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## UTOPIAN PLACES/SPACES IN SELECTED BONGANI SIBANDA'S SHORT STORIES

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**Abstract:** The dire socio-political and economic landscape in Zimbabwe has forced many Zimbabweans, young and old, to relocate to various and different diasporic locations. When these diaspora-based Zimbabweans "visit" or literary represent their rural villages, disparate spatial metaphors emerge. Writing from Johannesburg, Bongani Sibanda ambivalently locates and dislocates his characters from the literary places and space he creates for them. Drawing on various utopian spatial theoretical perspectives, this article examines the significance of Sibanda's creative overlay of his spatial ambivalence to his rural Matabeleland home on the relationship(s) his characters have with their spaces, creating a utopian landscape. This article argues that the characters' (and by extension Sibanda's) dislocation and breaking away from the traditional life and places that he creates for them, instigate a dystopian longing for a new life, one that is a conglomeration of history and time. Using three short stories by Sibanda (*Grace*, *The Service*, and *Death by a Cell Phone*), this article explores this dislocation, metaphorical and real, highlighting the plight of young people from Matabeleland who are either caught up in this utopian world or long to escape to a dystopian modern world.

**Keywords:** utopia, dystopia, dislocation, Bongani Sibanda, ambivalence.

### Introduction

The dire socio-political and economic landscape in Zimbabwe has forced many Zimbabweans, young and old, to relocate to various and different diasporic locations.

Although some keep contact and often visit their rural homes, the physical dislocation and the cultural experiences at their host locations usually transform their perspectives and relations to their places of birth. Writing from the comfort of their host countries, Zimbabweans represent, envision, and project their relations and experiences of their homeland as a nation/space/place from a myriad of angles and perspectives through music, films, and literary works. In these visual and literary representations of Zimbabwe, disparate spatial metaphors emerge.

In this paper, I engage with Bongani Sibanda's three short stories from his collection *Grace and other Short Stories*. I particularly examine how Sibanda's three short stories – "Grace," "The Service," and "Death by a Cell Phone" – create a utopian/dystopian spatiality for his characters, as well as critique and create a dialogue with the Matobo District, in Matabeleland South Province, Zimbabwe.

Matabeleland is divided into three provinces, covering the southwestern parts of the country. Specifically, Sibanda locates himself and his writing in Matabeleland South's Matobo District. Sibanda's selected short stories are interpreted, in this paper, as utopic because they are located in both the fictional and real world of the Matobo District. Peter Johnson explains that the "utopic is a non-place and a real place – 'half-fictional and half-real', closed and open, concentrated and dispersed, near and far, present and absent" (83). As such, the Matobo District provides the grounding of the "particular social context" that "reveals a significant, recognizable social problem to be solved" (Tally Jr. 16) in Sibanda's selected stories. I analyze the varied discontinuities that take place in Sibanda's characters due to their spatial location and positioning as expressive of a desire for a better way of life (Levitas 3). Because these three case studies are utopic, this article examines the significance of Sibanda's creative overlay of his spatial ambivalence to his rural Matabeleland home on the relationship(s) his characters have with their localities. This article argues that the characters' (and by extension Sibanda's) dislocation and breaking away from the traditional life and places instigate a dystopian longing for a new life, one that is a conglomeration of history and time. The article further explores this dislocation, metaphorical and real, highlighting the plight of young people from Matabeleland who are either caught up in this utopian world or long to escape to a dystopian modern world.

This paper is interested in utopia as "historically grounded analytical categories with which to understand how individuals and groups around the world

have interpreted their present tense with an eye to the future” (Gordin, Tilley, and Prakash 2). This paper locates this interrogation in the spatial in line with Elana Gomel’s observation that utopian literature targets the “radical restructuring of subjectivity hinged upon the belief in the transforming power of the environment” (125). To this end, this research seeks to examine the dynamic relationship(s) between Sibanda’s selected short stories (text), spaces and places they represent. Sibanda’s collection *Grace and Other Stories* has a total of ten stories. Out of these stories, “Grace,” “The Service,” and “Death by a Cell Phone” are utopian and constitute the primary texts in the present study. “Grace” and “The Service” are set in an unnamed fictional village, while “Death by a Cell Phone” is set in a fictional Barosi Village. Consequently, the three stories will enable me to examine both “space in literature and literature in space” (Jola 21), as well as the various critical (utopian) functions they play.

