The Uncertainty of Hope (2006) by Valerie Tagwira is a novel that offers profound insights into the condition of Zimbabweans during a time of crisis. Muchemwa (2013:128) argues that “Tagwira’s novel is often read in one of two ways: either as an HIV/AIDS novel focusing on the infection risks faced by women in a patriarchal culture that encourages men to have unsafe sex with multiple partners or as a Murambatsvina novel that opens a unique fictional window onto the massive displacement of people by a black postcolonial government”.

The relatively few scholars that have opined on the novel have applied an HIV/AIDS reading. The second group of scholars have applied a Murambatsvina reading. Both these approaches do grapple with some concerns of the novel but there is a gap. The gap can be seen when one tries to extract the condition of the informal trader and his interaction with the concept of space. This paper will apply an ‘informal trader’ reading to the text in order to assess this group’s plight in the text.

Tagwira’s The Uncertainty of Hope (2006) is the story of Onai and her struggle to survive in the turbulent and fragile post 2000s decade. The story is set in the year 2005. This year saw the roll out of operation Murambatsvina. Onai is in the centre of the storm because she witnesses Murambatsvina first hand. This is because she lives in Mbare, an area of the city that bears the brunt of Murambatsvina because of the thriving informal sector and the backyard shacks that are found in the neighbourhood. In the midst of this upheaval, HIV and AIDS are constant themes throughout the story. Characters live with it and the danger of contracting the virus is ever present.

Onai is married to an abusive husband Gari. Gari is irresponsible and promiscuous as evidenced by his relationship with Gloria the local prostitute. He regularly beats Onai up even for the slightest perceived infraction. This physical violence sends Onai to the hospital and...
she is helped by her friend Katy and her husband John. Onai is constantly faced by hardship throughout the text. Her children consequently form the basis for her drive to survive and earn a living. The setting of the novel is in the economic meltdown years after 2000. Basic commodities are in short supply and Onai and her children Rita, Ruva and Fari constantly have to queue for the food stuffs.

Onai is an informal trader and so she survives by selling vegetables, fruits and other small items that are in demand. Several of Onai’s friends that feature prominently in the novel such as Katy and Maya are also vendors. Murambatsvina understandably affects Onai and her friends because their activities are disrupted. Onai has obtained a certificate in dress making but due to the economic environment, she cannot get a job. Vending is thus the only feasible option for her for the vast majority of the novel.

If the vendor can be charged with contesting for space, a few implications have to be addressed. Space is not an end in itself. Rather it is a means to an end for the informal trader. The space being contested has to be used for a particular purpose. Overwhelming evidence points to the fact that the vendor seeks to obtain space in its many manifestations in order to survive and carry out his trade. Once the space being sought is obtained, a process of transforming that space automatically begins. The space has to be transformed in order for it to be amenable to the vendor’s purpose.

The city in Africa has increasingly become a place which draws economic refugees from the less developed rural areas of a country. Feremenga (2005:340) states “People leave their land -and go to the cities because the agricultural sector collapses and does not allow for survival. In southern Africa, the agricultural sector is characterized by extreme dualism: the white-dominated commercial sector, consisting of large, capital-intensive farms, co-exists with an impoverished black-dominated smallholder sector, which produces mainly for subsistence”. The city thus becomes an elixir for the vast majority of rural Africans who cannot make a living through farming. This results in explosive increase in migration and the urban population.

The contestation for mental space is particularly obvious after operation Murambatsvina. This is because the vendors begin to challenge the ideological assumptions of officialdom. After the operation Onai actively seeks to demarcate mental space. Valerie Tagwira through her role of the omnipresent third person narrator takes us into Onai’s psyche. “Onai was feeling surprisingly optimistic and this itself made her more buoyant. It would be another day of undercover vending in the city centre and she was looking forward to good sales. The fuel queues were longer these days and that meant more potential customers. She was beginning to get used to city vending; even to enjoy it a little”(p195).

