

# Contesting Homosexuality: Unreliable Narration in Tendai Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare*

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## Abstract

*Tendai Huchu's The Hairdresser of Harare is arguably a queer text. It presents the homosexual orientation of one of its male characters, Dumisani. By positioning this character in-between, the normal and abnormal spaces, this essay attends to the politics that coalesce around homosexuality and demonstrates how Huchu's novel gestures towards queerness, but narrative techniques undermine these overtures. Adopting deconstruction as a theoretical framework, the essay gets down to the nitty-gritty of what constitutes queer sexuality and measures this with the liminal presentation of Dumi as a queer character to show how he falls short of the queerness that he is deemed to harbour. The paper challenges prevailing interpretations of queerness in the novel by examining the politics of representation through the lens of unreliability and logo-centrism. By interrogating the reliability of the narrator and the centrality of language in shaping perceptions, the essay reveals the complexities of interpreting identity and sexuality in literature.*

**Key Words:** Logocentrism, Homosexuality, Unreliability

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## INTRODUCTION: NARRATING QUEERNESS IN ZIMBABWEAN SOCIETY

The attacks on the same sex relationships by the late president Robert Mugabe in 1995 brought into the surface the existing tensions and attitudes towards homosexuals in Zimbabwean society. It also opened a wave of suppression against those who were perceived to be members of LGBTQ+ community. Laws that criminalized queer relationships were enacted which among other things set in motion instances of violence and homophobic attacks against homosexuals. According to Chabata (2024) "... a wave of homophobic atmosphere has persistently hung over Zimbabwe since the regime of President Mugabe" announced its opposition against queerness. Mtsabo (2018) as quoted by Chabata (4) has reported that "50% of gay men were assaulted and 64% disowned by their family members due to stigma associated with homosexuality". In spite of the reported cases of violence and

rejection from family members, Chabata (4) opines that same sex relationships have continued behind closed doors. It can be argued that criminalizing of homoerotic relationships in Zimbabwe and the instance of violence meted out on gay men only made them silent and covert in their actions due to fear and ostracization.

Writing about discourses of homosexuality in Zimbabwe Henri-count Evans and Tinashe Mawere (2021:4), explain that homosexuality had been in existence long before Mugabe's tirade in 1995 with "formation of gay clubs in 1980's in Harare, formation of GALZ in 1990s". It was the Gays and Lesbians Association of Zimbabwe (GALZ) "exhibition stand at the 1995 Zimbabwe International Book Festival (ZIBF)" that fomented the president's anger leading to his government's clampdown on homosexual activities in the country. The government's action has tended to weaponize the masses against homosexuality and this has made it difficult for the people who profess alternative sexuality. Queer narratives continue to circulate, with many terming them as intrusion of western sexual mannerisms in Africa which is largely seen as traditionally heteronormative.

It is against the above background that Tendai Huchu pens his celebrated novel *The Hairdresser of Harare* (2010). The story is focalized through Vimbai, who the article refers to as an unreliable narrator, a young woman working as a professional hairdresser in Harare. Vimbai tells the story of Dumisani, a celebrated male hairdresser and a closet homosexual, whose guarded lifestyle she helps bring into the open. The novel opens with the narrator's proclamation that "there was something not quite right about Dumi" (Huchu, 2010, p. 1), but she could not exactly tell what it was. With this, Sisi Vimbai invites the readers to capitalize on the doubts she casts throughout the narrative about Dumi and the circumstances that surround their relationship. While the novel is arguably a queer text in its presentation of Dumisani, the substantial hairdresser of Harare, the revelations are brought out as rumours and innuendos making the reader doubt their authenticity. Through the construction of Vimbai as a rumour-monger and Dumi as an effeminate male character, this essay contests the arguments that the novel is mainly queer. The reading of the novel focuses on Vimbai's 'I' narrative voice particularly her flawed construction of Dumi's queer sexuality even when she couldn't tell what exactly was not right about him. Following the words of Piere Leroux (2019) that the novel stages "conflicting narratives and voices" (6), this essay considers the context of narration (salon as a place of gossip) and subjects the narrator to tests of reliability in its argument that the narrator's account comes through suspicions which alert us to question the queerness attributed to Dumisani. Using Wayne C. Booth's (1961) ideas revolving around unreliability and Jacques Derrida's principle of logo-centrism, which

is founded on stability and authority (Ellis 1989), the essay attends to the politics of queerness presented in the novel and attempts to deconstruct what it calls queer overtures by looking at the ways that the novel undermines what most of Huchu's readers have systemized as queer.

