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OTHERNESS AND STIGMA: THE CASE OF ALBINISM IN MEG VANDERMERWE'S *ZEBRA CROSSING* (2013)

María del Carmen Alcalá Arjona
University of Córdoba

l82aralm@uco.es

<https://orcid.org/0009-0003-7315-9784>

This research note explores the representation of the albino main character in the novel *Zebra Crossing* (2013) written by Meg Vandermerwe. The article analyzes the characterization of the albino figure within her community, focusing on how she is perceived and treated due to her visibly different physical appearance. Through this exploration, the study examines sociological aspects surrounding people with albinism, as well as the concept of otherness, highlighting how the protagonist is othered on multiple levels throughout the narrative.

Keywords: Meg Vandermerwe; *Zebra Crossing*; albinism; otherness; discrimination.

1. Introduction

This investigation explores the representation of the albino figure in the novel *Zebra Crossing* (2013), written by South African author Meg Vandermerwe. The novel follows Chipó, a seventeen-year-old

girl with albinism who migrates from Zimbabwe to South Africa in search of better employment opportunities and improved living conditions. Through an analysis of Chipo's characterization in relation to the people around her, this study investigates how she is perceived and treated within her social environment. In doing so, it aims to understand the broader phenomenon of how individuals with albinism are othered, stigmatized, and dehumanized due to their genetic condition and visibly different appearance.

In the African context, albinism is not only a medical condition but also a deeply social and cultural issue. People with albinism are often subjected to harmful myths, marginalization, and violence, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where superstitions and misinformation contribute to their exclusion from mainstream society. Chipo's experiences in *Zebra Crossing* offer a compelling lens through which to examine these dynamics, as the novel illustrates how individuals with albinism can be animalised and treated as less than human, reinforcing their social inferiority.

This study will therefore examine the ways in which Chipo is constructed as "other" in the narrative, focusing on her treatment by others and her struggle for dignity within a society that views her as fundamentally different. The novel provides a powerful commentary on the intersection of disability, race, migration, and social exclusion in contemporary Southern Africa.

2. Literature Review

People with albinism (PWA) in African contexts experience multidimensional vulnerability rooted in physical appearance, health challenges, and socio-cultural stigmatization. As Mubangizi and Kajiru establish, PWA constitute an exceptionally vulnerable population due to "limited resources, increased relative risk of morbidity, and chronic illnesses" (2020, 141). This vulnerability manifests through pejorative labeling (e.g., "white goats" or "ghosts"), systemic exclusion from education and healthcare, and violent targeting driven by superstitions about albino body parts bringing "good fortune" (Reimer-Kirkham et al. 2022, 721; Mubangizi and Kajiru 2020, 138). These conditions reflect Erving

Goffman's concept of "spoiled identity", where visible differences trigger social devaluation and exclusion (Goffman 1963, 3). Goffman's framework illuminates how stigma transforms albinism into a marker of inferiority, restricting access to dermatological care and economic opportunities while fostering internalized shame.

The dehumanization of PWA extends beyond individual prejudice to structural violence. Frantz Fanon's analysis of colonial hierarchies in *The Wretched of the Earth* provides critical context, revealing how colonial constructs of the "wretched" (Fanon 1963, 42) parallel contemporary animalization of PWA. This is evidenced by ritual attacks where body parts are commodified as charms, and familial abandonment of infants with albinism (Baker et al. 2010, 173). Such practices exemplify what Fanon termed the "Manichaean division" of colonial societies, where racialized hierarchies enable extreme dehumanization.

Gayatri Spivak's interrogation of epistemic erasure in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) further clarifies PWA's marginalization. Despite Tanzania's 2006 inclusion of PWA in disability conventions (Mubangizi and Kajiru 2020, 143), their lived experiences remain externally narrated through stereotypes rather than self-representation. Spivak's theory explains this silencing: PWA exist as subalterns whose narratives are appropriated by dominant discourses, whether through humanitarian frameworks or sensationalized media accounts of violence.

