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'Black on the inside': albino subjectivity in the African novel

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The last decade has seen increased attention to the treatment of people with albinism in several African countries, particularly the peril they find themselves in due to stigma and superstition. As a way of countering these misconceptions, there has been educative activism from legal, medical as well as religious perspectives. In this paper, we draw upon a different discourse- literary representation- arguing that in selected African novels, the authors employ a variety of strategies that counter harmful stereotypes about albinism, and in the process act as literary interventions that enable an appreciation of the person behind the skin condition. Drawing from insights in Literary Disability Studies, the discussion examines the representation of albinism in four African novels: Petina Gappah's *The Book of Memory* (2015), Meg Vandermerwe's *Zebra Crossing* (2013), Unathi Magubeni's *Nwelezelanga: The Star Child* (2016), and Jenny Robson's *Because Pula Means Rain* (2000), and highlights the way albinism is presented as bodily condition that intersects with other experiences on the continent, including indigenous epistemologies, gender, sexuality and family relationships.

Keywords: Albinism; Disability; African literature; Disability Studies; Subjectivity; Indigeneity

Introduction

> *And then I was born, with no darkness in my skin, with no pigment, an albino, murungu-dunhu[1], with my ghastly whiteness. My mother believed that I had been cursed inside her womb* (Gappah, 2015: 251).

There is a saying in one of the Malawian local languages, Chichewa, which goes *napweri samamwalira, amangosowa***.** In essence, the saying stipulates that 'an albino never dies. He/she just disappears'. A similar belief exists in other countries such as Tanzania where it is said that *Zeruzeru hafi bali hupotea na hata akifa huwezi kumuona alivyokufa*, which roughly translates as 'an albino does not die but only disappears. If s/he dies you cannot know because you will never see him/her die'. Statements such as these go a long way towards indicating the mystique that surrounds people with albinism in African societies, such as

Malawi and Tanzania. Because of the difference in skin colour, a lot of people in many African societies regard people with albinism as mysterious beings.

These supposed mysteries are reflected in some of the prevalent superstitions about albinism in these and other countries on the continent. For the most part, they place the lives of those with albinism in peril. For instance, Cruz-Inigo et al. (2011:79) note that:

> Throughout Africa, an indeterminate number of individuals with albinism, especially children, have been the victims of brutal attacks and murder in the name of witchcraft, superstition, and wealth [...] the atrocities committed against albinos has received widespread attention because of various crimes reported, such as infanticide, kidnapping, amputations, and decapitations, committed for purposes of supplying highly valued body parts used for amulets, which are then sold in underground witchcraft markets.

These reports illustrate how societal beliefs have made simply existing as a person with albinism dangerous in certain societies, on account of the cultural assumptions wrongly attributed to albino anatomy.

Malawi and Tanzania are good examples with which to begin this discussion, given that, in the year 2016, both countries registered among the highest number of murders and mutilations of people with albinism, brutalities fuelled not only by the aforementioned mystique, but also by superstition, including beliefs in the healing properties of body parts of people with albinism. This has reached such an extent that the United Nations issued a statement claiming that people with albinism in Malawi are at risk of 'total extinction' (Karimi, 2016). According to a 2017 report by the UN's Independent Expert, crimes against people with albinism in Malawi had risen from 65 in 2014 to 102 in 2017. As the report notes, the number of crimes is with no doubt higher, considering that some of these crimes remain unreported. The same could be said about Tanzania where continued brutalities against people with albinism have prompted the US government to offer asylum to affected individuals. According to media reports, between 2009 and 2015, about 155 cases of human rights violation against people with albinism were reported in Tanzania (Wesangula, 2015). Malawi and Tanzania are but two examples of countries in Africa where these barbaric acts occur. These brutalities have been covered by many news outlets, have been condemned by political and religious leaders alike, and have spurred activity in many of the NGOs littered across the continent.