### **Utopian spaces in “Grace,” “The Service,” and “Death by a Cell Phone”**

Utopias fall into four archetypal categories. The first one is paradise, which describes a better and happier sort of life that exists somewhere. Second, an externally altered world can be a utopia where a new way of life is made possible by some sort of an ‘unlooked for natural event.’ The third utopia is the willed transformation, which presents a new kind of life that has come into existence by some human endeavor. Fourth, the technological transformation is a utopia that describes a new kind of coming into existence by means of technological discovery. These utopias involve the space and place in their characterization of the social, political, ethno-religious, and economic relations. We can, therefore, use space as a filter concept through which description is affected and produced (van Den Heever 77). In essence, the engagement of space in utopian literature and utopian space in literature invokes the examination of literary space making, which is characterized by Gerhard van Den Heever as “spatializing practices” (73). David Harvey convincingly argues that in utopia, “spatial form controls temporality, as imagined geography controls the possibility of social change and history” (160).

In arguing that space is “the locus of projects and actions deployed as part of specific strategies” (Lefebvre 142-3), Henri Lefebvre establishes space as the producer of social relations. The historical development of a society or a community provide its cultural and social orientation and political and economic worldview

(Asante 1997) which influences the interpretation, conceptualization, and validation of different kinds of spaces. Lefebvre's conceptualization of space in terms of how it adopts structure and agency from its occupants highlights a certain level of transformability of any place into a space. This spatial conceptualization presents space/place as social and existential constructs which

serve as tool[s] of thought and of action; that in addition to being a means of production, as a means of control, and hence of domination, of power, yet, as such, it escapes in part from those who would make use of it. (Lefebvre 26)

The framing of spaces as social and existential constructs allows for the consideration of spheres of influence that wield political, social, and economic power such as homesteads, monarchies, community collectives, and nation states, opening up spaces to multiple renderings and readings that engaged with what Ngugi wa Thiongo terms contextually located “political, physical, social and psychic forces” (14). Such forces characterize spaces and places as utopian.

The four archetypal categories of utopia present society in a “perfected form or else society turned upside down” (Denniss 169). The literary spaces in literature and spaces of literature would “refract the real, exposing the order that contours our living space; the existence of such hybrid spaces reveals that what is could be otherwise” (Denniss 169; Piatti 183). Consequently, the literary activity allocates to literary topographies, multiple significances and interpretations hinged on history, the present, and the future, thus mapping the cultural, political, and spatial terrains (Tally Jr. 5; Jola 22).

This reads true to Robert Tally Jr.'s characterization of the dual function of utopia: “to call critical attention to the defects, sometimes systematic defects, in actually existing societies on the one hand, and to task the imagination with frequently daunting, if not impossible, job of envisioning radical alternatives, on the other” (Tally Jr. 21). In this section, I examine how Sibanda's selected stories respond to Tally Jr.'s and Denniss' observation.

Sibanda's chosen texts explore the first three categories of utopian stories and societies. In “Grace” and “The Service”, the “paradise” is located within the Africanized Judaic-Christian ethos while in “Death by a Cell Phone,” it is envisioned through the lenses of an ethnocentric African indigenous cultural practice. In

“Grace,” Mlungisi, the narrator who returns home after a 10-year stay in Johannesburg, South Africa, describes the unnamed village as ‘heaven’. This description of the village is influenced by Mlungisi’s experience in Harare and Johannesburg, which he sees as a “world of money, liberty and multiple options” (Sibanda 1-2). These places needed him to metamorphose in order to fit. Although looking and feeling unfamiliar to Mlungisi, the village is still a ‘heaven’ because it has remained unchanged in terms of its spatial outlook. The homesteads and its houses still look the same with Mlungisi even recognizing that “the ramshackle scotch-cart near the lemon tree next to the front rondavel was in exactly that position when he had left home a decade previously” (Sibanda 2).

