Review

Pragmatism, prostitution and morality in Philip Chidavaenzi’s The haunted trail (2012) and Virginia Phiri’s Highway Queen (2010)

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The article utilises Philip Chidavaenzi’s The Haunted Trail and Virginia Phiri’s Highway Queen to argue that female characters pragmatically turn to prostitution when the society, which should nurture morality in humanity, turns immoral against them. The moral principle is apparently premised on the notion that, when human beings behave altruistically they distinguish themselves from animals and bring order and peace to the society. The moral principle is applauded for bringing societies into homogenous folds. However, Chidavaenzi and Phiri’s works seem to challenge the presumptuous touting of morality as essential to the existence of human beings for its creation of a so-called civilised society. This enables the researcher to argue that morals fall away in the advent of poverty and hunger. The article further argues that in instances where human beings have to choose between morality and survival, the latter prevails. This article draws from the Marxist feminist theoretical frame work, to argue that in capitalist environments the poor disregard moral values for the purposes of self-sustenance. Marxist feminists have posited that controlling women’s sexuality and their access to resources in turn allows men to control women’s labour power and their sexuality. This observation enables a discussion on both Chidavaenzi and Phiri’s handling of female characters in as much as the characters' adoption of prostitution and crime presents moral dilemma. Pragmatic ethics and the African Philosophy of Ubuntu are utilised to illuminate the writers’ representation of this moral problem. Pragmatist ethics is broadly humanistic because it is the ultimate test of morality beyond whatever matters, for as humans, good values are those for which we have good reasons (Dewey, 1999). On the other hand, the Ubuntu philosophy believes that a person’s behaviour determines their ‘personhood’ and that immorality reduces the ‘personhood’ of a human being. In the face of adversity, the poor find good reasons to be amoral. Overall, the article argues that both writers, though in differing ways, portray characters who believe that in the face of adversity there are good reasons to be amoral.

Key words: Morality, Pragmatism, Prostitution, Feminism, Poverty.

INTRODUCTION

The Haunted Trail is a novel set in post-independence Zimbabwe in when the country was facing economic meltdown evidenced in the closure of banks and decay in the moral fibre of its citizens. To survive in this harsh
economic environment women operated shebeen and prostituted themselves. The protagonist Michael is a business man not spared from the harsh economy. He turns to corruption and murder to keep business afloat. To add to the struggles of the citizens at this time, the country is affected by HIV and AIDS pandemic, which results in children being orphaned at a young age as they are left to fend for themselves. The result is cyclic as children, like Michael and Jackie turn to prostitution and crime to survive and become infected by HIV and AIDS. Similarly, Highway Queen is set in post-independence Zimbabwe where the economic meltdown has resulted in the closure of companies and industries. Workers are retrenched. The result is mushrooming squatter camps that become homes to unemployed people who engage in illegal means to their living. Sophie the protagonist is faced with the crisis of feeding her family and decides to take up sex work to provide for them.

Marxist feminist theory is ideal for this research as it generally provides a critique of social relations. Many feminist theories focus on analyzing gender inequality and the promotion of women's rights, interests, and issues. Themes explored in feminism include art history and contemporary art, aesthetics, discrimination, stereotyping, objectification (especially sexual objectification), oppression, and patriarchy. Both male and female writers, highlighting the different burdens that women have to bear through the ages, have written various literature showing how inequality in the economy results in the oppression of one group of people by another. Marxist feminists purport that, capitalism is the root cause of women's oppression and that discrimination against women in domestic life and employment is an effect of capitalist ideologies (Bottomore, 1991). Marxist feminism is a sub-type of feminist theory that focuses on the dismantling of capitalism as a way to liberate women. Perhaps for Zimbabwe, a country bedevilled by economic woes, Marxist feminism wraps up the root cause of inequality. Both texts articulate that the root cause of immoral in society is the lack of economic means.