Studies on *The Hairdresser of Harare* have geared the novel towards homosexual paths. Leroux (2019) delves into the themes of gender and sexuality in the text. He attempts to contextualize the book in literary and social terms. He argues that using a gay protagonist to spread a message of tolerance involves a more nuanced investigation of gender and genre. The article examines the portrayal of gender and sexuality in the novel, probing how the author challenges traditional Zimbabwean cultural norms and societal expectations. It begins with a summary of the novel's plot and characters, concentrating on Vimbai, a hairdresser in Harare who serves as the novel's protagonist. Leroux then discusses the novel's investigation of sexuality, focusing on the taboo nature of homosexuality in Zimbabwean culture. The article further examines how the novel depicts the challenges and discrimination confronted by LGBTQ+ individuals in Zimbabwe and the internal struggles and conflicts encountered by characters grappling with their sexual identities. In the novel, Leroux also analyses the influence of religion and cultural beliefs on attitudes toward gender and sexuality. The article concludes by considering the novel's contribution to the Zimbabwean literary discourse on gender and sexuality.

Similarly, Ncube (2016) examines how varied perspectives on homosexuality affect the culture. *The Hairdresser of Harare's* depiction of the closet enables a thorough investigation of various underlying phenomena, including the results of power (political, economic, and social), religion and culture. Ncube argues that the protagonist finds it difficult to come out of the closet due to his fear of stigmatization. In addition, particular emphasis has been put on homosexuality, which has been seen as both a Western imposition and something that should be avoided. People have been entirely hiding their differences due to this view of homosexuality (and other minority sexualities). A complicated, historically entrenched endeavour to socially establish a (homo) sexual and gender identity has led to this concealment or closeting. Dumisani can avoid the disapproval of his family and community by hiding his sexual orientation and gender identity in the closet. Huchu calls the reader's attention to the variety and complexity of sexual identities created and preserved in the seclusion of the closet. In conclusion, the novel's ability to skillfully combine a variety of voices – some in favour of and others opposing non-normative sexualities – testifies to the need to take different views in understanding and appreciating a complicated issue.

Chitando & Manyoganise (2016) analyze perceptions about homosexuality in Zimbabwe using *The Hairdresser of Harare* and the ideology of hegemonic masculinity. The article looks at how homophobia and the ongoing threat of violence towards homosexuals are depicted in the book. According to the article, Huchu showed bravery by bringing up this subject but some claim that because of his focus on postcolonial politics and violence, he cannot give the problem of homosexuality the respect it deserves. Additionally, the novel may be commended for the optimism it inspires regarding the evolution of attitudes toward homosexuality. One could contend that the narrator's name, Vimbai, is not coincidental. This name's meaning is "Hope." Huchu might dream of a time when homosexuals in Zimbabwe won't face discrimination for who they are (569). However, associating homosexuality with violence risks implying that there are no caring and secure homosexual relationships in Zimbabwe. Huchu's work frequently features violence, which may reflect the ongoing opposition to efforts to end violence.

According to the above studies, *The Hairdresser of Harare* is both a sociological document and an instrument for influencing public opinion. In addition, most critics have interpreted the text through the lens of homosexuality. This paper provides an oppositional reading of the text by challenging the dominant theme of homosexuality and interrogating how the novel undermines what appears to have constructed queerness.

