excel in African traditional rendition. That colonialism favored male writers through early education and publication has been noted (Gabriel 2001, pp. 67–72), but equally devastating is the role of globalization and economic depression in strangling the African publishing industry. This all means that women poets and writers in general have a Herculean task on their hands as they have new obstacles, as well as a role in African book industries that are no longer economically supported by many African states.

Mugo’s and Thomas’s female personae have the attitude of traditional women in African cultures, unlike the educated and Christianized ones, whom ‘Zulu Sofola referred to as “dewomanized” women meaning those who are confused by Western values imbibed through education and Westernization and therefore lack the open and bold manner of their traditional sisters in the rural areas (Sofola 1998, p. 61). A complex kind of empathy, attraction, inquisitiveness, and identification, compel many African writers from the privileged class to use or include the voices of traditional Africans in their writings. Mugo speaks of women who gird wrappers rather than Western suits and gowns, while Thomas talks about women with *djambo*. The characters are at the center of the ecosystem involving their children, men, women, and their environment and who are therefore appropriate voices through which to delineate the conflict.

Writing at a time when most African writers largely used male voices to speak for women, the poets provide the African women's voice in modern poetry. Their characters engage in a double-edged war in which they fight colonialism while at the same time query of gender. The focus on colonialism and apartheid is so pervasive that it supports the sustained portrayal of the militant persona, and raises gender questions as important teasers that connect with current debates on postcolonialism, sisterhood and bonding, patriarchal exclusion, feminisms, and difference. These are pressing issues that need more poetic attention, because of their centrality in women's lives that are inextricably bound with men's and children's lives. The poets' postcolonial gender engagement shows that they are influenced by an African humanism that encourages inclusive rather than exclusive gender liberation, because their female characters are not interested in narrow individualism and the feminism of exclusion but rather tackle the multiheaded bull-hog, that is, multiple repressions from gender, class, race, and colonialism. The poets are, therefore, in the vanguard of writers who dispel the idea of African women as silent and docile victims.

The poems speak of women who are not just victims of oppression but who forcefully tackle the hostile reality. The women do not operate only as sexual and maternal beings but take on multifaceted roles. They combine the domestic roles with public tasks and act as commanders, military strategists, and directors of operation. While we note the peculiar nature of Southern African women's experience of traditional gender suppression heightened by racial, colonial and class suppression, and so do not want to "level oppression" of women in patriarchy, it is necessary to note an intersection, not

analogy, of the militant woman's experience with the American super-mom syndrome. The militant woman is operating under an emergency situation, combining tasks in order to meet the exigencies of the situation, and so becomes the "super woman" of liberation struggle at the forefront of domestic, public, and in-between spheres. The way many American women try to excel at both the public and domestic spheres has led to the "super-mom" syndrome, which connotes the effort of women who try to balance career and families. It is a situation that many women increasingly find problematic because of its unhealthy issues, but it nevertheless intersects with that of the majority of women in many parts of the world where women do a "double shift" by covering household chores, family, and childcare in addition to other jobs in the public sphere (Cole 2002, p. 405). The poetic personality of this discussion represents women who are more than super-moms because of their strategic positionality in embattled settings and the heroic stance they take.

Our point here is that we need more courageous and gender-inclusive poetic representation of historical reality to augment the works of Micere Mugo and Gladys Thomas, who, as we have seen, are significant in placing human female agency in knowledge formation and poetic information distribution, as they portray militant poetic characters asking very important questions about the knowledge of women and women's agency, especially on the subject of colonialism.

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