This article makes the two novels to be understood in a context where human nature is prone to judgement of what is good and bad. Kant cited in Leitch (2001: 504) avers that judgement is generally the ability to think the particular as contained under the Universal. This means that what society deems to be immoral behaviour is applied universally no matter the circumstances that may affect an individual. Patriarchal societies set up moralistic principles, which act as measures to check the appropriateness of human behaviour. These measures premised on the androgenic standard of what is good or bad are then applied to both men and women. The androgenic society decides that prostitution is immoral as far as the woman is the one selling sex. For the truck drivers in Highway Queen it is normal for them to have sex with various women but for Sophie it is immoral. Society neglects to define what the buyer of the sex who is a man is doing. The woman is the one who is monitored for social reprehensible behaviour. This is evidenced by a lack of a synonymy that aptly describes a man who buys sex from women. Words used to describe men who have several sexual partners do not have the same negative connotations. While a man can proudly call himself, a casanova, libertine, gigolo ladies' man or philanderer a prostitute may not do the same. Michel is a philanderer but his fiancée is expected to be a virgin. Spivak therefore argues that, “The subaltern enters official and intellectual discourse only rarely and usually through the mediating commentary of someone more at home in those discourses” (Leitch, 2001: 2195). From Hudson-Weems’ (2004) point of view, definitions belong to the definers not to the defined, historically. It is up to women to define themselves if they do not someone else will and they would do it miserably. Sophie and other prostitutes in Highway Queen are raided and arrested for soliciting while the men they solicit are not affected by the raid. For women and the proletariat what is considered good for them is decided in their absence. Therefore, prostitution can only be immoral and no situation can warrant it to be regarded differently.

From an African philosophical point of view, morality embraces the Kantian principles as expounded in the Ten Commandments of the Bible. Similarly, judgement is made on individuals depending on the relationship of ones behaviour and how it relates to the community. The African traditional concept of morality is humanistic or anthropocentric in nature. The central moral norm was to maintain harmonious relationships within the community (Gyekye, 1996; Wirudo, 1998; Bujo, 1990; Mojola, 1988; Motthabi, 1986). As such, women in African societies are socialised to respect the community and follow the androgenic principles regarded as the norm. Sophie desperately tries to keep her prostitution a secret, as she is aware of the consequences of her behaviour. The idealised and respected women are those who are obedient to their husbands even if the husbands are wrong and unreasonable (Gaidzanwa, 1985). African maxims are specific about the formation of character. Character is acquired. Every person is responsible for the state of his or her character as it is a result of habitual actions approved by the patriarchy. The conduct of human beings ought to conform to certain fundamental norms and values, which translate to moral virtue. A human being not capable of displaying the expected characteristics falls short or lacks personhood (Ubuntu). Michael and Sophie therefore lack Ubuntu because of their behaviour. Eckensberger, (2004) argues that morality is not only a central aspect of culture but it is unique to humans. From an African perspective, morality forms character and character forms ‘personhood’. One who lacks ‘personhood’ is judged as lacking character and therefore does not qualify to be a human hence the use of the Zulu proverb umuntuungumuntuŋabantu (a person's character is determined by how others view him)
In an ideal utopic society, man and women would have equal opportunities and access to economic resources. Women would, therefore, have no need to sell themselves for money. On the other hand, for one to be able to sell there should be a buyer. In situations where oppression prevails and in an unjust society where systematically and over long periods one group denies another access to resources of the society immorality is bound to prevail (Collins, 2000). Sexual double standards and male control of access to the means of production and reproduction control women just as surplus labour is controlled by low wages. Men exercise their control in receiving personal service work from women, in not having to do house work or rear children in having access to women’s bodies for sex and in feeling powerful and being powerful (Hartmann, 1979). Until recently in Zimbabwe, the police would arrest women for soliciting but the solicited were never arrested. “The patriarchal nature of Zimbabwean traditional culture has for ages relegated women to second class citizens. Activists say this resulted in women struggling to assert equality even where it is enshrined in the constitution” (The Zimbabwean 3 June 2015).

Women and girls are not born into prostitution but rather a society that is based on the availability of economic resources forces women to be prostitutes. Jackie and her siblings in the Haunted Trail are exposed to prostitution at a very early age. Prostitution represents the fusion of exploitation for an economic purpose namely the commodification of women’s sexuality (Collins, 2000). Similarly, men are not born thieves and murderers but in capitalist societies, men are forced to make money or they become emasculated. The choice given to them is limited; they can either sink or swim. Sanyinka in Walsh (2008) argues that, when one is born into the “lumpen proletariat” one becomes self-centred and egotistic as one is at the fringes of the society. The “Lumpenproletariat” engages in acts of violence and crime as outlets for frustration in a class struggle. In Zimbabwe, this group of people has come to be known as “Majagger” meaning to balance. Unfortunately in the balancing act there is no stability hence morals are easily discarded. Marx and Engel in Walsh (2008:94) have proffered that crime is the product of an unjust and alienating social condition, “the struggle of an isolated individual against the prevailing condition”. Both Phiri and Chidavaenzi in their novels narrate the struggles of men and women who are aspiring for a better life in the face of a decaying economy.