### **UNRELIABLE NARRATION AND LOGO-CENTRISM: A THEORETICAL APPROACH**

Logo-centrism, as articulated by Derrida (1976), denotes the prioritization of language, whether oral or written, as the definitive source of meaning, presupposing a direct correlation between language and truth or reality. This approach elevates specific viewpoints or ideologies as absolute, immutable, and without reproach. Conversely, unreliable narration features a narrative voice whose credibility is compromised, prompting readers to doubt the veracity or precision of their story (Booth, 1961). The examination of these two elements together demonstrate how the novel undermines established interpretations of meaning by depicting events through a narrator with biased or erroneous perceptions. Huchu, through Vimbai's defective perspective, demonstrates the fragility of language and contests the notion of a singular, objective truth. This critique creates opportunities for marginalized voices and alternative narratives that may otherwise be stifled by prevailing logocentric discourses. We contend that *The Hairdresser of Harare* employs unreliable narration to reveal the faults of logocentric thought, thus creating a more intricate and nuanced tale that encourages readers to interrogate prevailing meanings and interpretations.

The protagonist Vimbai serves as an unreliable narrator, with her constrained comprehension and subjective prejudices influencing her account. Her inconsistency undermines the logo-centric premise that language, as spoken by the narrator, serves as a direct medium for expressing truth. Huchu thus, undermines the notion that narrative and language can be entirely relied upon to convey objective meaning by depicting events via Vimbai's defective perspective. Vimbai's assessments of other characters, especially Dumisani, are influenced by her fears and biases, resulting in a disparity between her perspective of events and actual fact. This gap prompts readers to interrogate both the veracity of her narrative and the constancy of meaning, so contesting logo-centric beliefs that words possess immutable or authoritative significance (Derrida, 1976).

Unreliable narration in the novel also exposes the power dynamics embedded in language. Logo-centrism often reflects and reinforces societal power structures, such as patriarchy, colonialism, or heteronormativity, by privileging certain voices and interpretations over others (Derrida, 1976). However, unreliable narration works to destabilize these dominant discourses by highlighting their limitations. In Vimbai's case, her narration initially conforms to societal expectations regarding gender, class, and sexuality. Yet, as the story progresses, her unreliability reveals the ways in which these societal norms are both constructed and flawed. Through her narrative, Huchu critiques the dominant ideologies that shape Vimbai's worldview, suggesting that language and the narratives it produces are not as transparent or trustworthy as logo-centrism would suggest (Booth 1961; Fludernik 1996).

The unreliable narrative in the novel reveals the power dynamics inherent in language. Vimbai's account initially aligns with cultural norms pertaining to gender, class, and sexuality. As the narrative unfolds, her unreliability exposes the artificial and broken nature of these societal norms. Huchu's story attacks the prevailing beliefs influencing Vimbai's perspective, implying that language and its narratives are not as clear or reliable as logo-centrism posits (Booth 1961; Fludernik 1996). Moreover, the novel contests logocentric readings by highlighting the volatility of language and narrative. By employing an unreliable narrator, Huchu undermines the reader's capacity to depend on language for unequivocal interpretations. The reader must confront the likelihood that there is no unique, objective truth and that meaning is dependent on perspective (Tyson, 2006). For example, as Vimbai's early ideas of Dumisani are dismantled and shown to be erroneous, the reader recognizes her blind spots and biases. This not only diminishes her authority as a narrator but also necessitates the reader to critically evaluate the societal norms and values that shape her judgments. The novel reveals

the inadequacy of language and narrative as reliable transmitters of reality, encouraging a more critical examination of meaning.

### CONTEXTUALIZING *THE HAIRDRESSER OF HARARE*: GENDER, SEXUALITY AND THE NORM

Critiquing the sociological perspective that most of Huchu's readers have taken, Leroux (2019) offers a different and essential perspective of questioning gender and genre in connection to one another in *The Hairdresser of Harare*, claiming that Vimbai makes use of the structures of popular genres such as the romance or fairy tale to bring out the subversive character of Dumi. For instance, while submitting the novel to the genre of 'chick lit', Leroux observes that "an essential feature of the genre won't be possible" (5) because the heteronormative marriage that underlies the genre cannot materialize. What we see to be necessary to pursue further is Leroux's criticism of readers' *swift admission* that Dumi is gay, terming Vimbai's narrative as a "*false mystery . . . essential to understand(ing) Huchu's treatment of homosexuality in the novel*" (6). To echo this, we argue that, contrary to public consensus, *The Hairdresser of Harare* is emphatically not a queer text. What the readers have found to be queer results from readers' inability to scrutinize conflicting narratives and voices staged within the novel.