From an ethico-religious utopian perspective, Sibanda’s “Grace” and “The Service” evoke an Edenic vision found in the Biblical book of Genesis. This vision is characterized by tranquility and peace where initially Adam (and later on Adam and Eve) freely roamed and exercised dominion over animals and vegetation. Just like Adam, about whom we are told that he rested in the garden of Eden, Mlungisi enjoys the strange-yet-liberating geographic outlays of the village and sees them as particularly providing him with his own ‘paradise’ to rest, far from the Johannesburg maddening crowd. Sibanda outlines Mlungisi’s desire to rest:

He looked about, enjoying the familiar strange sights, long stretches of land carpeted with overgrazed brown grass, a donkey and its foul grazing quietly to his left under a lone amarula tree. It felt blissful to be home at last where he could relax easily. (Sibanda 1)

Although this picture contrasts the Biblical rendition of the Garden of Eden and would have been characterized as dystopic had it been presented from a Eurocentric point of view, it complicates the neo-colonialist and capitalist view that the industrial city provides a safe ‘heaven’ for people, especially so in Africa.

While there are high figures of rural-urban migration in Africa because the countryside is underdeveloped and lacks opportunities, in “Grace” the rural space remains an alternative to the energy-sapping and capitalist metropolis. In other words, through “Grace,” Sibanda invites his readers to “experience better alternatives” provided by the countryside, such as this village. While Sibanda’s village is unnamed, it can be easily placed on the real cartographic map, using the other

geographic referents that he provides in the text. For example, the village is close to Bidi, Gohole, and Ntobe villages (Sibanda 8). This locates the village in the Matobo District, specifically around Maphisa in Zimbabwe's Matabeleland South Province.

Most of the latter's youth, looking for jobs and developmental opportunities unavailable in Zimbabwe, migrate to various South African cities due to their close proximity and similar cultural and linguistic practices. Because they migrate without proper documentation, it usually takes them a long time to return home, just like Mlungisi in "Grace." However, when these diaspora-based-and-educated Africans return home, they become ambivalent in the mold of Wole Soyinka's Lakunle in *The Lion and the Jewel* and Charles Mungoshi's Lucifer Mandengu in *Waiting for the Rain*.

Yet, Sibanda's Mlungisi is different from Soyinka and Mungoshi's ambivalent characters as he exhibits a connected and phenomenological sense of place, which makes him "recognise distinctive places and identify with particular places" (Alexander 39) at his rural home. Unlike Lakunle and Lucifer Mandengu, Mlungisi can identify the village's spirit of place "that which persists in defiance of the time, conveying the unchanging individuality or uniqueness of a place in a manner that can be readily intuited but not defined" (Alexander 40).

Sibanda further locates the Biblical Savior within the politics of existentialism in Africa. In "The Service," the Vangwato sect is led by the Father, who is in self-exile in Lusaka, Zambia, while in "Grace," it is led by Muzi, the "alleged reincarnation of John the Baptist, who was dispatched from Heaven to set free Africa from colonisation" (Sibanda 6).

In both stories, Africa is presented with local equivalents to the Biblical Jesus as the Savior, a political and decolonizing act, especially considering the central role religion played in the colonization on most Third World countries. The call for an African alternative to Jesus as the Savior reads true in Zimbabwean and South African religious spaces.

Zimbabwe's Paul Mwazha's African Apostolic Church and South Africa's Shembe churches revolted against the neo-colonialist tendencies of Christianity as taught by missionaries in Africa and led a revival (their churches continue) of a Christian ethos anchored on the locality of man in Africa. Their spirituality is thus tied to Africa as a political space. The congregants in these sects consider the two to have met God in the Mosaic form and were deployed to save Africa from Eurocentric,

neo-colonialist, and subjugating religious practices. In drawing his material from the real world, Sibanda voices his ideological spatial and religious situatedness in a veiled manner.