There are many types of space some of which include social, mental, physical and public
space. Lefebvre (1973:8) states “Even illness and madness are supposed by some specialists to have their own peculiar space. We are thus confronted by an indefinite multitude of spaces, each one piled upon, or perhaps contained within, the next geographical, economic, demographic, sociological, ecological, political, commercial, national, continental, global”. The implication here is that the idea of space cannot be constrained and it can take on many different forms. The contestation of space thus becomes a battle which can be fought on any one of a plethora of battlefields. It is thus important to reveal the nature of the space that is being contested.

After the devastating destruction of operation Murambatsvina one would expect the informal trader to be dismayed beyond hope. This however is not the case for Onai and her compatriots. Onai is even beginning to enjoy vending in the city. A sense of optimism is pervasive for informal traders like Onai. This is in direct rebuttal of the government’s discourse of the informal sector as grotesque and repulsive. The informal trader as depicted in The Uncertainty of Hope has fought officialdom over mental space and has emerged victorious.

Jones (1994:1) notes that “space reflects social domination, through the domination of space, even though its appropriation is not determined by the existing economic or political system”. The informal trader through the pursuit of space in its many variations is attempting to obtain social domination. Social domination for the vendor comes in the form of acceptance of the informal trade as a legitimate profession. At this juncture it is important to remember that space in itself is intrinsically useless. It has no inherent value. All the value that space can be said to have is man-made. That space is useless until the informal trader or officialdom states that it is valuable.

Illegal foreign currency deals are the most profitable way for Katy to survive. The government has explicitly prohibited illicit transactions that are performed outside the formal banking sector. Katy nonetheless finds justification and rationalization in her own thoughts regarding the deals she partakes in with police commissioner Nzou. “The deal was sealed at a rate of twenty five thousand Zim dollars to the US. Katy smiled. It would be one of her easiest transactions. Despite her contentment, vague doubts remained. How had John managed to amass so much money so quickly? He’s a man, she comforted herself, he knows how to make a good deal” (p103).

Katy down plays any fears she might have regarding her illegal foreign currency deals. This is in the face of the ever present threat of arrest for foreign currency dealing. She has in essence vanquished the psychological assault that the government has waged on illegal foreign currency traders. Katy has won mental space because she has accepted the foreign currency dealings as acceptable. She also does not question the absurd amount of foreign currency her husband is able to get. She formulates the far-fetched explanation of John’s ability to “make
a good deal” in order to pacify her misgivings. It is later revealed that John is involved in human trafficking. This is the source of the bulk of his foreign currency earnings.

Their entire community of informal traders in Mbare is also collectively claiming mental space in direct opposition of government doctrine. This is highlighted during the loudspeaker announcements of the impending clean-up operation.

Most residents only caught snatches of the announcement, as they went about their daily business. What they heard, they received with concern, which rapidly switched to skepticism and amusement when they discussed the matter with friends and family. There was no way any such thing would be allowed to happen, especially in Mbare; after all, the township was the bedrock of the informal employment sector, the largest in the whole country.

Denial is a weapon used by these informal traders in order to claim mental space. Once the informal traders are encapsulated in the comfort of denial, the government’s message loses its force. Once denial is employed the informal traders can look forward to a future of brisk trading without disruptions. In the minds of the traders the future looks brighter than ever. This is one of the ways in which the vendors as a collective claim mental space.

Maya is evidently the ring leader of her cabal and thus she helps to frame the thinking of the female vendors. She in essence shepherds them towards a mental place to occupy. She does this by highlighting the mental space she has claimed and directing others towards it. “Maya swept condescending eyes over the group of nervous women and declared ‘I don’t think they’ll close this market. We’ve been here for years and years. The council is aware of our business.’” (p129). Maya becomes instrumental in helping her colleagues claim mental space. After this short speech the vendors become relaxed and the laugh at a jibe made towards Katy by Maya.

It can clearly be noted here that the informal trader contests for space in two main ways. The first form of space is physical and the second is mental. According to Muchemwa (2013:128) The Uncertainty of Hope can be read “as a Murambatsvina novel that opens a unique fictional window onto the massive displacement of people by a black postcolonial government”. It is in response to economic hardship and the assault from government that space is contested for.

References