Colonisation in Zimbabwe brought with it capitalism and subsequently urbanisation. Since the resources generated from the urban industrial world were swiftly transported to the mother country (Fanon, 1997), the native countries did not have enough resources to develop their industrial base and create employment for all their citizens. The lack of resources, coupled with rampant mismanagement of the economy, left the country Zimbabwe in distress. The majority of the citizens in urban areas live in poverty. Tuan (1984) in Collins (2004:144) suggests that “power as domination involves reducing humans to animate nature in order to exploit them economically and to treat them condescendingly as pets”. This is true of all colonised states where the natives were always treated as inferior and the women too as inferior in relation to men. Marx has articulated that a person’s beliefs and values are a reflection of that person’s economic interests (Leitch, 2001). For the colonisers the main interest was to make much profit. However, for the marginalised native person one had to do whatever it took to survive. The protagonists in both novels are not averse to throwing caution to the wind. They show that consciousness can be over ridden by circumstances. In instances where one is faced with adversities conscious is subjugated by the survival instinct.

**Fallibility, vulnerability and rational humans in a decaying economy**

Very often human beings judge others based on what society defines as right or wrong behaviour. Humanity has created organizations and units of existence. It is within these organizations, such as the family, religion, political party or work place that rules and standards of behaviour are defined. These units set up yardsticks to measure the morality or immorality of one’s behaviour. The concepts of morality and goodness (this varies according to persons and is contingent to ethics) are linked to the well-being and dignity of other fellow human beings (Boss, 2008:378). What humans consider morally upright should be ultimately good to all and not for an individual. One’s ideology or proposition can only be true if it works satisfactory for all involved. For pragmatists there is no fundamental difference between practical and theoretical reason or any ontological difference between facts and values (Dewey, 1999). Gelfund (1987:65-88) argues that the vices rejected by traditional societies are abuse, lying, deceit, stealing, adultery, drinking, violent quarrelling, pride, jealousy, covetousness, hatred, ingratitude, anger, negligence, weakness, assault, provocation and selfishness. Both Chidavaenzi and Phiri pick on these avarices and show how the individual characters are forced to forget their ‘personhood’.

Chidavaenzi and Phiri opine that human action cannot be viewed from the prism of one’s orientation. They bring to the fore the old adage of ‘don’t judge a book by its cover.’ Both authors discuss the decade of crisis that was characterized by an economic meltdown that resulted in the closure of banks, factories, industry, excessive unemployment and ultimately poverty. The job losses increased the plight of Zimbabweans whose situations were further worsened by the scourges of HIV and AIDS. Olen et al. (2008) point out that, it is the moral duty of the
government to promote the general welfare, the common good or public interest. However, for Zimbabwe, the country became inhabitable as it was bogged down by corruption, political unrest, mismanagement of the economy and lack of funds to take care of public interest. Many citizens discarded their morality and pursued any avenues that would put food on the table. The effects of the crisis are examined by Phiri (2010) in Highway Queen when she traces the life of a prostitute who just wants to feed her family. Muwati et al. (2003) highlight that; citizens became very vulnerable to this decade of fatally deficient government policies that reduce the ordinary citizens to abject poverty.

In both narratives, the authors evince conceptual thrust that debunks the tendency to homogenize the human experience. More often-such homogenization undercuts the objective impact assessments (Muwati et al. 2003:126). For Chidavaenzi, his protagonist Michael is driven by an insatiable lust for wealth and power as he makes determined effort to escape from the poverty and squalor of Mbare. Michael who is raised by a single mother, a shebeen queen and prostitute is selfish as his only concern from an early age is to do what gives him pleasure. Wiredu (1998) affirms that, at all stages … morality is grounded in conceptual and empirical consideration about human wellbeing. Michael’s egoism is a trait nourished by a capitalist society where the subjugation of the proletariat is a means of reducing labour cost and maximising profits. Marginalisation of women and their function as secondary labour forces is an essential and fundamental characteristic of Capitalism (Kristeva, 1982; Selden, 1989). Michael’s mother as part of the marginalised is incapacitated from giving him a life different from what he has. His tragic flaw becomes like that of Okonkwo in his attempt to transcend the weakness of his father (Achebe, 1990) and like that of Macbeth with his vaulting ambition (Shakespeare, 1971). Ultimately, the characters’ flaws lead to their demise.