It is not our intention to focus on these forms of discourse. Instead, this paper attempts to do something different, endeavouring to examine what we might call literary interventions into the subject of albinism on the continent. In terms of methodology, therefore, this paper draws on Literary Disability Studies, which, as shown below, is aided by insights from Disability Studies. Simply put, we examine literary representations of the albino as portrayed in a number of novels, including Petina Gappah’s *The Book of Memory* (2015), Meg Vandermerwe’s *Zebra Crossing* (2013), Unathi Magubeni’s *Nwelezelanga: The Star Child* (2016), and Jenny Robson’s *Because Pula Means Rain* (2000). Since the start of the 21st Century, the attention of the world has been drawn to persecution of people with albinism, particularly in certain parts of Africa. This has been a major factor in our choice of texts, since all four of them highlight the factors that have given rise to this persecution, as well as the experiences of people with albinism. In addition, the novels meet the important criterion of situating the person with albinism at the centre of the narrative, which enables a more extensive examination than if they had been at the periphery. There is a wealth of indigenous African knowledge on disability, which unfortunately remains unexplored (Devlieger, 2010). These novels afford us a window into that discourse, with albinism as a specific area of focus. However, the examination of these texts is premised on the observation that the literary mode allows more than merely a spectacular observation of the existence of the person with albinism. More than that, the novel, in particular the African novel in this case, permits a mode of knowing that enables a much-needed empathetic appreciation of the social othering of the albino figure.

As a study of literary works, our approach is to examine ways in which characters with albinism have been constructed, and indeed forms of agency they have been accorded in the literary narrative (while being cognizant that this form reflects the real world). To that end, we highlight three modes of representation employed by the novels, in their attempt to draw attention to albino subjectivity. The first is the ‘normalization’ technique, where the novel accords agency to the albino figure by making him/her the narrator and/or protagonist of the story. Through this agency, readers are forced to reckon with the humanity of the albino character, but are also afforded intimate insight into the experiential realities of people living with albinism. The second prong is one where the novel draws attention to familial or social acceptance/rejection of the albino character. In this case, the authors deliberately place the albino – as a character – in the midst of others, drawing attention to his/her social being and how this is conditioned by dominant perceptions in the society. Third, and last, is a literary strategy where the authors engage in a form of transgressive reappropriation, deliberately imbuing the albino figure with otherworldly characteristics, such as an association with the supernatural world. We note in this regard how the authors recast the belief about albinos’ mystique noted above into a tool with which they conceptualise a positive albino subjectivity. These are by no means limited categories, and two important points need to be highlighted in this respect. The first is that there are some frequent overlaps between them, where, for instance, one novel may evince both agency and supernatural features. The second observation, one to which we make frequent reference in the discussion, is the observation that gender becomes an important player in the narratives, particularly those featuring relationships between mothers and daughters.[2]

In labelling albinism as a disability, we are very much aware of the fact that definitions of disablement tend to be fluid, based on cultural locations. Indeed, there is hardly any global consensus on the proper definition of disability. In this regard, it is important to pay attention to cultural nuances when it comes to reading disability. Even the field of Disability Studies, in which we locate our study, often 'problematically transports theories and methodologies developed within the Western academy to other global locations, paying only nominal attention to local formations and understandings of disability' (Barker and Murray 2010: 219). Acknowledging indigenous knowledge systems is essential, as reflected in Patrick Devlieger's (2005:695) entry in the *Encyclopaedia of Disability*, where he informs us that 'African knowledge of disability is "embedded" in its seeking for links between the occurrence of disability and several world orders [including the natural order, the social order, and the cosmological order]'. The same applies to understanding albinism within the continent, in the sense that we must embrace indigenous knowledge systems that may play a role in creating a particular kind of subjectivity for the person with albinism.

The cultural specificity notwithstanding, we are firm about the employing of insights within Disability Studies in reading these texts. This is because the task of Disability Studies at present is concerned with, among other things, the examination of creative representations of the disabled body, whether in literature, film or art. This is in line with the assertion by Disability Studies scholar Rosemarie Garland Thomson (1997:6) that disability itself is 'produced by way of legal, medical, political, cultural, and literary narratives that comprise an exclusionary discourse'. However, while this particular disciplinary perspective provides insights into the texts, we are still cognisant of the specifically unique context of the novels - the African continent - and the exciting intersections that are to be found between disability (or albinism, in this case) and a number of other experiences that are unique to, or at least prevalent in this continent.

Agency: enabling the narrator

Most of the times, in creative practice, disabled characters take a back seat. Indeed, '[i]f disability appears in a novel, it is rarely centrally represented' (Davis 1995:41). In according agency to the disabled character, therefore, we can indeed argue that this is a positive turn. After all, as Clare Barker (2011:3) argues in *Postcolonial Fiction and Disability*, 'this aspect of disability representation- the depiction of disabled characters as embodied agents, as national subjects as well as symbols- [has been] missing from current postcolonial scholarship'. It has long been the argument in Disability Studies that a lot of the representations of disabled people have tended to be rather negative and stereotypical. Commenting on this trend, Mitchell and Snyder (2000:17) observe that, for a long time, such a portrayal presented '[d]isability [...] as a restrictive pattern of characterization that usually sacrificed the humanity of protagonists and villains alike'. Instead, the trend we see in novels considered in this paper is one where agency is accorded in several ways, in particular: the acquiring of voice; the explicit presentation of the experiential side of the albino's life; and the articulation of basic human emotions.