Studies on hairdressing parlours have painted these as sites where women converge to share "life stories – hardship, trials, gossip" (Hooks, 1989). Before we narrow our analysis down to the gossip-mongering of beauty parlours, we take an overview of how hair politics have been woven into African literature studies. Cristina Cruz-Gutiérrez (2019) examines hair politics and the politics of self-representation in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) and claims that hair has a political function in counter-discursive groups that seek "to denounce and debunk social constructs diminishing the beauty and cultural significance of natural hair" (67). In Cruz-Gutiérrez's argument, hair politics contests some assumptions and looks back to the earlier studies; it is even clearer that beauty salons are constructed as places of counter-discursive narratives. Equally, in *The Hairdresser of Harare*, Vimbai develops doubts about Dumi's sexual orientation, and before confirming anything queer about him, starts describing him as a homosexual. While it is arguably true that Dumi is a homosexual character, this essay contests this argument by constructing Vimbai as a rumour-monger. When discussing Dumi's actions, appearance, and interactions with other salon employees, Vimbai speculates about Dumi's sexual orientation. We portend that social norms and expectations around gender and sexual identity frame Vimbai's rumours about Dumi's sexual orientation. In the context within which the homosexual narrative is

framed, the criminalization of non-normative sexualities goes beyond just considering them unnatural and to plunge Dumi into this criminalized space, Vimbai has the option of painting him as gay. Additionally, Vimbai's ideology is affected by cultural expectations of heterosexuality and masculinity, which impacts how she views and talks about Dumi's sexual orientation. Cultural or societal expectations that men should adhere to traditional masculinity and heteronormativity, and any divergence from these norms is considered deserving of gossip or conjecture, heavily affects the claim that there is something wrong with Dumi.

### **Sisi Vimbai and The Unreliable Narration**

There are three narrative clues that submit Dumi into the homosexual realm. For one reason, Dumi works as a hairdresser, much to Vimbai's chagrin (5). Second, Vimbai is perplexed that Dumi has never made sexual advances toward any women at work or elsewhere (83). Third, despite having the chance to have sex with Vimbai on a silver platter, Dumi stubbornly refuses to do so (159). Understandably, Dumi's tepid reaction to Vimbai's sex-oriented attention makes her feel rejected. Dumi responds by saying "stop" when she tries to take down his pants (160). Then, in a last-ditch effort to understand Dumi's mindset, Vimbai makes the following assumption: "Perhaps he didn't think me appealing. I hadn't gotten the idea that he did. Had I gone too fast? What if he believed I was a whore? I had to know the reason for his disapproval of me" (161). We contend that Vimbai portrays Dumi as gay by using the aforementioned faulty indicators.

Additionally, after much introspection regarding Dumi's recent shift in behaviour, Vimbai plays the bothersome neighbour and enters his room while he is away. Even though she was on the verge of giving up after a protracted, futile search at one point, her desperate effort ultimately paid off (160). She did discover "a small black journal with 'Dumisani Ncube' written in silver lettering on the sleeve". At that very moment, relief filled Vimbai as she said, "I knew I had found what I was looking for" (162). As soon as she opened the diary, she was horrified to see that "the contents were worse than anything [she] could ever have imagined" (163). Dumi's homosexuality had just become real to her. She turns her eyes away from the diary, its pages making her want to throw up. She launches a vicious assault on the immorality and unnaturalness of homosexuality to express her lost optimism.

The line of reasoning here is that Vimbai fabricates the diary to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that Dumi is gay. By narrating in the first person, Vimbai can accuse Dumi of being gay at all costs. She introduces the concept of connecting Dumi to queerness at the beginning of the essay. Vimbai makes a glaring statement that:

There was a time when I was reputed to be the best hairdresser in Harare, which meant the best in the whole country. Amai Ndoro was the fussiest customer to ever grace a salon, and she would not let any ordinary kiya-kiya touch her hair. Having sampled all the salons in Harare – and rejected them all – she settled on ours (1).