James Coleman's theory of social action (1986) reveals how macro-structures constrain individual agency. Poverty restricts healthcare access despite severe sun-sensitivity; educational exclusion limits employment mobility; and myth-perpetuating institutions reinforce dehumanizing stereotypes. Coleman's structure-agency dialectic demonstrates that PWA's vulnerability is not inherent but produced through intersecting social constraints.

The novel *Zebra Crossing* (2013) exemplifies these dynamics through its main character Chipu, whose migration from Zimbabwe to South Africa reflects Wilkinson's concept of othering as "a discursive practice of inferior definition" (2016, 34). Chipu embodies spatial marginalization, intersectional oppression (gender-albinism), and a dehumanization continuum from verbal

abuse (“ghost”) to physical violence. Her experiences illustrate Goffman’s stigma management, Fanon’s dehumanization, Spivak’s subalternity, and Coleman’s structural constraints, which are theoretical lenses essential for analyzing literary representations of albinism.

2. Analysis and Discussion

From a young age, Chipo experiences relentless discrimination rooted in widespread superstitions and misconceptions about albinism. These misconceptions manifest through verbal abuse, exclusion, and abandonment. Her father’s immediate rejection after her birth, “he took one look at my foreign pink form and condemned Mama for cheating on him with a white man” (Vandermerwe 2013, 28)—exemplifies the ingrained prejudice. This moment, which marks the beginning of Chipo’s trauma, is both personal and emblematic of broader societal biases. The fact that Chipo’s father accuses her mother of infidelity due to the child’s pale skin reflects a deep-seated ignorance that is common in communities where scientific understanding of albinism is lacking. Kadenge et al. note that among the Shona people, albinism is frequently linked to infidelity, curses, or spiritual contamination, reinforcing stigmas and justifying social ostracism (2014, 1231). Such social alienation continues within the family structure. George, Chipo’s brother, becomes a key figure in reinforcing societal discrimination within the domestic sphere. His verbal assaults—“you know how they feel about peeled potatoes like yourself” (Vandermerwe 2013, 14)—mirror the broader community’s sentiments and illustrate how internalized societal beliefs infiltrate familial relationships. Religious institutions, which often serve as spaces of comfort and inclusion, are portrayed in the novel as reinforcing exclusion and prejudice. When Chipo and her mother attend a church service, the pastor proclaims that Chipo “bears the mark of the sope. It is a curse” (Vandermerwe 2013, 86), “sope” being a derogatory term used to insult someone’s intelligence or behaviour. This moment is pivotal, not only for its emotional brutality but also for its ideological implications. The pastor’s words link Chipo’s physical appearance to sin, moral failing, and divine punishment, echoing

traditional Shona beliefs that consider albinism a curse or a result of witchcraft. Furthermore, the clergyman blamed Grace for Chipo's albinism by stating the following: "A curse that signifies the sins of her parents. The curse of the mother shall be visited upon the offspring. As much as Cain's mark branded him as one cursed by God" (Vandermerwe 2013, 86). This episode that the narrator recalls gestures toward the idea that Chipo's Shona community has strong misconceptions and harsh beliefs and prejudices about albinos. In this line, according to Kadenge et al.:

the traditional Shona society considers albinism a curse from God, his will/choice, a result of witchcraft, a sign that the ancestors are unhappy, evidence of the mother's infidelity, a result of the mother scolding or laughing at someone living with albinism while pregnant, having sex with a 'tokolosh' (a devil's imp) or that their mother ate or drank some unorthodox medicine during pregnancy (2014, 1231).

In this scene, religion does not function as a site of solace but rather as a mechanism of social control and marginalization. The community's ready acceptance of the pastor's judgment demonstrates how religious narratives can legitimize and perpetuate prejudice under the guise of spiritual doctrine. This societal judgment is compounded by the role of language in enforcing exclusion.