We can start with the idea of narrative voice. In this regard, our argument is that, upon examining the novels herein, we discover that the author's choice of making the character with albinism not only the protagonist, but also the narrator, is a move that enables him/her to tell his/her own story in the way he/she chooses. In this fashion, they highlight aspects that draw attention both to their normalcy, but also to the specificity of experiences as persons with albinism. The novel thus acts as a classic mirror for reality, in which the readers are faced with their possible discriminatory practices from the perspective of the victim, and can thus create empathy.

Through the first person narrative mode, the novels achieve a level of intimacy that permits readers to get up close and personal with the experiences of people with albinism. This is also coupled with the fact that the narrative voice in the four novels belongs to characters with albinism. The result is that the albino 'disappears' in the narrative, save for a few instances where as readers we are reminded by society's reactions that the protagonists we are reading about are actually people with albinism. By drawing us into the protagonists' lives and intimate experiences, we are made to interact with protagonists that are human, just like any other despite their disability. Vandermerwe's *Zebra Crossing* is not about Chipo the albino, but a young girl pushed across the border from Zimbabwe into South Africa by social and political events- a girl who, amidst social and sexist oppression, desires to love and to be loved. Memory's struggle (in Gappah's *The Book of Memory*) to prove her innocence through writing as an act of remembrance and witnessing, pulls us readers away from the prejudices she is sometimes subjected to as a person with albinism towards her complex family and personal story and its intricate bearings on the character herself. We are made to sympathise with Nwelezelanga in Magubeni's eponymously titled novel, particularly the circumstances surrounding her birth, because the protagonist herself tells us about them. Our sympathy as readers is, however, soon overtaken by awe as we follow the exploits of Nwelezelanga the girl among herdboys tending cattle and also a child with supernatural powers, an attribute we comment on in detail later in the article. And in Robson's *Because Pula Means Rain*, we journey together with Emmanuel as he learns to distinguish between things he can change, and those he cannot.

In Robson's novel, it is this narrative voice that belongs to the albino character. One of the moments when this comes out clearly is in the early stages of the text, where the narrator expresses his hatred for mirrors: 'I hate to see my reflection. It is always a shock to me. As if each time I am seeing my face for the very first time' (Robson 2000:10). We must clearly examine this moment, which is expressive of a hatred of the self. This self-loathing, also reflected in Emmanuel's desire 'to pick up a shard of glass and stab it into [his] flesh because [his] flesh was so wrong' (ibid, 2000: 8), is a product of the stigma that he encounters in his society. It comes as a result of society's regard for him as a *leswafe* (albino). His treatment by other members of society - at school, in shops - is what makes him hate himself.

One crucial point about this category is the fact that the reader recognises the person with albinism as a normal human being. In his book, *Aesthetic Nervousness*, Ato Quayson (2007: 51) notes that there is a category of disability representation 'in which the disabled characters are completely normalized and exist within the full range of human emotions, contradictions, hopes, fears, and vague ideas, just like any other character'. Although Quayson locates this category primarily in life writing, it can also be found in the narratives of Memory, Emmanuel and, to some extent, Chipo. We may not rush to categorize it as positive representation. However, we acknowledge that, in these texts, the attribution of voice ensures that the person with albinism is not defined solely by skin pigmentation.