With this, we hazard the view that Vimbai is aggrieved by the entry of Dumi as the best hairdresser. This, therefore, suggests that there is a push and pull between who calls the shots in the game of hairdressing. Vimbai is initially the queen hairdresser at Khumalo Hair and Beauty Treatment Salon, but Dumi sets in, threatens and outdoes her long-held hairdressing prowess. From the onset, we argue that for Vimbai to counter and consolidate her lost power, she resorts to rumour-mongering by adroitly scheming to win her readers. From her narration, we learn that Vimbai is a blabbermouth who is quick to tell her readers “something not quite right about Dumi the very first time I ever laid eyes on him” (1), yet she just couldn’t tell what it was. Without this conviction, even as early as the very first sentence of the novel, the readers are hence disposed to question Vimbai’s utterances before believing in her narration that Dumi is a homosexual. Coupled with this, the novel admits the fact that the salon is indeed a gossip-mongering site; “The fussiest customer was also the largest motor mouth and gossip-monger. Once she was our client, we never needed to advertise again, as long as we kept her happy” (1).

Diop (2018) postulates that Dumi employs Vimbai as a palliative strategy to address the psychological problems he is dealing with. If anything, she is only a front, a smokescreen to hide his sexual orientation and, more importantly, to patch things up with his family. Vimbai, on the other hand, falls short since her calculus has been tainted by her innocence and incautiousness. It is understandable why her shocking revelation of Dumi’s homosexuality shocked the institution. In our opinion, Vimbai manipulates Dumi to get her a new salon and improve her lifestyle. Still, after experiencing sexual repression from the latter, she tarnishes the young man’s name. This supports Wayne’s assertion that motivational factors—like self-interest or personal biases—can affect reliability.

Individuals may be biased in their decisions and behaviour when they have personal agendas or vested interests, which can provide incorrect results. In this situation, Vimbai has her own self-interest at stake, specifically a love relationship with Dumisani, which she is unable to obtain. To combat this, she creates an untrue story whose narrative techniques underscore what we have called unreliability. Evan Mwangi studies unreliable narration in Ngugi wa Thiongo’s *Devil on the Cross* (1980) and observes that the incomplete account of “Gĩcaandĩ Player” submits the narrative into unreliability, calling

“upon the reader to offer a counter-narrative” (Mwangi, 2007, p. 29). It is with this same breath that we consider Vimbai’s narrative incomplete since she supplements her narrative with the diary that ‘reveals’ Dumi’s homosexual life. Looking at Christine Legros’ essay also indicates that critics have had some interest in the politics of unreliability. For Legros, the unreliable narration is witnessed when “what the text achieves does not necessarily align with its apparent content” (Legros, 2022, p. 273). Though unreliability for Legros does not imply deceit, we argue that the unreliable narration of Vimbai is packaged to distort and deceive the readers that Dumi is indeed a homosexual.

Furthermore, we argue that the use of a diary as a means to determine Dumi’s sexual orientation is not to be relied on because diaries, akin to other sources, possess inherent limitations in comprehending the life of another individual. Utilizing diaries as a source for comprehending an individual’s life necessitates the consideration of various factors that impact their reliability. These factors include the individual’s thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Besides that, we observe that scheming Vimbai is simply looking for better ways to convince the readers about Dumi’s constructed sexual orientation. She chooses a diary as the most appropriate way. Readers must understand that though they are disposed to believe in the use of a diary, it is pertinent to put the whole narrative in the vocal point of Vimbai, the schemer who has been outdone in hairdressing, and she must fight back. It is at this point that we subject Vimbai’s narration to what Gerard Genette calls ‘focalization’, which is “the angle from which things are seen” (Gerard, 1980, p. 68). This diary, therefore, together with what has been framed as Dumi’s confession, is focalizations from Vimbai herself that readers don’t have to believe.