When discussing the concept of othering, it refers to the social and psychological processes by which certain groups of individuals are categorized, labelled, and ultimately marginalized as being fundamentally different or inferior to the dominant social group. This act of defining others as "not belonging" or as "outsiders" serves to reinforce the identity, power, and social boundaries of the dominant group, often at the expense of those being excluded. In the context of albinism, othering becomes particularly evident in the way individuals with this genetic condition are treated within their own communities. Albinism, which results in a lack of melanin and causes visibly lighter skin, hair, and eye colour, often draws negative attention due to its perceived strangeness or deviation from normative appearance. This distinct physical difference becomes a focal point for prejudice and superstition, leading to acts of

exclusion, mockery, and in severe cases, violence. Jensen's definition of othering is key to understand this close relationship:

the theory of identity formation inherent in the concept of othering assumes that subordinate people are offered, and at the same time relegated to, subject positions as others in discourse. In these processes, it is the centre that has the power to describe, and the other is constructed as inferior (2011, 65).

Although Chipo is the narrator of the story, she provides a first-hand experience of having been othered throughout her entire life by her close relatives, family members and acquaintances. Consequently, the reader regards Chipo as being othered by her people both in her birthplace, Beitbridge, Zimbabwe, and in South Africa, where she migrates. Besides, an example of this othering and discriminatory act is when Chipo is referred to as “monkey and sope” (Vandermerwe 2013, 15). Naming and name-calling are particularly powerful tools of othering in *Zebra Crossing*. Chipo's name, which means “gift” in Shona, is a poignant reminder of her mother's attempt to affirm her daughter's worth. However, this affirmation is systematically undermined by society's derogatory labels. Chipo recounts the insults she receives, “peeled potato,” “monkey,” [...]“tortoise”—which follow her from Zimbabwe to South Africa. These names are not just casual slurs; they carry cultural weight, reducing her to an object of ridicule and stripping her of individual identity. The prevalence of these names across multiple African countries, as Chipo notes “In Malawi, they call us ‘biri’... In Tanzania, we are ‘animal’ or ‘ghost’...” (Vandermerwe 2013, 15)—highlights the pan-African scope of the prejudice against people with albinism. It demonstrates that the problem is not localized but systemic, woven into the fabric of multiple societies. Wilkinson (2016) points out that for Chipo, every moment is lived as an outsider, and her identity is constantly reduced to her condition. This relentless reduction leads to an erosion of her sense of self. The taunts at school, especially the mocking of her physical slowness, “Chipo works like a tor-toise!” (Vandermerwe 2013, 52)—serve not only to belittle her but to reinforce her social isolation. When her classmates declare that “no one will ever want to marry you” (Vandermerwe 2013, 55), they affirm a narrative of unworthiness and undesirability that becomes internalized. Additionally,

Mubangizi and Kajiru defend that “societies in various locations around the world have developed their own diverse ways of believing who and what albinos are without regard for the cause of albinism” (2020, 138). Therefore, sociological research has analyzed the complex phenomena by which albinos are treated as inferior to the rest of the people. Another example of this unfair behaviour that people have towards Chipo is represented in the novel when the girl mentions the possibility to get an autograph by David Beckham and her brother George answers to her the following: “But not you, Tortoise. If he sees you, he would get such a fright he might run away” (Vandermerwe 2013, 20). It is precisely her brother George who frightens Chipo when he tells her that snakes like to eat albinos (Vandermerwe 2013, 80). George’s frightening commentaries to Chipo underline Chipo’s vulnerability to discrimination and stigma on a social level, but also on a more basic sphere. Chipo is constantly othered by her brother throughout the narrative, and he even regards her as a burden—“come on, burden” (Vandermerwe 2013, 81), he says—and not as another human being that happens to be his little sister.

In addition to being othered in her community and even in her family, Chipo is characterized as an animal, that is, she undergoes a process of animalization. Buxbaum affirms that “certain humans are reduced to, or made akin to, animals in order to dehumanize and more easily objectify them” (2017, 79). Chipo is animalized in the novel, compared to animals who are physically weak or slow. As Buxbaum points out, “Chipo herself is most often associated with, or considered akin to, slow and docile animals – a tortoise rather than a zebra – by her brother” (2017, 83). She was referred to as a tortoise by her school mates due to her slowness when she is writing down the lesson written on the board. Her classmates connect her slowness with that of a tortoise. Therefore, her humanity is transformed into the existence of an animal and thus she is characterized as docile, a property which belongs to tamed animals and not wild. Such animalization process thus steadily dehumanizes Chipo’s ontology and reduces her existence to that of a tortoise mostly. The main character is also animalized when she consults Doctor Ongani, the witch doctor who promises to help women to “Get right partner. Win loved one (7 days) guaranteed”