Representations of sexuality also contribute to this overall portraiture of one's humanity. These novels are examples of a discourse that highlights people with albinism as individuals with sexualities, just like any other human being. In most current hegemonic discourse, from films, to novels, to art, '[d]isabled bodies are not permitted to participate in the erotics of power, in the power of the erotic, in economies of transgression' (Davis 1995:158). This idea is challenged by the novels under study. A very blunt example is found in *The Book of Memory* when, as a prisoner, upon being asked what she needs, the narrator replies to a visitor with: 'a good hard fuck' (147). In making this statement, the protagonist clearly disputes the idea that albinism also renders one asexual. The expression of sexual desire is therefore a deliberate strategy that Gappah employs to highlight the basic human desires felt by Memory, desires that her visitors in prison seem to be ignorant of. The same strategy could be read in Chipo's attraction to David, one of the flatmates in Cape Town. She pines for him rather strongly, oblivious to his homosexual orientation, and wishes she could 'feel his arms around [her]' (Vandermerwe, 2013:49). In her loneliness, she daydreams about sharing intimacy with David: 'I go home and beneath the bed covers I run my hands over my adolescent breasts. Immediately my nipples harden. My lover is above me. Dark. Handsome. He is leaning over me. He is pushing his tongue inside my mouth' (ibid, 2013:75). These scenes challenge the suggestion that in 'much writing about disability, the sexuality of a body deemed "disabled" is [...] ignored, or alternately is portrayed at the other extreme as a perverse sexuality that is equally deviant' (Barker 2011:123). The two authors deliberately challenge this view, to illustrate that even fictive writings about disability do not necessarily place disability as the primary experience.

Albinism is what some classify as a visible disability, perhaps indeed the most visible one. The disability- defined in opposition to impairment - resides in the fact that the character with albinism is treated differently based on the appearance of his/her skin, supporting the statement that 'disability is a specular moment [accompanied by] a welter of powerful emotional responses [which can] include horror, fear, pity, compassion, and avoidance'

(Davis 1995:12). In this regard, among the experiential features that usually abound in narratives about, or involving, albino characters are the conditions involving the sensitive skin, and the measures taken to mitigate or cure their 'afflictions'. From the description in the texts, the characters in focus have oculocutaneous albinism, which 'results in the partial or complete absence of pigment from the skin, hair and eyes. Consequently, people with oculocutaneous albinism have pale skin, sandy coloured hair, light brown eyes, and suffer from nystagmus, photophobia and poor visual acuity' (Baker et al., 2010:169). Our interest is in how such medical facts are communicated through the fiction. In *Nwelezelanga*, for instance, the narrator clearly talks of the difficulty of working in the bright, hot sunlight:

> We continue hoeing without any conversation between us [...] The sun begins to make me uncomfortable as I start to scratch. My straw hat is no match for the domineering sun.
> [...]
> Go to the shade now, Nwelezelanga, you know that the sun is unmerciful to you,' Mama instructs with kindness. (Magubeni, 2016: 24)

The sensitivity of albino skin is one thing that people without albinism do not readily understand, and therefore in drawing attention to the sensitivity of Nwelezelanga's skin, Magubeni engages in the literary intervention that was highlighted in the beginning, creating the experiences for the reader of his novel, who, at this point, is already familiar with the protagonist's experiences. Similarly, in *Because Pula Means Rain*, Emmanuel talks of having to wear a hat to protect his skin from the harsh sunlight. However, what we find in the novel- which one rarely encounters in medical and anthropological writing - is the emotion attached to having to wear the hat all the time. This is a mode of teaching that gets really intimate with the reader:

> I hate the hat I have to wear. I hate the floppy khaki brim that hangs all the way around my head, as if I am some small and very stupid child. But it protects my neck, that's what my grandmother says. It stops my pink neck from blistering and burning in the sun. And it is better than exposing the ugly ginger-yellow of my hair. (Magubeni 2016:28)

In her writing, Charlotte Baker (2008:116) argues that, despite the various representations of the albino body in writing, readers must always bear in mind that it is a medical condition. Her insistence is in reaction to the tendency to see albinism- and indeed many other disabilities in literature - as symbolic of other socio-political matters. This is an interesting case where a scholar insists on not neglecting the medical interpretation of the disability, a trend which is rare in Disability Studies. Indeed, one of the classical debates that one becomes familiar with in this field is that concerning the medical and social models of disability. Though surprising, Baker's position has the merit of highlighting the medical recourses that people sometimes seek for their disablement.

Family: naming as definition

The welfare of people with albinism primarily depends on the attitudes that are developed within their families. In other words, if the family displays love, it has a bearing on the person's sense of self-worth as a human being. However, there are some instances where the family fails to display affection towards the child with albinism, and instead rejects him/her. *The Book of Memory*, *Nwelezelanga: The Star Child* and *Zebra Crossing* all have examples of this unfortunate phenomenon.

