Review

Exhausting the poet: a study of Chenjerai Hove’s poetry across historical periods

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This paper explores Chenjerai Hove’s poetry stretching over different historical periods. First, the colonial era poetry is analysed that operates at the critical realist level, which registers discontent with different levels of segregation, especially in Red Hills of Home and some poems in And now the Poets Speak. It then moves on to the analysis of conflict in the Rhodesian socially stratified society. It seems the disgruntlement intensifies into a full-scale war typified in Up in Arms where heavy imagery creates a vivid mental picture of this struggle for total emancipation. This, therefore, implies that such poetry operates at socialist realist level. It moves on to focus on the author’s post-colonial poetry that is mainly celebratory in the heydays of independence (in And Now the Poets Speak and Patterns of Poetry in Zimbabwe), as opposed to neo-colonial tendencies and dictatorship lambasted in Rainbows in the Dust. The Afro-centric nature of the poems is expounded, making it clear that Hove’s audience is than the black Rhodesian in the earlier anthologies and the denigrated “independent” black Zimbabwean in the latter works. Howbeit, the research shows that Hove throws in love poetry as comic relief in the otherwise ‘serious’ poetry that aims at societal overhaul. Finally, the paper questions the poet’s pessimism throughout these different historical periods concluding that literary artists have a calling to police their societies against excesses regardless of the race of the perpetrator. The vision of the poet is to see a tolerant democratic society that provides equal opportunities to all regardless of race, sex or tribe.

Key words: Afro-centric literary approach, conscientisation, hegemony, Marxist literary theory, transliteration.

INTRODUCTION

Chenjerai Hove is a prolific Zimbabwean author, poet and political commentator. He writes in both English and Shona [the indigenous language spoken by the majority of Zimbabweans], but his voice in poetry is unmistakable in both. His fiction includes inter-alia, the award winning novel Bones, a novel titled Ancestors, another novella called Shadows, and social commentary essays in MASIMBA and Palaver Finish (a collection of his column articles in The Standard newspaper). However, the focus of this paper is on his poetic works found in Red Hills of Home, Up in Arms, And Now the Poets Speak, and Patterns of Poetry in Zimbabwe, but it is in Rainbows in the Dust, his solo penultimate anthology, where our emphasis is going to lie.

Preamble

English poetry is generally a dreaded area of literary study, hence the need to demystify it by exhaustively studying it by author to establish trends (if any). Chenjerai Hove’s literary ambidexterity particularly beckons...
investigation. His uniqueness lies in his ability to write in English first, and then, paradoxically, in his L1 – Shona. Furthermore, his works in general, and his poetry in particular, stretch across approximately three historical periods namely colonial, postcolonial (independence heydays–1980 to the mid-1990s) and the new millennium periods characterised by different challenges. Always, the poet finds something to say to his society through his poetry.

**Delimitation**

The paper focuses on Chenjerai Hove’s poetry in *Red Hills of Home, Up in Arms, And Now the Poets Speak and Patterns of Poetry in Zimbabwe*, but more emphasis is on *Rainbows in the Dust*. These anthologies are not only purposively representative of the poet’s works, but they contain the bulk of his poems.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This analysis is based on two main literary theories namely the Afro-centric theory of literary analysis and the Marxist literary approach. Therefore, it is worth our while to briefly explore these to establish a framework, a springboard from which the argument develops.

The Afro-centric approach is based on Chinweizu and Ihechukwu (1980) analysis which argues that the African novel is a hybrid out of the African oral tradition and the imparted literary forms of Europe. The authors correctly argue that “works done for African audiences, by Africans, and in African languages whether these works are oral or written, constitute the historically indisputable core of African literature”. This implies that there are a number of considerations to be made to determine the ‘Africanness’ of a work of art. Firstly, the primary audience for whom the work is written needs to be determined. Then the cultural and national consciousness expressed in the work, whether through the author’s voice or through characters must be considered. In addition to that, the nationality of the writer, whether by birth or naturalisation has a direct bearing on how he writes. It also takes into cognisance the sensibility of the work. Consequently, Hove’s nationality as a Zimbabwean by birth and his African sensibilities portrayed in his poetry both make his works of interest to African academics.