Similarly, Phiri’s protagonist Sophie turns to prostitution in order to feed, clothe, and send her children to school. Her husband, the breadwinner is incapacitated and emasculated by unemployment and alcoholism (Muponde, 2007). Sophie tries to find a solution to her predicament, which in itself is a result of immoral leaders failing to govern the country and therefore driving it to decadence. She makes a rational and pragmatic decision to sell sex. “While the practice is morally reprehensible, it is a crisis management strategy that on the other hand enables her to retain her dignity,” (Muwati et al., 2003: 126). In the circumstances, she is in a catch 22 situation where inaction results in starvation, homelessness, failure to put the children to school and inviting the judgemental scorn of society for selling her body. In the end, her pragmatic and innovative impulses prevail.

Michaels’s upbringing is a very shameful experience, which develops in him selfish character. His mother, who is abandoned by her gangster lover, is poor and the only source of her income is the shebeen and prostitution. She changes lovers, is eventually infected with HIV and dies of AIDS alone and is given a pauper’s burial. Michael, like Sayinka Shakur, emerges from the lumpen proletariat background as a paranoid control freak, a sexual sado-masochist with a repressed inferiority complex (Muponde, 2007:12). His violent behaviour is a reaction against the feeling of class subjugation and poverty, which he adversely tries to escape. He uses the despicable traits to gain success in the banking sector. Driven and motivated by the fear of poverty Michael becomes a misanthropic, ruthless workaholic “all his life he had been escaping the squalor, overcrowding, and degrading poverty of his youth”(p. 9).Michael lives in the shadows of his fear that when he eventually encounters the light it fails to penetrate the darkness in him. Chiedza, his girlfriend is the direct opposite of him, brought up in a secure home, by a widowed lawyer mother. Chiedza has a wonderful childhood, Christian upbringing and a philanthropic nature.

Chidavaenzi creates a complete contrast of the Jacha and Deng family. The Jacha family is driven by conservative values while the Deng family has no moral value system. While both women lose their life partners in different circumstances, for Fungai, a middle class working woman, life is not difficult because she is empowered with an education and a lucrative career and manages to raise her daughters in a pleasant environment. Hungwe (no date: 47) this article has no date attests that, “While education is regarded as vital in fighting poverty it is not seen as fundamental in the development of the girl child among the marginalised populace”. For Michael’s mother, the options before her are limited. Without an education and no means of taking care of her child, the only option is prostitution. It is however ironic that in spite of their different backgrounds both Michael and Chiedza are not spared from the HIV and AIDS virus. Chidavaenzi seems to articulate that HIV has no class boundaries.

From the beginning of the novel, we meet Michael, a self-aggrandizing, corrupt and uncultured boy who matures into a decadent adult. Michael leads a reckless childhood. He sleeps with different women some older than him from an early age. His family background does not give him any moral or ethical values. His lust for sex is equated with his lust for power and control. His failure to control his lust results in losing Pentagon Bank, his empire. In spite of his success with the bank having opened branches in major cities in Zimbabwe, Michael’s lust is voracious as he moves to buy Manrow Bank. The same lust is exhibited by the truck drivers in Highway Queen. They are all keen to have unprotected sex with the same lust is exhibited by the truck drivers in Highway Queen. Sophie. Michael orchestrates the illegal take-over of struggling banks and fraudulently amasses funds to finance his schemes. He is pragmatic in his approach as he argues that, “We are registered as a Financial Services Provider but owing to the economic crisis we are facing
at the moment. It is advisable to divert a little if we are to remain above water” (p.7). One of the clearest influences from the West is the growing materialism in Africa (Mwikamba, 1992 in Indowu et al., 2008). Money and material wealth have become semi-gods leading to the decay of morals, as economic activities and successes have become ends in themselves. African communities have moved away from the communal way of life to Eurocentric individualism that makes it difficult to apply the principles that worked in traditional societies. While in traditional societies the success of an individual translates to the success of a community in modern day success is individualistic (as gaining it is a competition).

Chidavaenzi brings forth a fallacious argument that the greater impulse to do whatever is necessary to attain which ever roles are given high status is a function of male physiology (Boss, 2008: 488). Michael and his directors who are males will stop at nothing to amass wealth at the expense of the ordinary people. Chidavaenzi seems to argue that even the most egocentric of the human lot share their egocentrism with those of their kind. Michael and his directors act altruistically, at least with regards to those within their group, which to them is a moral standard regardless of the effects it has on the people with accounts in their bank. Both Chidavaenzi and Phiri seem to argue that, morality falls away when the poor are faced with an opportunity to escape their poverty. Sophie is threatened by hunger and poverty, so prostitution seems to be a gallant means of survival. Similarly, for Michael buccaneering is the only way he can make enough money to keep him safe from poverty.