One of the key features that draws our attention to the albino character's existence in society, her social being as it were, is the according of names. Unfortunately, as Devlieger (2010:84) notes, scholars with the field of Disability Studies have not paid that much attention to the terms given to disabled persons. This onomastic turn, on the part of other members of society, is a way of isolating the individual, a method of creating her anew. We read in this activity (of naming) an attempt at control. By giving the albino character a different name, society does not merely render him/her as other than human, but also exercises control over him/her through the placement in a specific category. Examples abound from the novels in focus. The very first page of Magubeni's novel is a detailed discussion of the relevance of naming:

> I have many names; my mother calls me 'Nwelezelanga' because of my golden hair. Some call me 'Mhlope' because of my fair, almost-ginger skin. One wise old woman of the tribe calls me 'Mehlomadala' because of my big round eyes that reflect oceans of untold stories. The village girls who like to taut [sic] me just call me 'that albino girl' (Magubeni, 2016:3).

We note with interest how the first two names that Magubeni's protagonist is known by, have something to do with her albino condition, particularly the hair and skin. But it is the 'old wise woman' who confers on the protagonist a name that does not focus on her physical condition and appearance, but rather on her humanity imbued with ancestral powers. By calling the protagonist 'Mehlomadala' which roughly translates as 'eyes of the old', the wise old woman places the protagonist amongst the old and wise in the society who are custodians of the 'oceans of untold stories' reflected in the protagonist's eyes. Against such a high profile status accorded to the protagonist by prominent members of society, taunts by the village girls pale off. What remains with the reader is the protagonist's supernatural ability and importance that define her character throughout the novel.

Similarly, in *Zebra Crossing*, there is a long passage in which the narrator lists a variety of names levelled at people with her condition in various African countries. Her brother calls her ‘peeled potato’, a common name for people with albinism in Zimbabwe, alongside ‘monkey and sope’. In Malawi they are referred to as ‘biri’ and in Tanzania as ‘animal’ or ‘ghost’ or ‘white medicine’. They are called ‘ndundu (living dead) in the Congo and ‘leshane’, meaning half-persons in Lesotho. In South Africa they are called a range of names: ‘inkawu’ meaning ape, ‘wit kaffir’, ‘spierwit or ‘wit Boer’ (Vandermerwe, 2013:10). Given here is an inventory of names that, for a larger part, label and shame the albino person as less human and sometimes not human at all. Most of these names, as can clearly be noted, focus on the albino person’s physical appearance which is considered a defect across African societies. However, the protagonist insists on being called by her ‘real name’ (Chipo), which means ‘gift’ in Shona; a name given to her by her mother and one which underlines her worth as a person (ibid, 2013:10).

We again find a similar instance in *Because Pula means Rain,* where naming is imbued with negativity and revulsion. In the novel, the narrator detests the medical term for his condition:

> Such an ugly sounding word, albino. I hear it whispered around me, or else the Setswana word, leswafe. I hear it hissed in the aisle of the Spar shop and among Form One pupils at the Community Junior Secondary School, the CJSS. *Leswafe! Leswafe!* As if I am an alien or a refugee and not a Motswana at all. (Robson, 2000:18)

The naming is thus used as a tool of alienation. Worse still, it also becomes a way in which the character with albinism becomes dehumanised: ‘White monkey - that's the other name they call me in the Village. The white monkey, even though my skin is not white at all. It is a name that makes me tremble with anger and shame’ (ibid, 2000:19). Later in the novel, a medical expert (presumably white) admonishes people for using the word ‘albino’, and instructs them to say ‘person with albinism’ instead, as is done in her country. This is the moment where the medical expert ignores not only the indigenous attitudes towards albinism, but also the feelings of the affected individual. In the novel, the narrator makes clear his expression of the desire to just be regarded as a person: ‘I tried to decide if it would feel different to be called a person with albinism rather than being called an albino [...] no. There was no difference’ (ibid, 2000:75). This is commentary on another of the ongoing debates in Disability Studies, regarding the proper terminology with which to address people with disabilities.