In the story "The Service," the village is characterized in negative terms as stagnant and full of sickly and evil-ridden people in need of exorcism, which can and only can take them to the 'paradise', while in "Death by a Cell Phone," the Barosi village is depicted as a closed system stuck in the euphoric nostalgia of yesteryears. Although some of the members of the society have been exposed to the globalized Western systems of life and thought, when they return to the Barosi village, they reject all that is colonial, neo-colonial, and neo-imperialist. Their paradisiac moment is located in a future society void of colonial legacies and Western technologies such as cell phones, cars, and modern houses among other things.

The voice of the narrator in both stories, although displaying historical and interpretive authority as a member of the society, adopts an ambivalent perspective towards this utopian/dystopian continuum that lingers above these communities. For instance, in "Death by a Cell Phone" Sibanda concludes the story with this line: "Each man too wondered deep in his heart if he did not have some Western gadget on which he depended and would be loath to part with" (Sibanda 75). This struggle with belonging to both places: the 'good place' that the Barosi People's cultural ceremony fights for and is hinged on and the 'no place' of Western influence among the people of Barosi invokes a desire to escape from both these spaces/places.

Within the Zimbabwean context, there has been a struggle between indigenous traditionalists who have continuously called for a return to the source, which Nyathi terms the "African cosmology" (54) and Christian ethos underpinned on the judiciary framework, which since colonization is on a 'civilizing mission' of Africans.

For instance, Harare twin brothers Tafadzwa and Tapiwanashe Fichiani, who claimed to have a religious calling to return to traditional dress of loin skins worn before Africa was colonized, were arrested, forced to undergo psychiatric tests, and made to pay a fine for indecent exposure. The twin brothers refused to sleep in the modest suburban Mount Pleasant house and use any Western gadgets such as beds and cars, electing to stay in a backyard mud and grass-roofed house.

Sibanda's "Death by a Cell Phone" is characterized by and grounded in this "particular social context," and this "context reveals a significant, recognizable social

problem to be solved” (Tally Jr. 16). In this utopian text which turns dystopian, Sibanda critiques the Zimbabwean society’s socially and politically closed system. The public censure of the Fichiani twins, which ultimately killed their desire and ‘calling,’ is represented and replicated by the death of Mdala Moyo in “Death by a Cell Phone”.

Kirsten Imani Kasai observes that organized religion, as seen in “The Service” and “Death by a Cell Phone,” ignores the “influences of our planetary warming crises, technology, advanced warfare, political states, access to information and access to education” (1384). It achieves this by emphasizing on exclusion and condemnation of the “practice of fluid, socially applicable morality in favor of anachronistic philosophies and behavioral guidelines that breed divisiveness” (Kasai 1384).

In “Death by a Cell Phone,” the dystopian fear of being controlled, marginalized, and disempowered (Kasai 1383) informs the King’s and Barosi community’s decision to create a closed system that isolates them from the global and industrialized world. Thus, the Western gadgets’ infiltration into the community results in chaos and disorder in the cultural village – as the death of Mdala Moyo pushes the Barosi Cultural Practice Ceremony participants towards a psychological self-introspective journey. This, according to Kasai, arises from the “knowledge of our human history of violence and oppression” (1383) aptly captured by Sibanda in “Death by a Cell Phone”:

‘I am not going to lie and say that before Europeans came to Africa we had no wars, no droughts and no diseases’ Themhani continued, awakening those whose imagination was transported back into the past. ‘No Comrades! Those things existed as they do in all nations. But I wouldn’t be lying when I say the white man brought more wars, more suffering and more diseases – some of which are incurable – and above all, he robbed the black man of his source of livelihood, like the woodman chopping down the trunk of a tree and replacing it with an artificial one’. (Sibanda 71)

The invocation of the different historical tropes of violence at the hands of the colonizing white man anchors this dystopian desire to invade, overthrow, and kick-out ‘Gokwe’ from Gokwe. The fear of the spread of incurable diseases and suffering as a result of interacting with the white man, his gadgets, and all those that interact with him instigates this move by the Barosi Kingdom.