(Vandermerwe 2013, 134). She is isolated and locked in a room by Doctor Ongani, who exploits her albino condition for witchery purposes even at her own life's risk. She is literally regarded as a caged bird. She is unable to cook for herself, so it is Doctor Ongani who brings Chipó the meals. She is therefore animalized again, and the girl feels her life "seems frozen, like those animals in their glass cages in the science museum" (Vandermerwe 2013, 195). Chipó feels treated as a caged animal, devoid of life and freedom to move, and observed as if she were exposed like a cultural artifact in a science museum. Interestingly, readers are the ones who are witness to her "frozenness", for the characters in the novel barely care for her. Her free will has disappeared to the point that her lack of rights as a migrant, her lack of love or attention from her friends and family, and her lack of opportunities is steadily reduced to the point that they reach the small proportions of a locked room everybody seems to have forgotten to open until the tragic end of the novel, where Chipó dies and her story concludes in a tragic and poignant way, with the novel closing on the idea that her spirit remains as a witness to everything that happened.

3. Conclusions

After the study of the novel *Zebra Crossing* (2013) written by Meg Vandermerwe, and the analysis carried out to fulfil the main objective, which was investigating the representation of the albino figure in the novel, and the subsequent secondary objectives, various conclusions can be reached.

Firstly, related to the sociological research conducted about albino people within their communities in the African context, we can conclude that severe discrimination of this vulnerable group of people is quite common within their own society or community in the African context.

Secondly, processes of othering are usually described for people who suffer from the genetic mutation of albinism in those areas of Africa. Such complex phenomena have also been found and analyzed in the novel object of study in this research investigation. The issue of othering of people with albinism is a direct

consequence of the physical appearance and disabilities in albinos, and an example is the pejorative Chipo receives from George according to her physical appearance, “peeled potato” (Vandermerwe 2013, 14).

Other relevant conclusions that emerge from this study are mostly related to the animalization and dehumanization processes that Chipo is subjected to as part and parcel of her complex, multifarious identity as an albino, a young woman and a migrant. Thus, people with albinism also experience violence that reduces their existence to that of animals and are thus animalised. One of the most remarkable examples in the novel is the labelling of Chipo as “tortoise” (15). In turn, the fact that she is locked down by Doctor Ongani and she feels as a caged animal whose life “seems frozen” (Vandermerwe 2013, 195) reinforces this idea.

We can also conclude that the novel is successful in representing the African traditional cultural lore by which people with albinism are regarded by the rest of African people as superstitious magical entities who can bring good luck, as the sign in Doctor Ongani’s room claims: “Doctor Ongani and Real Live Albino – Special Extra Powerful *Muti* to Improve Your Luck” (158). Moreover, in the novel superstition is very much connected with Chipo’s disappearance. There is a superstitious belief in some African communities which claims that people with albinism do not die but disappear: “‘But tell me, *sisi*. Is it true that you people do not die, only disappear?’ That is what many believe about albinos” (26).

After the analysis and commentary on Vandermerwe’s *Zebra Crossing*, in line with the main objective of this research investigation, I can affirm that the representation of Chipo in the novel *Zebra Crossing* as an albino girl who is remarkably discriminated and othered for her different condition to the rest of her Shona community is strongly based on the medical and sociological scientific literature consulted. Not only is Chipo socially stigmatized and neglected, but also denied the most basic health services

After having prepared this article and having developed a personal awareness for the situation of albino individuals, I believe it is essential to raise awareness on the issue of albinism. Their

health and social problems should be highlighted so that they have access to a better quality of life. Therefore, I intend to encourage readers to conduct investigations about albinism and to emphasize the importance of literary figures such as Chipo in *Zebra Crossing*, in their portrayal of the difficulties that albino individuals go through in some African countries. It is necessary to keep reflecting on the literary gestures towards creative solutions and new perspectives on this convoluted phenomenon.

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