Interestingly, Asante (1998) defines Afrocentricity as literally placing African ideals at the centre of any analysis that involves African culture and behaviour. He further clarifies that it is “...a moral as well as an intellectual location that posits Africans as subjects rather than as objects of human history and that establishes a perfectly valid and scientific basis for the explanation of African historical experiences” (p 2). It is titillating to note how the colonial African is more of an object than a subject during the colonial era and whether the African lot has changed in any way as portrayed in Hove’s post-war poetry. However, more importantly, it is our concern whether the poet himself has been spared by the objectification and commoditisation of the African in both pre-independence and post-war poems as reflected in the colonial language (English) that he continues to use in his writing.

Finally, the language in which the work is written can easily tell us its traditional orientation. On the language question, the prominent African literature giant, Chinua Achebe honestly admits that he writes African literature in English, a colonial language. He justifies his position claiming that he writes in a ‘special English’ that communicates his African concerns. He further develops his argument thus, “I feel the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience, but it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home, but altered to suit its new surroundings” (Achebe in Epstein and Kole, 1998).

This, therefore, brings us to what Adjare (in Epstein and Kole, 1998) calls transliteration. This is the transfer of textual material from a source language into a target language yet maintaining the contextual flavour such as idiomatic expressions. It will be impressive to see how the localised variety of English impacts on the poems. Considering that Hove’s writing thrives on this device, the paper analyses how it enhances his poetry.

Conversely, Ngugi (1986) puts language at the centre of the contentious collision between imperialism and resistance to it. He thus argues that “[t]he choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people’s definition of themselves in relation to the natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe” (p4). The controversy is vehemently concluded so radically when he indicts any African writer purporting to be authoring African literature as Anglicised and, though helping create resistance, never connected with the people, and it leads the intellectuals to despair. In other words, for Hove to write in English, no matter what variety it is, is self-defeatist because whilst the writer is waging an anti-imperial war with one hand, he is advancing colonialism and neo-colonialism by contributing to its linguistic heritage with the other. Since the poems under review are all written in English, Hove is not spared this criticism on language grounds.

Another literary approach employed in this paper is the Marxist literary theory. This approach heavily borrows from Marxism. Basically, Marxism entails that everyone in society depends on the base, which is the means of production. Giddens (1993) holds that the bourgeois class in a capitalist society controls the base, perpetuating itself through its superstructure, usually in form of the police and the army. The exploited, oppressed and
generally maligned class called the proletariat at one time or the other becomes conscious of its predicament and gets organised to topple the bourgeois. Marx (in Raman, 1985) believes that the conflict of social classes establishes the ground upon which ideological conflicts arise.

When the stage is thus set, the struggle to overthrow the capitalist bourgeois is inevitable. The expected outcome is an egalitarian society characterised by communal ownership of the means of production, in the modern sense overseen by a people’s government. In Hove’s case, the oppressive government is either the minority racist regime that perpetuates the oppression of the blacks in order to maintain the status quo or the de facto one-party dictatorship whose ruling elite does not only plunder the national resources, but also thrives on intimidation. This follows that an egalitarian society is not possible under such systems, hence the author’s legitimate concern. Raman (1985) interestingly indicts morality, religion and philosophy as mere phantoms formed in the brains of men. Since literature is a mirror of the society which is characterised by classes, Zhdanov (in Eagleton, 1996) rightly observes that there is no literature which is not class literature, not tendentious, allegedly non-political. Therefore, Hove’s poetry is no exception.

As if measuring up to what Lenin (in Raman, 1985) calls “partinost” – a commitment to the working class cause - Hove presents typical works of art which, therefore, “possess a progressive outlook, glimpsing the developments of the future in the lineaments of the present, and giving a sense of the ideal possibilities of social development from the point of view of the mass of working people” (Raman, 1985). No wonder why, in the different anthologies, we meet the oppressed who are not silent but frothing and fuming in sulphuric fury at the exploitative governance they are made to endure in both colonial and post-colonial political systems. The poet seems to be a spokesman for the maligned populace; a voice in the wilderness of oppression. So, having briefly established a theoretical framework, we now move on to the analysis of the poems in the various anthologies.