The narrative framework of Western utopian literature presents a narrator or a main character who embarks on a voyage, visits a strange, idealized country, makes contact with the inhabitants, learns about their customs and institutions, and obtains the opportunity to witness their imperfections and high status (Pinheiro 149; Gomel 18). This perspective presents a stranger who identifies utopian spaces in a foreign culture. This is problematic in several ways.

First, it locates the reading and representation of spaces using a foreign lens of a traveler who does not understand the culture and psychology of the space, which results in these spaces framed utopian. As such, most African spaces that have been portrayed as utopian in European travelogues, maps, and literary stories have fallen victim to this challenge.

However, this does not mean that there are no literary narratives that highlight this utopian spatiality. Bill Ashcroft observes that "African writers were the first to recognize the emancipatory potential of independence had been at the very least overestimated and more often simple betrayed" (703). Rather than rejecting and bemoaning both the "imperial presence and its colonial inheritance in distorted nationalisms," utopian African literature "provide the very critique on which the imagination of a better future could be built" (Ashcroft 703-4). In so doing, these literary stories are critical of the African landscape and provide a re-imagination of the prospects of the present on which the present and future can be remodelled.

Sibanda makes use of local characters that have either been away from home for a considerable time to narrate and use their experience and relations to the environment and space to guide the eye of the reader (in "Grace") or a historically located participant/observer who narrates the story from the perspective of the community. Located within fictional villages placed in the surroundings of real geographic places within the Matobo District, Sibanda locates his critique of the Zimbabwean in the here and now.

In "Grace," Mlungisi returns home from Johannesburg through Harare and Bulawayo, while in "The Service" and "Death by a Cell Phone," the narrators are members of the community who voluntarily participate in these ritual gatherings. These narrators enable us to envision alternative spaces and places by "forcing us to think of the break, and not by offering a more traditional picture of what things would be like after the break" (Jameson 232).

In the three stories, Sibanda leaves the reader engaged, reading against the grain and looking for alternatives – he does not prescribe to his readers the dystopian places. Barbara Piatti notes that this critique of the landscape is “created and called up via the imagination of the main characters” (179). The changes in the spatial perception of the narrator create a nostalgic effect where “everything suddenly seems so much smaller than what he recalls it to be and very different” (Piatti 183). This reads true to Andrew Milner’s observation that the “whole point of utopia or dystopia is to acquire some positive or negative leverage on the present” (827).

Tally Jr. opines that “utopian narratives perform a critical function in demarcating a sort of homogeneous space within which a cognizable communitarian identity is inscribed, thus forming a sort of imagined totality and, with it, a nation state” (3). This kind of spatial characterization of utopia locates it within a mapping exercise that oscillates between the imaginary representation of the society and the critical projection of the world system. This mapping approach can be easily read in the powerful countervailing forces of “productions of imaginations” or “aesthetic dimensions” of the utopian’s one-dimensional society (Tally Jr. 13).

In this instance, utopian (spatial) stories entail both the perspective of the observing subject (in this case the author and his narrators) and the places represented/observed (Prieto 64), moving away from the cartographical eye-in-the-sky view of most travelogues or literary renditions of Africa by Europeans. This phenomenological approach to utopian writing “provide[s] us with an immersive experience” (Prieto 64). To borrow from Prieto:

By forcefully demonstrating the need to rethink traditional (humanist) conceptions of self and world, individual agency and social structure, they enable us to re-examine some deeply entrenched assumptions about the nature of place, with an eye to refining and improving it. (Prieto 62)

The descriptions of place are thus positioned as foundational to consciousness and subjectivity as observed by Malpos that the “very structure of the mind is intrinsically tied to locality and spatiality” (10).