Michael, as a narcissist is well aware that his actions are against the law while Sophie is aware that prostitution is immoral. However, for both characters to survive and not go back to the squalor and poverty of the squatter camp and Mbare they have to do those things which are not good for the whole. Michael becomes a ruthless shark who is “only contented when an enemy was bleeding helplessly on the floor” (p.8). Poverty has taught both Michael and Sophie that they live in a dog eats dog society and their survival is dependent solely on them and them alone. Michael advises his colleagues that they should open offshore foreign accounts to protect their earnings. Bonge (1965) cited in Walsh (2008) avers that, Capitalism generates egoism and blunts altruism because it relies on competition of valuable resources setting person against society.

The Darwinism tendency exhibited by Michael leaves him in a precarious position in a world of economics where it is the survival of the fittest. For Michael and his cronies, “everyman is alone in the world and fights alone to survive. That is the way of the world”(p. 31). The devastating effects of this ethical egoism are closures of the banks. Chidavaenzi seems to be equating human behaviour to that of animals. Laws, rules, and regulations are only useful to rational beings for as long as all things are equal. Mnyaka and Motlhabi (2006) affirm that Ubuntu ethics is anti-egoistic as it discourages people from seeking their own good without regard for or at the detriment of other persons in the community.

Michael and Jackie are indifferent to the standards of morality set by a society whose premise is of a privileged position. Jackie and Michael are two individuals from a pauperised background who are non-conformist and have a prurient tendency to engage in sex. Both characters are caught up in what Bohms (2001:115) refers to as “the primitive rebellion hypothesis”. Poverty stricken individuals are prone to crime as a means of survival. Crime is a rational response to their situation and morality falls away. Chiedza can easily judge Jackie’s behaviour as a “decadent and carefree woman of the city” (p.1). Chiedza is looking at Jackie from a privileged middle class position where she makes assumptions about the expected behaviour of a proper and decent woman. Ironically, in her naivety it is not Jackie who becomes HIV positive but her. Chidavaenzi seems to heighten the irony in that; it is normally the poor who are associated with disease and promiscuity.

The background of poverty moulds and shapes Michael into a reckless adult. When he gets Pentagon Bank, he is consumed by the love of wealth that he does not know when to stop his misogyny. As a child, he did not get the grooming that Chiedza had. Chiedza controls her passion but Michael does not know any better. Michael has not been taught to love. His home was not a haven of love and happiness as such he does not know what love really is. He wants to possess Chiedza because of her beauty and good character. To him, Chiedza fits the role of a perfect wife for a business tycoon. He does not share her passion for a family. Michael is portrayed as a panjandrum as he believes that managing to escape the squalor of Mbareputs him above everything else including HIV and AIDS.

The moral woman in the wake of poverty and AIDS

Emmanuel Kant has stated that moral judgments are binding to all human beings no matter what kind of society they live in (Stanford Encyclopaedia, 2002). Chidavaenzi and Phiri argue against this view as they posit that a person’s behaviour is controlled by their circumstances more than what the society expects of them. Human beings are generally egocentric and more often than not the golden rule of, ‘do unto others as you want done unto you’, is put aside for self-fulfilment and survival imperatives.

Chiedza and Jackie are two graduates with diverse backgrounds who meet at the university. While Chiedza sits in her dorm room reading Jackie parties until morning. In a traditional African society, a shared morality is cement to the society (Kigongo, 1991, kinoti, 1992). While the ultimate goal of traditional education was morality, the behaviour of both characters is indicative
that modern education unlike traditional education does not place emphasis on ethical behaviour. Chiedza is a determined, hard-working, goal oriented and moralistic woman. She is highly religious and believes that sex before marriage and "having a child outside wedlock was a sin against God" (p. 95). Orphaned at a young age, Jackie is the exact opposite. She has street shrewdness and is very independent. In spite of having multifarious boyfriends, Jackie takes exceptional care to protect herself and becomes selfish. As a female gigolo, she dates men of her own choosing and whim. She calls herself the 'men's lady' taking away the Casanova masculine role to apply to her love for sex with different partners. Like Sophie in Highway Queen, she assumes a new identity as a self-namer and self-definer (Muwati et al., 2013: 121). Jackie is liberated from patriarchal control and learns from an early age to take care of herself. She has no remorse or regret of her decision even that of sleeping with her best friend's fiancé. She exhibits qualities that are masculine in nature and uses them to protect herself from patriarchal dominance. She uses men as objects for her own pleasure and knowingly engages in adulterous affairs with married man. In this way, she adopts a process that Bell describes as disidentification in which she challenges patriarchally ascribed gender roles of what a woman should be. Simons (1975) argues that as females increasingly adopt male roles they will increasingly masculanise their attitudes and behaviour and thus become crime prone. Jacques Lacan in his seminar encore (1972-3) suggests 'jouissance' by which he means sexual pleasure and enjoyment are fundamentally phallic and thus do not relate to the female other as such (Collier, 2013: 98). Jackie however, takes back her sexuality and enjoys sex as much as her numerous male partners.