EXPLORATION AND CRITIQUE OF THE POEMS

Throughout his poetic works, Hove raises class conflict issues in an Afro-centric manner. This follows that this paper employs the afore-mentioned two major literary approaches namely, the Marxist and the Afro-centric approaches. Basically, Hove is disturbed by the stratified nature of his society comprising mainly the haves and the havenots. The class of the haves (sometimes called the bourgeois) is exploiting, oppressing, nay, abusing the have nots (usually referred to as the proletariat). In the earlier anthologies such as Red Hills of Home and Up in Arms, the bourgeois is represented by the white settlers whilst the proletariat is made up of the conquered black majority. The white oppressors own the means of production in form of land (which is the base), whereas the blacks are the farm labourers who work under excruciatingly difficult conditions for a meagre remuneration. Racial segregation is everywhere galore and special jobs in towns are reserved for whites in the same way special schools are reserved for white children at the expense of the “natives.” It is this gross injustice that the poet lambasts through his poems in Red Hills of Home and in And Now the Poets Speak.

The poem A Masquerade in And Now the Poets Speak, for example, explores the theatricality of the coloniser who corrupts history to suit his colonial agenda: “They came bound to pretence, to malice, With home-made headloads of histories/ Distilled in huge stately palaces/ Of heroes felt in the head.” It is this hegemony which enables the bourgeoisie to conquer the “natives”. The heavy imagery in this poem is employed to buttress the poet’s disdain with a stratified society. “Blessed leprosy”, “heroic pus”, and “cancerous throats” all portray an infectious and potentially fatal system which the readers need to check before it spreads any further. Under such conditions, the African is on his knees, his morale in the intensive care unit and his ghost ready for hades. Hove is, therefore, conscientising his society so that it rises up and claims its God-given rights and freedoms.

The poet further presents a vivid portrait of a native worker. In the same anthology, the poem Boy focuses on the dehumanisation of the black labourer. It starts by posing two rhetorical questions, “When, brother, will you be?/ How will you be?” interrogating the white man’s racist attitude of viewing the blacks as invisible. No matter how old, this fifty year old worker is still a “boy” in the racist eyes of a white man. Fanon (1963) clearly describes this attitude thus:

The Negro loves to jabber, and from this theory, it is not a long road that leads to a new proposition: the Negro is a child… [a] white man addressing a Negro behaves exactly like an adult with a child and starts smirking, whispering, patronising, cozening (27, 31).

This microscopic image dwarfs, belittles and dehumanises the African, hence the need to find a way to ameliorate the situation, in this case through a struggle for independence.

In such an unjust society, “...the conflict of social classes establishes the ground upon which ideological conflicts arise” (Raman, 1985). However, “…in order for the oppressed to unite, they must first cut the umbilical cord of magic and myth which binds them to the world of oppression” (Freire, 1976; 142). Therefore, by presenting all the injustices of the colonial system, Hove is not only conscientising the masses, but he is also sobering them.
up, demystifying oppression in preparation for an armed struggle he describes in his next collection.

In *Up in Arms*, the inevitable class conflict has reached its climax. Unlike the tolerant “boy” who is childish and invisible, “...there is another who has the courage and passion enough openly to resist society, to reply with declared war upon the bourgeoisie to the disguised war which the bourgeoisie wages upon him, goes forth to rob, plunder, murder, and burn!” (Engels, 1892). So, in the poem *A war-time wife*, the poet presents an oxymoron between an expectant mother and a destructive war. There is a deliberate mix up here, the woman finds herself in a quandary with war uncertainty on one side and the certainty of life inside her on the other. On the one hand, she is “[...]torpedoed with bulging wars” and on the other “swelling with fragrant hope.” There are numerous puns where the image of pain is simultaneously applied to the pain of giving birth and the pain suffered in a war situation which creates bitterness and resentment of the colonisers in the latter case. The living are “dragging on weary muscles,” some kind of perseverance in the war, just like the pregnant woman’s perseverance in pregnancy and labour. Unfortunately, the poem ends in a sombre mood with “fertility periishing in thatched graves.” Now, the woman’s hopes and expectations come to nought as the war takes its toll. The horrific images of graves, tears, “swallowed by history’s gorgon” are revelatory of the destructive nature of war and how so many casualties are caused by the inevitable conflict of classes.