Literary utopias oppose and propose ways out of the contemporary predicaments. These oppositions and propositions of images of values and a

satisfying and happy life are based on a rejection of some of the social impulses and evolution of others. In this light, utopia is seen as a vehicle of social and political speculation, which starts with the proposition that things are bad and must become better or perfect (Brinton 50).

The process of opposition and proposition of alternatives and transformation of society is located within ritual habits interpreted as rational behaviors. In "Death by a Cell Phone," the Barosi People's Cultural Ceremony provides a ritualized space and performance that enables the members of the community to act the way they do to the extent of taking life without thinking twice about it.

The old men that kill Mdala Moyo for possessing a cell phone and other Western gadgets in his home only regret it when the ceremony is over and they are on their individual journeys through the conscience of the narrator. This recollection and revival of the conscience emerges as a pathway to the alternative approaches to the Barosi closed social system. This reads true to Ka Mana's remark that the alternatives must enable the complete liberation and transformation of structures:

We must undertake a process of reconditioning of our inner life: conscience, heart, imagination and spirit. Such a process is not possible just by the power of denunciation and uprising, but by undergoing complex metabolisms whereby our sensibility, which is above all a work of reflexive lucidity, gives us the world as a sensible and significant world, not a world that is barren, morbid and frozen in its creative possibilities. (58)

Sibanda does not, however, take this process of liberation and transformation to the collective level beyond the individual. Yet, the political project of reform remains real, as the elements of desire, harmony, and hope are emphasized even at the individual level through self-introspection. The latter is part of an organized concept that "encourages everybody to investigate the norms of organisation and to describe ideal systems through which human lives could be made better" (Babae et al. 64).

The link between certain characteristics of cultural performance spaces and African life positions spatiality as a central figure in the development and dissemination of information, norms and values, representation and presentation of culture, and religion and life (Sibanda 51). This spatial debate highlights the influence of the different silently-inscribed spatial ideologies, expectations, and conventions of practice (Sibanda 53).

### **Mapping the Matobo District as a cultural space**

Cultural space relates to the configuration of space according to indigenous (context-specific) spatial concepts. This does not only capture the physical forms but also the behaviors associated with these physical forms (Balme 228). Lotman characterizes cultural spaces as semiotic realities which, through their historical existence, unfold indeterminate and unpredictable role of the processes that remodel them (3). In essence, cultural spaces are characterized, modeled, and remodeled by the behaviors of people in response to the socio-political and cultural realities obtaining. The stories of the present study characterize the unnamed villages and Barosi Village as cultural spaces. The villages are depicted as religious. Religious principles typify their identity and the relations they can have or not have with the outside world.

Although Sibanda's villages remain unnamed in "Grace" and "The Service," they are easily geographically identifiable within the real Matobo District. The vivid descriptions of real and known places aid Sibanda in his task. For instance, the village in "Grace" neighbor villages of Ndabankulu, Bidi, Gohole, and Ntobe, while the village in "The Service" border villages of Malaba, St Joseph's, Mzila, Mazwi, Maphisa and Matemani.

These are some of the specific places from where prominent political leaders emerged, such as the late Zimbabwe African People's Revolutionary (ZAPU) party and vice-President of Zimbabwe Dr. Joshua Nkomo (from St Joseph's), and the current Chief Justice, Justice Luke Malaba (from Malaba), among others.

The location of the unnamed villages constitutes a borrowing of relational spatial descriptors from these known places makes them become "familiarised points of habitation" (Gunner 117). This sense of belonging to the district and locality affirmed by Sibanda's "multitude of references to place and to the names of homesteads and individuals" (Gunner 117), such as Koba homestead, Koba bus stop, NaTimothy (Mother of Timothy), and Baba Tshuma (Mr. Tshuma). These are real names for localities and people that can easily be found in these places that Sibanda refers to in his stories. The unnamed villages can, thus, be framed nodal points for departure, arrival, and/or return (Gunner 124).