In *Because Pula Means Rain*, the protagonist makes several efforts to change his skin color, including appealing to God through prayer and acquiring a skin ointment from a traditional healer. However, as Gina Leigh Robson (2011:22) observes, ‘both Western Christianity and tribal ritual [fail] Emmanuel. He is still caught in his place of double negation, and Emmanuel now starts to realise that neither the old, traditional ways of his people, nor the new ways of his devoutly Christian grandmother are going to heal his otherness’. Instead, the way forward is to tread a path that draws from both worldviews, but is still uniquely his, a

path that helps him to start charting his own destiny, resisting society's attempts to define him by locating him as either merely a subject to be cured, or a piteous figure to be prayed for.
In *The Book of Memory,* Memory is glad that she has to tell her story herself because previous accounts of her life have focused on her 'condition'. Notable in these accounts is what she calls 'brutal honesty' with which her society 'regarded anyone different' (Gappah, 2015:10). Her condition makes her appear like a white person, yet she is not. Instead she is a '*murungudunhu*' that is, a black person 'imbued not with the whiteness of *murungu,* of privilege, but of *dunhu*, of ridicule and fakery, a ghastly whiteness' (ibid, 2015:10). It becomes so much a part of her that she notes, 'when I did venture out, it was to be greeted as *murungudunhu,* so that I thought it must be part of my name' (ibid, 2015:47). Like Emmanuel, Memory wishes she could change her skin colour, appealing to religion: 'I prayed every second I could for God to darken my skin [...] but my skin remained what it had always been' (ibid, 2015:56).

The family unit is responsible for creating one's social being. In fact, in Axel Honneth's (1995) theory of recognition, he acknowledges the family as central in creating recognition in the individual. It is within the family that, ideally, 'subjects recognize each other reciprocally as living, emotionally needy beings' (18). Therefore, familial acceptance or rejection is crucial in the projection of an individual's existence. In the case of Nwelezelanga, the first encounter is rejection. When she is born, the midwife tells the mother, 'You should get rid of this thing, Nokwakha!' (Magubeni, 2016:6). This is a statement that reeks of rejection, with the refusal to acknowledge the humanity of the newborn, by naming it a 'thing'. However, as the novel proceeds, Nwelezelanga finds acceptance, love even, from her adopted mother. And indeed the novel has a somewhat positive ending in the reunion of Nwelezelanga with her birth mother, who is at that moment wracked with remorse for abandoning her child. Another form of rejection can be found in wilful ignorance of the biological/medical causes of albinism. For example, in *Zebra Crossing*, the protagonist's father takes one look at his newborn child and concludes that her 'pale skin was the product of an interracial betrayal, pure and simple' (Vandermerwe, 2013:21), which he uses as an excuse to abandon his family.

Magic or mockery?

Clare Barker (2011:2) makes an important observation that '[p]ostcolonial literature is replete with exceptional child characters, often with physical or cognitive disabilities, who have privileged access to landmark social and political events; who may possess supernormative forms of knowledge or insight…'. This statement is particularly relevant when we consider some of the representations of albinism that exist not only in the written literature, but also in other forms of the African imaginary, including folktales, proverbs and folk songs. It is these young characters that Barker refers to as 'exceptional children'. As readers, however, we are invited to wonder if such representations do not have negative effects, that is, if they do not perpetuate stereotypes and stigma that already exist for people with disabilities. Charlotte Baker easily responds to this query in the affirmative. Her reading of a number of novels leads her to conclude that the majority of representations tend to be of the negative sort. She gives the example of Patrick Grainville's *Le Tyran Eternel*, in which the protagonist simply goes by the name 'the Albino', suggesting 'that there is no need to look beyond the skin of the albino to identify him, for it is white skin above all else that marks the albino apart' (2008:117).

If we look at the literary works as modes of intervention, then a contradiction arises with regard to whether or not they provide corrective images of albinism. The main reason for attacks on people with albinism in most African societies is not simply hate. Rather, these attacks are based on beliefs in magical properties inherent in the albino anatomy. In this regard, do *Nwelezelanga: The Star Child* and *Because Pula Means Rain* offer positive interventions? As a way of responding to this apparent paradox, we believe that the work of texts such as Magubeni's and Robson's novels toes the line of what Mitchell and Snyder (2000:3) identify as the 'transgressive reappropriation' mode of disability representation. They observe that one of the more recent trends in disability movements has been the embracing of terms formerly used to denigrate against them. This 'power of transgression always originates at the moment when the derided object embraces its deviance as value' (ibid, 2000: 35). In this case, the literary text permits the albino character to be valued for the same magical qualities for which they were ostracised.

In Magubeni's *Nwelezelanga: The Star Child*, the character of focus is a young albino child. From the onset, the reader is made aware that this is no ordinary child: 'I'm young yet old; I've experienced the cycle of birth and death many more times than I care to count. I've donned and shredded many skin colours in my lifetime' (Magubeni 2016: 3). This is what is known as a spirit child, similar to the *abiku* and *ogbanje* phenomena, referenced several times in various classic pieces of African literature[3]. It is therefore not unusual to encounter such supernatural beings in literature. From this description, the novel therefore associates albinism with the supernatural world from the start.