Chiedza, on the other hand, comes from a sheltered background and courts danger by escaping the protected small town environment, refusing to register at Africa University an institute guided by moralistic values and forms an embryotic protection for its students. The Africa University is opposed to the University of Zimbabwe, which is highly liberal in its approach. Chiedza is attracted to danger. In Michael, she sees an enigma, which she is curious to explore. She takes the role of the light, as her name seems to suggest, in the relationship. The two are of opposite orientation. While Chiedza's childhood is very cultured, nurtured, and cosseted, Michael is amoral and has no family values to talk of. Michael's life has a lot of dark alleys, secrets and shady dealings. Chidavaenzi brings forth the theme of beauty and the beast. Michael holds on to Chiedza in the hope that she would bring light into his dark life and restore him to a better person. Unfortunately, he is not aware that the pursuit of his pleasure has ramifications, which have a negative impact on others and those he cares about the most.

Chiedza’s mollycoddled childhood did not expose her to the debauchery found in the big city of Harare. She genuinely believes that if she is good nothing bad will happen to her. She fails at self-preservation because of her naive belief that being good would protect her. Although she suspects that Michael is an adulterer, she continues with the relationship. Even after they are engaged, she does not take precaution to protect herself or insist on an HIV test before their sexual encounter. She prophetically exclaimed that, "you know what scares me HIV and AIDS, Jackie" (p20). Chiedza seems to fulfill Kant's upshot assumption that a man has autonomy while the woman lacks the autonomous capacity to reason for herself (Anderson 2003). She inevitably authors her own tragedy by failing to reason.

For Jackie, Chiedza should not be fearful as she does not sleep around but she quickly cautions her naive friend and warns that, "a condom can make a difference between life and death" (p21) Chiedza only realizes the importance and difference a condom would have made after she is tested HIV positive. Chidavaenzi is suggesting that HIV is not always a result of loose behaviour or prostitution therefore, people should not judge those that are HIV positive in a totalising and homogenising manner. Chiedza's status is different from Sophie in that she is innocent. Chiedza's only sexual encounter with her fiancé, leaves her HIV and AIDS positive and therefore exposed to the stigma, associated with the virus. Her tenacious hold on Michael is motivated by his success in business. She seems to be substituting him for her father whom she lost as a child. She fails to act on her instinct that warns her that Michael is not what she needs; she fails to make an ethical decision. Michael's obscurantism is a fascination that she enjoys to her own detriment.

Jackie and Michael, coming from marginalized backgrounds has a proclivity to engage in sex with different people. For Chiedza sex is sacred and a preserve for the married. Precocious sex for both Michael and Jackie is inevitable as they are exposed to it both at home and in their neighbourhood. Precocious sex for both characters ruins their view of love and the purpose of sex. Jackie's first sexual encounter is at fifteen. The early exposure to sex sets her apart from her best friend as she becomes aware of what it entails. Chidavaenzi seems to be arguing that there is apreponderance in poor families to engage in sex from an early age. "Jackie then an innocent naïve young girl did not know what that meant. She later learnt that a girl had something, a priceless possession that any man would do whatever it took to have, including parting with his hard-earned salary only for a few minutes of pleasure with a woman" (pp35-36).