In the same anthology, the poet pursues the subject of war, this time in an afro-centric way in the poem *When the wind blows*. The persona is optimistic, so he justifies the cause of the war. It is described in its minutest details, the liberation fighters are christened warriors and white settlers labelled “long-nosed wearers” of “fear- termed farmers.” As the bullets graze and hail, the streams bath in blood. This hyperbole serves as visual and aural imagery of the intensity of this war of attrition. The war is justified, for the warriors “kill to cool the land,” to overthrow the capitalist colonial bourgeoisie. The warriors get maximum support from the masses or crowds who “swear slogans.” The situation is consistent with Freire’s observation that “...when the people have reached a relatively clear picture of oppression which leads them to localise the oppressor outside themselves, they take up the struggle to surmount the contradiction in which they are caught” (132). Hove’s poetry lives up to these parameters.

Furthermore, the form of this poem is irregular with the longest stanza having twenty-two lines and the shortest with six. This irregularity is not amiss since it epitomises total discord and ultimate pandemonium characterising liberation wars. Fanon (1963) explains clearly that decolonisation which sets out to change the order of the world is, in fact, a programme of complete disorder. Over and above all, we get to know that this war is not only supported by the masses, but by the ancestral spirits as well who “whisper” through the wind, encouraging the warriors and fanning them to plug on. So, this familiar Afrocentric faith does not only authenticate the struggle for liberation, but it goes further to mobilise, nay to incite the suffering masses to join in this justified ‘holy war.’

In addition to that, Hove’s poetry in *Patterns of poetry in Zimbabwe* dares getting right into the war front. The comparatively rosy period of the ‘death of a soldier’ with ‘christened’ hate is over. Now are the ugly “road[s] littered with corpses” where we must “remember Chimoio” and Nyadzonia. The tragic atmosphere created by *Remember Chimoio* through hyperbole is enough to appeal to the reader’s emotions. In this massacre, “the pebble you picked/ was a dead tooth of man” and “the meat you ate/ tasted like man”, then “the wetness you touched/ was the blood of man.” There is no longer fantasising and titillating with war any more, but “...it is solely by risking life that freedom is obtained; only thus is it tried and proved that the essential nature of self-consciousness is not bare existence...” (Fanon, 1963). The theme of sacrifice here explored where people are butchered and blood split into the soil is reminiscent of Ngugi’s Mau Mau guerrillas whose blood (symbolised by Kihika’s death) waters the seed of Uhuru (liberation) in *A Grain of Wheat* (Ngugi, 1967). The poet’s vision at this particular moment is to refresh the reader’s memory on the cost of independence, lest he forgets.

From the conflict period of *Patterns of Poetry in Zimbabwe*, Hove pursues his calling further into the post-colonial socio-historical moment. Haralambos and Holborn (1995) explore the Marxist ideology further by observing that when the proletariat take over power, they assume a temporary dictatorship to contain the riotous emotions of the masses and ex-combatants that may want to stage a coup de tat. However, this dictatorship may go unchecked and the workers’ paradise remains a wet dream that will never bear tangible fruits. Some authorities call this scenario “negation of negation.” For instance, Fanon (1967) rightly notices that “... you often hear it said that in underdeveloped countries a small dose of dictatorship is needed.” In reality, nothing could be further from the truth since the small dose becomes a permanent drug in most post-colonial states such as the independent Zimbabwe which the poet explores in *Rainbows in the Dust*.

The first observation one is bound to make on this anthology is its distinctness from the preceding collections. Unlike the heavy imagery and abstraction characterising the previous poems, the poet is now more narrative and explicit. It is no longer “an attempt by the individual to become invisible” (Marechera, in Wild, 1988). However, he continues to spice his poetry heavily with imagery to carry his message through. The title itself is a vivid metaphor. The attractive rainbow, symbolic of
variety and peace, has fallen flat into the dust. The choice of the word “dust” instead of “soil” is reminiscent of death, funeral, a grave. One wonders why this treasure, multiple democratic voices should be buried at this hour when the coloniser has gone. The poems therein answer this haunting question in no uncertain terms.

In the poem to a racist mother, the poet explores counter racialism and all forms of segregation by the black leaders. He chooses to use motherhood metaphorically to represent the country. The needle which represents the wealth of the country or the base “knows no boundaries” and “is colourless.” So Hove directly criticises the nepotistic, racist and tribalistic ruling elite. For “[i]s there in truth any difference between one racism and another? Do not all of them show the same collapse, the same bankruptcy of man? ... All forms of exploitation resemble one another” (Fanon, 1965). Such segregation inherited from the colonial system defeats the whole purpose of the struggle in the first place. The persona sees an impending catastrophe, a crisis threatening to engulf the whole nation because “the sun set for us all.” Since the segregatory society is worse than the feudal society, it is this retrogressive tendency that the poet indicts.