The subjective nature of diaries is inherent, as they solely represent the personal viewpoint of the author. The author has the option to emphasize specific facets of their existence while disregarding or diminishing others, leading to a prejudiced or inadequate depiction of their encounters. Furthermore, it is possible that diaries may not provide an accurate representation of an individual’s genuine thoughts, emotions, or experiences as a result of self-censorship. Individuals may exhibit a lack of complete transparency in their personal journals, particularly if they anticipate an audience or are composing for future generations. The interpretation of a diary authored by another individual necessitates a comprehensive comprehension of the contextual factors that influenced its creation, such as the cultural, social, and historical milieu. The accurate interpretation of the meaning conveyed by the words inscribed in a diary may pose a challenge in the absence of appropriate contextual information.

The fallibility of memory is a well-established phenomenon whereby individuals' recollections of events or emotions may be subject to inaccuracies. As a result, it is possible that diaries may not consistently record events or feelings with complete precision. The veracity of Dumi's homosexuality cannot be reliably inferred from Vimbai's diary narration. The utilization of a diary serves as a mechanism for the narrator to present a captivating narrative. The text features a narrative that has been consistently and fervently upheld by the narrator from the outset. Vimbai endeavours to amplify Dumi's voice by means of the diary in order to disclose his homosexuality. This paper asserts that the diary must be deemed an untrustworthy source. Furthermore, Vimbai hastily decides to approach the minister and disclose that Mr M and Dumi are engaged in a romantic relationship without careful consideration. Booth Wayne's situational factors, including environmental influences, social pressure, and stress, have the potential to impact human behaviour and reliability, as the user has suggested (Booth, 1961). In situations characterized by high-stress levels, individuals may exhibit impulsive or erratic decision-making tendencies that are comparatively less dependable than those demonstrated in more tranquil circumstances (Booth, 1961). As a result of her erratic behaviour, Vimbai proceeds to the office of the minister, a decision which she later comes to regret.

### **(De)Constructing Gender: Dumisani as an Effeminate Male Character**

Cruz Gutierrez observes that since ancient times, hair has been considered a key indicator of identity; "it influences the concept(ion) of femininity" (Gutierrez, 2019, p. 66). The assertion, as mentioned above, underscores the cultural import of hair in shaping gender identity and physical presentation, with a specific emphasis on women. Throughout various cultures, hair has been linked to femininity and regarded as an emblem of attractiveness, desirability, and societal standing. Throughout history, there has been a societal expectation for women's hair to adhere to specific norms regarding its length, texture, and style (Hooks, 1989). Moreover, hair has been utilized to convey notions of femininity and physical appeal. It has been regarded as a means of self-expression, enabling women to display their distinctiveness and unique fashion sense. Dumi's profession as a male hairdresser challenges conventional gender roles and societal norms pertaining to hair and femininity. His occupation as a hairdresser challenges the traditional notion that hairdressing is exclusively a feminine sphere. The individual's proficiency in hair styling presents a counterargument to the notion that hairdressing is a vocation reserved solely for females. The narrator exclaims, "These were difficult times, and jobs were scarce, but I'd never thought that men might try to get a woman's job" (Huchu, 2010, p. 7). According to Vimbai, this phenomenon affects his sexual orientation. Individuals who opt

for hairdressing as a profession are often stigmatized with the label of being non-conforming to traditional gender norms.

Furthermore, Dumi's creativity and skill in hairdressing allow him to challenge societal expectations of feminine appearance. He is known for his unique and unconventional hairstyles, which do not conform to traditional norms of femininity. This challenges the notion that women's hair must conform to Western standards to be considered beautiful or acceptable. Vimbai, in her appreciation of her work, even links race and gender together since, in her view, the secret to success is that the "client should leave the salon feeling like a white woman" (3). Dumi's approach to hairstyling goes beyond gender norms and allows his clients to express themselves and challenge societal expectations through their hair.

*The Hairdresser of Harare* offers a multifaceted depiction of masculinity, as evidenced by Dumisani's non-conforming physical appearance and conduct, which challenge conventional notions of Zimbabwean masculinity. The behaviour mentioned above is juxtaposed with the hyper-masculine conduct exhibited by other male characters in the literary work, including the married politician who is a regular visitor to the salon. Likewise, the literary work departs from conventional gender norms by exploring Vimbai's sexuality and aspirations, which conflict with her conventional upbringing and societal conventions. Vimbai is a lone parent who has remained unattached for a period of six years. Furthermore, she attempts to initiate intimacy with Dumi through seduction but ultimately faces rejection.