Jackie emerges as an ethical egoist ready to take on the world but on her own terms. This realization is also an awakening for Sophie when after three episodes of unprotected sex with men she realizes she has a
commodity that men cannot resist. “To achieve this I would sell my body. That was the only commodity that no one had control over except myself” (Phiri, 2010: 88). Selling sex is the best employment available; her body is hers to control just as an athlete decides whether to run or not. Tate (1983) cited in Collins (2000:4) avers that, “this type of change ... occurs because the heroine recognises and more importantly respects her inability to change her situation. This is not to say that she is completely circumscribed by her limitations. On the contrary she learns to exceed former boundaries.” What is ironic about Sophie is that she is married, a mother and a prostitute. Gaidzanwa (1985) attests that, motherhood is respectable and held in high esteem as long as it goes with socially approved wifehood. For as long as she is married, the community and society respect Sophie. Her trips to the boarder are approved as she is working to support the family. Gaidzanwa (1985) further states that, a wife is judged by how she behaves towards her husband and how she looks after household and the children. Sophie makes sure that the family is provided for and when she can she fulfils her conjugal rights as once her obligations are fulfilled she is idealised and her morality is not questioned.

Characters in both texts seem to justify their choices reverently. However, morality should never be overridden, that is one should never violate a moral prohibition or requirement for non-moral considerations (Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 2010). Hammar (2008) argues that, prostitution evinces the decline of the economy and of social and ideological systems within which such matters can be regulated coherently. It neither indexes the moral decline of people nor is it rooted in natural promiscuity. Sophie is not a prostitute under normal circumstances she is a housewife. For Sophie however, no level of morality can justify her family going hungry and uneducated.

Boss (2008:373) avers that, premarital chastity is the best way to guarantee marital commitment and faithfulness. Chiedza strongly believes in fidelity and chastity before marriage. Chiedza’s undoing is her respectable home; she is not taught how to handle men, alcohol and sex. Michael who attempts a romantic date, which eventually leads to their premarital encounter, easily traps her. She agonizes over the adulterous act, which seemingly violates the principle of fidelity (Boss, 2008). Fungai is closer to the centre of the moral community and has shielded her (pre-eminent) daughters and watched over them like a mother hen (p13). While this might have been good for their welfare, it does not prepare Chiedza to face the darker side of love. She is too trusting and believes that Michael will do the right thing. She is so innocent that her friend flirts with her fiancé and she does not see it as a threat. Fungai in some ways lets her daughter down by not following through on her instincts. She is driven by the nature of a patriarchal society that demands that all ‘good’ daughters should be married. Hungwe (no date???) this article has no date attest that, women would garner respect through marriage and bearing children within wedlock and earning money for the patriarchal family. At the mention of an engagement, Fungai lets her guard down. She feels her work is done. While she has been perturbed by Michael’s character from the onset, the prospect of marrying her daughter off to a successful businessperson overrides her scepticism. She welcomes Michael into her home.

Michael is scarred and does not have any standard to determine what is moral or immoral. It does not bother him to sleep with other women while engaged to Chiedza. Life in the Shebeen taught him that women are sexual objects that are to be used for pleasure and the benefit of men. He adheres to the chauvinistic belief that women are there for the gratification of men (Muponde, 2007:13) Women, especially in cases where they would ordinarily be inaccessible to the psychopath are regarded as chattels of sexual gratification and objects of humiliation (Muponde, 2007:14). Beauvoir argues that throughout history women have been reduced into objects for men because men have imagined women as the other. Women, in patriarchal cultures are regarded as the other while men are the norm (Leitch, 2001:1404).

Mrs Kanda, like Sophie falls prey to Michael’s demands. Imperceptibly threatened with the loss of her job and a looming disciplinary hearing, she has no choice but to comply even “when she knew what the dinner date entailed” (p.11). Michael’s masochistic nature is unveiled in the fact that he is not even attracted to her but he sleeps with her to show his dominance and machismo. Similarly, Dhuri abuses Sophie when she tries to purchase goods for sale to feed her family. Muwati et al. (2003:126) attest that, “Through these heinous acts by unscrupulous masculiniti, the author depicts how in a crisis women become exposed to multiple risks and crises. Sophie finds it difficult to protect herself from such powerful men who have access to scarce resources and commodities. She becomes a victim of the excruciating decade long economic, political and social crisis in Zimbabwe”.

Women cannot protect themselves from masculine autonomy, as they do not have the means to preserve themselves from exploitation. Patriarchy is centred upon the conservation of patrimony, which implies that those who transmit and own the wealth control the existence of property and its circulation (Beauvoir in Leitch, 2001).