The association with magic - the evil sort - is also evoked upon the birth of the child. Indeed, '[t]he situation for the African albino is aggravated by traditions that perceive disability as a curse or as the manifestation of sin in the family' (Baker, 2008:116). In her insistence that the child should be gotten rid of, the midwife tells Nokwakha, the child's mother: 'This is a bad omen; you have given birth to an albino. This is the devil incarnate; get rid of this thing at once' (Magubeni, 2016:6). The midwife draws on an alleged prophecy, which warned of 'an albino child who would be born in the first moon of spring' (ibid, 2016:6). There are therefore two clear associations with magic. The first is the narrator's admission to being no ordinary human. The second is that from the midwife, which is a reaction of fear, a belief that the albino child is a fissure tear in the fabric of normalcy. She convinces the mother to indeed get rid of the child, which is done by casting her into the Umfolozi River. Similarly, in *Because Pula Means Rain*, there are some people who believe that Emmanuel bears evil magic. These include cattle herders who believe that an albino's presence 'will be bad for our herd [...]. The milk will come out sour and rotten and green. The calves will die inside their mothers' bellies' (Robson, 2000:64). Again, in *Zebra Crossing,* a pastor accuses Chipo of bearing 'the mark of the sope [...] a curse' (Vandermerwe, 2013:66) and demands that she repent. This association of disability with evil is not limited to the African context.

It is common knowledge that, as was mentioned at the beginning, many albinos find their very lives under threat in most African countries. There is some limited commentary on this point in Magubeni's novel. Despite her connection to the spirit world, or because of it, Nwelezelanga knows that she is constantly in danger. She must always be on her toes, since:

> ...there is a belief across the breadth and plains of the land that children with albinism have special powers and [their] body parts are believed to possess powerful omens by the witches of dark magic. Many of [them] are hunted down for sacrifices because of the suppositious belief that immortality will be gained in the everlasting life. (Magubeni, 2016:11)

The association of disability with magic is troubling, at best. The novel suggests that magical properties have to be associated with disability, which has the danger of emphasising the isolation of the person with the disability. This is unless we are ready to accept the text as an act of transgressive reappropriation. Magubeni is not apologetic in the least when he talks of the midwife's discovery of extraordinary souls that are born into disabled bodies:

> [...] there were special souls being born across the land; babies that had old souls and an incredible awareness of what is. These children were in some way handicapped for reasons she could not comprehend. Some couldn't speak properly and had difficulty in communicating verbally. Others were deaf and some were blind; they were born as outcasts but had an uncanny ability to see things that other couldn't see. She noticed that these divine powers were more endowed in children with albinism. (Magubeni, 2016:64-65)

Magubeni's investing the disabled body, particularly the albino one, with special powers, powers of the gods, seems to be his attempt to positively represent it. Being a practicing *sangoma* and herbalist himself, Magubeni reveres ancestral powers which he invests in his protagonist and other babies like her. This is unsurprising, since in most African societies 'disability serves as [...] a connection to the other world' (Devlieger, 2010:96). However, instead of debunking the dangerous association of albinos with magical powers, Magubeni's presentation here seems to affirm the same and therefore puts albinos at continued risk. His condemnation of such an association and resultant brutal occurrences is not as explicit and therefore not as effective. Regardless, this is an illustration of how the literary text affords a glimpse into the indigenous understanding of disability. After all, as Patrick Devlieger (2010: 82) observes, within specific cultures, certain forms of disability may be understood as manifestations of the extraordinary, a status that ‘may be positive, negative or ambiguous’.

One commendable thing about Robson’s *Because Pula Means Rain* novel (which is not the case with Magubeni’s novel) is how the narrator explicitly debunks a variety of stereotypes and beliefs about albinism, simply by pointing out clearly his ignorance of some of the purported truths that abound in his community. One of the myths that baffles him is the one that claims that:

> [...] a leswafe does not die. When he is old he goes out into the deep bush and slowly crumbles into dust. Or into ash. And no one will ever find his body because there is no body left to find. He will never have a decent burial with mourners standing around his grave to remember him, making sure his remains will rest in peace. But how can this be true? It cannot. It is not possible. (Robson, 2000:24)

This is a common myth in Africa, as noted in the introduction to this paper. As a way of debunking the belief, in some African societies, great effort is made to invite a lot of people to the funeral of a person with albinism, as a way of removing stereotypes, even in death (Baker et al., 2010:177).