Dumisani is portrayed as a homosexual character who does not conform entirely to traditional gender norms associated with femininity. Dumi acquaints Vimbai with his affluent family without divulging the precise nature of their association. Dumisani personifies the traits commonly linked with the concept of masculinity. Despite the initial competitive dynamic between them, Vimbai and the salon's patrons express admiration for Dumi, highlighting the rarity of a man who takes care of his grooming in Zimbabwe (38). The disjunction between sex and gender, specifically the male gender identity, challenges established categories and exposes the socially constructed nature of these identities. The presence of these categories serves as a catalyst for the narrator's identification of a homosexual individual. The abovementioned phenomenon can be ascribed to Booth Wayne's notion of cognitive biases, which are inherent imperfections in human cognition and judgment that contribute to their unreliability (Booth, 1961). In this context, the narrator (Vimbai) demonstrates a tendency towards confirmation bias, a cognitive bias in which individuals exhibit a preference for information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs, ultimately resulting in potentially

unreliable judgments and actions. Vimbai's narrative voice is authoritative yet unreliable, reflecting her personal biases and emotional turmoil. Her initial portrayal of Dumisani is negative, influenced by her jealousy and insecurity. As the story progresses, her evolving perception of Dumisani reveals the complexities of their relationship and challenges the reader to question the reliability of her account.

The criteria for masculinity are associated with verbal aggression and control, whereas Dumisani exhibits bravery and deference in the face of perilous circumstances. For example, he assumes the dangerous task of safeguarding Trina, a Caucasian female who previously worked as a farmer and currently serves as a provider for the salon, even if it means facing a physical assault from military veterans. Dumisani's portrayal does not conform to stereotypical depictions of a homosexual individual. The concept pertains to the hierarchical structures and power relations inherent in logo-centrism. The intrinsic power dynamics in language, where certain ideas and discourses are privileged over others, reveal how language can assert dominance, exercise control, and perpetuate societal norms and hierarchies (Sarup 1988).

In contrast, conventional males exhibit highly foreseeable patterns of conduct. The men Vimbai encounter in public spaces exhibit abusive and violent behaviour without provocation. Men exhibiting such characteristics are commonly called "nice guys" (Huchu, 2010, p. 23). Leroux (2019) observes that the intriguing aspect pertains to the manifestation of aggressive conduct from an individual commonly perceived as affable and amiable. Though the narrator initially doubts Dumi's behaviour, she suddenly changes when she learns that "DUMI IS A HOMOSEXUAL – *Ngochani*" (Huchu, 2010, p. 166). While this would have been the best time for Vimbai to confirm what she had expected for a long time, she says that she would have denied what she had seen were it not for Dumi's handwriting. Vimbai's unreliability can be traced back to the first sentence, where she says there seems to be something not quite right about Dumi – after confirming that – she again says:

He spoke like a normal man, wore clothes like a normal man and even walked like a normal man. Everything about him was masculine. Didn't homosexuals walk about with handbags and speak with squeaky voices? (166).

Readers are left wondering how we can trust her thoughts that Dumi is a normal man, especially when his queer life has been exposed. As initially argued, Vimbai relies on uncertainties because even after learning from the diary that Dumi is homosexual, she speculatively talks "of white tourists coming into the country and corrupting the youth" (167), and we argue that Vimbai is simply trying to drag Dumi into these queer rumours.