Michael is a sociopath who fails to empathize with an ailing parent. He is a coward who fears responsibility and does not want to associate with a diseased female. Instead, he neglects his mother and relocates to his friend’s house. Attree (2007:62) argues that, “The failure to associate compassion with those suffering from AIDS and the resulting distancing from the obstruction of those who are ill as enemies to be defeated leads to the misunderstanding and miscommunication of the dangers
and risk associated with HIV infection”. He does not learn anything from his mother’s illness because he chooses to shut it out of his life. When his girlfriend Lina is pregnant, he immediately threatens and chases her away. When Chiedza becomes HIV positive and pregnant, he is not penitent but instead, he dismisses her and takes away his ring. Broodryk (2002) believes that, caring for oneself and for others members of the community through human labour is a moral imperative in Ubuntu. Michael lacks the ability to share in someone else’s pain and has no sense of moral duty. His scapegoating strategy is indicative of anachronistic masculinity that pathologizes the female body as the one that carries diseases. His mother, unlike Sophie who hides her activities, does not attempt to hide her immorality hence he adopts the same strategy. Michael like Stephen is bludgeoned by crisis and embraces a typically nihilist attitude to his HIV status and the loss of his company. Both losses are metaphors of castration and emasculation as he has always regarded himself as a bull powerful enough not to be scathed by anything. Michael is in the same trap that resists the acknowledgement that ‘the strong healthy man’ is vulnerable to infection and disease (Attree, 2007). While Chiedza is devastated by her HIV status, she goes into a depression, cries and fails to eat. Michael is resolute and conjures up some bluster and bravado, as he believes, “he is still on top of the world. HIV and AIDS- whatever they called it would not touch him” (p. 101).

Chidavenzi and Phiri both seem to lament the lack of change in behaviour for most Zimbabweans. Sophie like Nora in Ibsen’s In a Doll House discovers her own power to act in certain sense, autonomously. She is aware of HIV and AIDS and makes a determined effort to use a condom but she realises that most of her clients prefer not to. A reading of Highway Queen illustrates how this conception of the ideal autonomy misrepresents the reality of individuals lived experiences and imposes a gendered identity, which subordinates women to a masculine narcissism. For most men, a whore cannot be raped—they want it, and if indeed, they were raped the injury would be smaller, bearable or insignificant (Svanstrom, 2005). Historically women have been reduced to sexual objects for men as virgins, prostitutes, wives or mothers (Showalter, 1996). Men claim right to women’s bodies and claim right of command over the use of women’s bodies because patriarchal norms concerning sexuality still dominate the judicial system and public opinion (Paterman, 1988:17 in Svanstrom, 2005). Most men like Michael think they are untouchable because they have money and therefore they are immune to the disease. Michael does not take into consideration that he has been indiscriminately sleeping with different women.

Michael is too ashamed to accept his status because he has violated all moral principles in his quest to enrich himself at the expense of fellow human beings. He has violated the principle of fairness to satisfy his ultra-ego. He foresees a bleak future, as he fears that once it is known that he is HIV positive the golden rule will apply. All those he has treated harshly before will also treat him the same. He has been treating people badly therefore, he cannot expect to be treated differently. He realises very late that the man who is afraid of nothing at all, but marches up to every danger becomes foolhardy (Olen et al., 2008). It is a truism that courage is not necessarily the absence of fear but the ability to do the right thing at the right time and in his wilful narcissism, he ignores this. He has habituated himself to have what he wants predisposing to seek gratification. Because of his indulgence in every pleasure without refraining from a single one, he becomes incontinent. One may then conclude that the biblical warning of life being a Newtonian experience aptly applies to Michael; that what goes around comes around.

Conclusion

The economic differences between the rich and the poor define the standards of measure that can be used to determine the morality of a person. While the bar can be set high for those in privileged positions, the same measure cannot be used for the poor who in most instances are forced to commit crimes to survive. Capitalism has not incorporated women into the labour force the same way it has accommodated men. Women are marginalised in terms of employment hence they look for alternative ways to earning a living. Capitalism has created a distinction between men and women with women being relegated to the home and family life where there is no source of income. Morality is an ideal that every human being should strive to uphold, as the society does not have a balanced fair scale of existence for everyone. While prostitution may, under normal circumstances, be regarded as reprehensible in some extraordinary instances it may be a morally upright form of employment. Morality cannot be regarded universally, in an umbrella term, to judge all humans, as some may not be privileged enough to stay away from crime and corruption. While in an ideal world an immoral person is judged as lacking personhood and therefore not qualified to be considered human the nature of modern day society calls upon humanity to consider the standards set as measurement for acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.

Conflict of Interests

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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