The Barosi village's existence is presented in "Death by a Cell Phone" as hugely hinged on the cultural regeneration and liberation of the Barosi people exemplified through the latter's Cultural Practice Ceremony. Through this ceremony

and the ultimate wild-chase of Mdala Moyo, we get to peep into the geographic and spatial layout of this fictional village. Sibanda narrates:

They chased him through the sparse acacia scrub that was immediately in front of the king's homestead and into the mopane forest and past the deserted Mbewu fields. (71-73)

This integration of the flora into the narrative of "place in the sense of locality, in particular mountains, ridges, plains can be absorbed into the personal" (Gunner 120). The familiarity in the description of the place and its use by Mdala Moyo to evade the chasing pack imply a personal bond with the place.

Themhani, the King's son, takes the readers on a historical journey that has spatial connotations:

'Last year?' he said moving about, rubbing his hands together. 'We removed our children from Western schools after discovering that they did not exist during the times of our ancestors.' The villagers shouted uproaringly.

'Last of last year?' 'We killed and burned all the skinless yellow people in our village, in accordance with our ancestors' tradition of cleaning communities'

'Last year?' 'We promoted our chief into king, and made our ward a kingdom after discovering that before colonisation our ancestors weren't ruled by chiefs but by kings and lived not in wards but kingdoms

'This year?' 'We give our chief a regiment, reclaim the Mbuzi goldfields and expel the foreigners so we can mine ourselves just like our ancestors once did.'

'Next year?' 'We will use force to expel Gokwe from all the territory under the Barosi Kingdom' (Sibanda 68-69)

The aesthetics of the operational spaces within the Barosi village, which are a product of the story that is being narrated frequently, conflate the person with the land, and the land becomes part of the body's social and historical text (Gunner 120). The social and historical identity that the King and his subjects aim to revive and recall is perceived through the land, which must first be reclaimed from the foreigners of Gokwe. While Gokwe is a real geographic space in the Midlands Province, in this instance, Themhani characterizes the people and the land as one.

Liz Gunner states that once this happens, the land and the people become biographical and autobiographical signifiers of the narrative (119).

The consideration of Gokwe as a foreigner invokes a resource struggle that is centered on the ethnic and linguistic identity in the real Zimbabwe. Gokwe is a hetero-ethnic district with pre-dominantly Shona and the Ndebele on the margins. Therefore, the district has been categorized as Shona. Gokwe, as a fictional representative of the Mashonaland provinces (there are three specific provinces with the name Mashonaland prefixed to the title and four others that a dominantly Shona-dialects speaking) and Shona identity, is portrayed as a dystopian place that must be eradicated so that the calm and tranquility at the Barosi village continue.

This transcends Sibanda's utopian project from being a utopia to being a "practical political program in our world, in the here and now" (Tally Jr. 27). In the Zimbabwean context, currently there has been a challenge with artisanal miners relocating from various Mashonaland districts and taking over mines in countless Matabeleland districts. This has resulted in efforts to revive a culturally-based resource-defense mechanism under the respective traditional chiefs in the affected areas. The way Thembanani mobilizes and motivates the community into self-belief, invoking a sense of pride and commitment to drive out Gokwe, models the strategies employed by young people from Matabeleland to fend off the invasion by the '*MaShurugwi*' (violent artisanal miners from Shurugwi).

## **Conclusion**

While Sibanda's literary utopian narrative exploited the four archetypal categories of utopia, the invocation of dystopian images – chaos, fear, violence, oppression – challenges the reader to imagine other possibilities beyond the implied alternatives in the stories. As I have argued, Sibanda's short stories can be framed as a "thought model of what might be – the 'approximate' future" (Kasai 1399) through its initiating and sustaining real life change and solutions. In this paper, I drew from Sibanda's selected short stories' utopian spatiality and deployed them to make sense of the Zimbabwean reality in general— and the Matobo District's in particular. I have used the utopian, and to a lesser extent the dystopian spatial narratives, as a literary cartography to "represent the political, economic, aesthetic and social realms" (Tally Jr. 5) of Matobo District in Zimbabwe.

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