### **Contesting Queerness: *The Hairdresser of Harare* and the Politics of Normativity**

The portrayal of Vimbai, a hairdresser employed at a salon in Harare, depicts her as a heterosexual female who conforms to conventional gender norms and societal expectations of femininity and professionalism. As the narrative unfolds, Vimbai's conventional notions regarding standard sexual behaviour are called into question upon the arrival of a fresh hair stylist, Dumisani, to the establishment. Dumisani's portrayal exhibits flamboyant and effeminate traits, leading Vimbai and other characters to speculate about his sexual orientation. The situation mentioned above presents a challenge to Vimbai's pre-existing beliefs and attitudes towards gender norms and sexuality. She is faced with the task of reconciling her own biases and convictions. Vimbai's initial unease with Dumisani's non-conforming gender expression and possible homosexuality is indicative of the societal prejudice and bigotry that may be directed towards LGBTQ+ individuals in certain cultures and communities.

Normative sexuality pertains to the sexual behaviours, desires, and identities deemed socially acceptable or anticipated within a given culture or society. The concept is frequently delineated by cultural, religious, and societal conventions and exhibits notable variations across diverse cultures, historical epochs, and belief systems. Normative sexuality is a broad term that pertains to various facets of human sexuality, such as sexual orientation, gender identity, sexual conduct, relationships, and sexual expression. Heterosexuality, monogamy, and cisgender identity are widely regarded as normative in numerous societies.

*The Hairdresser of Harare* delves into the examination of normativity within sexual orientation. The act of homosexuality is deemed illegal in Zimbabwe, with societal conventions reinforcing heterosexuality as the prevailing standard. The narrative of Dumisani underscores the obstacles and marginalization experienced by individuals whose sexual identity diverges from prevailing cultural norms. The text posits that normative conceptions of sexuality can lead to judgments, actions, and communications that are not dependable. Vimbai, relying on an anecdote of questionable reliability, hastens to inform the minister that her spouse and Dumi are engaged in a romantic relationship. The circumstance above results in the marginalization of individuals who are socio-economically disadvantaged, exemplified by the case of Dumi as the victim. The utilization of power by the minister to employ individuals to physically harm Dumi, resulting in severe injuries, is evident. However, there are no indications of the minister ostracizing Mr M. But Dumi's living quarters are thoroughly searched, and his possessions, including his passport, are seized. This experience serves to underscore the

concept of power dynamics, wherein those who hold privilege within a given society will invariably exert their influence to achieve their desired outcomes. The limitations and exclusions of normative sexuality result from its failure to encompass the multifaceted and diverse nature of human sexuality (Ncube, 2016, p. 8). Non-normative sexual identities or behaviours are often experienced by individuals who do not conform to normative sexual categories. This can result in sexual minorities, such as LGBTQ+ individuals, facing prejudice, stigma, and discrimination. An illustrative example is that of Dumisani, who is subjected to the stigmatizing label of homosexuality due to his divergence from conventional masculine norms. The protagonist experiences difficulty conforming to societal standards and harbours apprehension regarding potential persecution based on the narrator's perception or assumption of his sexual orientation.

## CONCLUSION

This essay has examined the politics of queerness in Tendai Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare*. It has agreed with the general argument that the novel is mainly queer. This is because Dumisani is constructed throughout the novel as a homosexual character with no interest in women, even when he has been lured into normative sexuality by the novel's narrator, Sisi Vimbai. However, we have taken a different perspective and contested such positions by arguing that there is not anything queer in the novel, by adopting ideas formulated around unreliability and logo-centrism. We have argued that the queerness in the novel is just Vimbai's own construction to undermine Dumisani's growing prowess in the hairdressing business. That Vimbai's account is deeply coloured by her personal biases and prejudices, particularly towards her colleague and rival Dumisani. Her jealousy and initial mistrust of him shape her portrayal of events and characters, leading readers to question the objectivity of her narrative. This subjective view point means that she misinterprets actions and intentions, offering a skewed version of reality. Moreover, Vimbai's emotional state affects her reliability as a narrator. Her feelings of insecurity and fear of losing her status and later her complex emotions towards Dumisani influence how she describes events. This emotional bias distorts the truth and creates ambiguity in her storytelling. Vimbai's narrative voice is a key element of the novel's logo-centric structure. The narrative choice underscores the logo-centric emphasis on speech as a direct expression of the narrator's inner world. However, Vimbai's reliability as a narrator is questionable complicating the logo-centric assumption of speech as a transparent medium for truth.

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