In *Because Pula means Rain*, Emmanuel is surrounded by people who believe he has magical powers. One of them is Sindiso, an older friend who holds him as a good luck charm, and therefore takes him on a road trip to visit an ex-girlfriend. However, things do not work out as he had hoped: ‘He had driven four hours with an albino, an alien freak, right there in the car beside him, just to make sure he had good luck with his girlfriend. But all he got was bad luck and a girlfriend that didn’t want to see him’ (Robson, 2011:42). This very same association of the albino with magical qualities can be used to exploit them. It is yet another way in which their humanity is ignored.

The one magical feature that the author seems to support is Emmanuel’s ability to communicate with ghosts, a power which leads to his breaking of a curse that has dogged his village for a long time. In this instance, his heroism is not noticed by other members of the village. However, his actions lead to a crucial development in his character, his acceptance of his condition, through the ‘[opening] of a third space of identity [a synthesis of the Christian and traditional outlooks] where he can come to terms with the whiteness of his albino skin’ (Robson, 2011:23). He knows he cannot change his pigmentation, but at least he can bring peace to the deceased spirits that have brought so much misfortune to the village.

Chipo’s experience in *Zebra Crossing* is much more tragic, though more steeped in the reality of African people with albinism when crossed with experiences of migration. As a

Zimbabwean illegal immigrant in Cape Town, she is lured into participating in a scam working with a self-titled Doctor Ongani, who offers ‘The Miracle Medicines That Cannot Fail’ (Vandermerwe, 2013:104). He convinces her that having an albino on his team will lead to huge profits. As he tells her flatmates, ‘Chipo’s condition represents luck’ (ibid, 2013: 126). This leads to her being exploited for money. She is advertised as a good luck charm, and eventually, the ‘Doctor’ realises he can make money from her hair, which leads to a sign being placed outside their apartment: ‘Real Albino Hair. Get Rid Of Your Enemies’ (ibid, 2013:142). In the eyes of these normates, the person with albinism is nothing more than a commodity off which they can enrich themselves. The sharing of the individual’s hair in this case, represents an attempt to partake of that magic, without regard for the wellbeing of the individual whose hair it is.

Conclusion

It is commonly accepted that literature serves as a window into its society. This is what the South African writer Ezekiel Mphahlele (1974) refers to as the ethnic imperative. With this point in mind, in this paper, we have brought together novels from four different authors from three different countries with the aim of illustrating the genre’s ability to challenge misconceptions that exist on the continent and outside of it, with regard to albinism, as well as to provide a glimpse into some African ways of understanding albinism, as they are presented in the text. This has been done by highlighting how the texts provide the albino character with a voice that becomes crucial in indicating indigenous knowledge systems and their impact on the lives of people with albinism; the way albinism as a condition influences gender and sexual positioning in the eyes of their immediate societies; and the impact of family relationships on the creation of the albino subjectivity. In so doing, we have indicated how these texts, in various fashions, challenge the harmful stereotypes that abound in society.

The four novels tackled here are all works of the imagination, and an objection could be leveled against them on the grounds that they are not reality. This would not be new, given decades of ‘suspicion over the ultimate utility of representational studies about disability’ due to various degrading portrayals of persons with disabilities (Mitchell and Snyder, 2000:15). Indeed, in arguing for the voice of the person with albinism, some would also argue that we should only give credit to autobiographical writing. We hold that this is, in a way, limiting opportunities for learning. Much as credit is given to the autobiographical genre, it too has its shortfalls, a discussion of which is not the purview of this paper. Moreover, we reiterate the point advanced by Rosemarie Garland Thomson (1997) that literary works are part of a human discourse that can produce the category of disability. As part of this discourse, the novel can create and re-create realities that societies subscribe to.

Notes

[1] Shona for ‘fake white person’.

[2] One of the common trends in reading the African albino is to focus on the racial subversion created by the ‘whitened’ body (Baker, 2008:116). In this paper, we have deliberately avoided this line of thinking.

[3] In Yoruba and Igbo cultures of Nigeria, there is a belief that some children die in infancy only to be reborn to the same mother again and again, in a repetitive cycle that can only be arrested through prayer, special charms, or the decision by the child to stay alive. Such a child is referred to as ‘Abiku’ in Yoruba and ‘Ogbanje’ in Igbo.

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