Again, we are given the ironic poem i will not speak where the post-independence political situation is dramatised. The readers are conscious of the fact that the persona is already “speaking” but he is “not speaking.” In other words, he is prohibited from speaking. In this post-colonial society, silence dominates, tantamount to the peace of the graveyard, echoing Mpasu’s own Malawian society which he vividly describes in the following manner:

It is true that we had what looked like peace. But it was the peace of the cemetery. It was enforced silence which was mistaken for peace. Our lips were sealed by fear and death. Our pens were silenced by long jail terms without trial (Mpasu, 1995:2).

The persona quickly gives us the reason why they are silent: “they sent the police to kill [his] words.” The post-colonial leaders have created a superstructure to protect themselves from the toiling disgruntled masses. The manipulation of the police by such dictators is explained by Fanon (1967), as he correctly observes that “in these poor underdeveloped countries, where the rule is that the greatest wealth is surrounded by the greatest poverty, the army and the police constitute pillars of the regime” (my emphasis). Similarly, Engels (1892) vividly describes how the police are at war with the damned classes saying, “...when these people find no work and will not rebel against society, what remains for them but to beg? And surely no one can wonder at the great army of beggars, most of them able-bodied men with whom the police carries on perpetual war” (author’s emphasis). One wonders what kind of leadership this is when the custodians of the law resort to harassing the masses for begging, in Engel’s case, and for “speaking” in Hove’s case.

Moreover, the readers get more harrowed with fear when the person vows thus:

I will not speak when the presidential speech spills blood on streets where i walk when women ululate at the sight of blood the blood of their own children, I will not speak (Rainbows..., 9)

A bizarre image is created here when women are portrayed as having suddenly turned callous to the extent of ululating as they witness blood flowing from their very own children. Blood is symbolic of life but when it is spilt it means death, at the instigation of the president and with full support of the parents whose children are being butchered on a stake! When folly reaches these levels, the poet shudders to comment, so he chooses to be silent. The overall vision of this poem is to have the human in this “fallen” state, this beastly insensitive person to repent and regain normalcy.

The poet goes on to exaggerate the post-colonial situation to create a clear picture of his society. When he says, “when the hungry are fed on metal/ and the sick are soothed with poison,” we understand that he is referring to the crisis of expectations. The people get the very opposite of what they were anticipating, which is tantamount to an insult. Furthermore, the persona expatiates on more ills of the society when he regrets saying,

but there is hunger on the jacketed face there is wound on the academic face there is a contour on the child’s face faces denied even a diet of words faces dieting on words for the heart’s comfort (ibid, 11)(emphasis added).

The stanza metamorphosises into a rhyming song, a pathopoea, producing a rhythm of hunger, erupting into a beat of want. Here, the poet plays with our emotions such that we cannot help but empathise with the poor misgoverned and denigrated creatures.

Towards the very end of this long poem (signifying the endless troubles of the exploited masses), the persona creates images of corruption, disease and death. He recites, “…every wound/smells of the decay of the state:/ a destiny of death/ smells of the death of the republic.” The situation is presented as hopeless and unredeemable. The reader can almost detect the stench of the republic, reminiscent of Shakespeare’s Denmark in Hamlet where “[t]here is something rotten in the state... Ellowyne, 1973” (Act 1 scene 3). Hove is lampooning the rulers of his country whose corrupt leadership has reached alarming proportions. His vision is that unless
something is done urgently, the torpedoed and fragmented society is heading for inevitable total demise.

To add on to that, the poet sometimes becomes overtly precise to ensure that his message reaches the poor uneducated masses. So he avoids riddles, puns, sarcasm and allegories to communicate directly with his African audience. For instance, in the poem *on being asked for a ruling party membership card*, the poet zeroes in on the very source of the society’s troubles. We will extensively quote this poem to demonstrate this claim:

you asked me, party cadre,
for a membership card
of the ruining party.
what an insult
to the flowers and the birds
of my country
in my heart (ibid, 35) (my emphasis)

To the persona, the ruling party is the very cause of societal discord. So to possess a membership card of such a ruining party is an insult. The voice speaking here cuts like a two-edged sword, direct and to the point. So, the economic, political and social woes explored in the previous poems emanate from the core, the pith of governance which is the ruling party. This is, therefore, a direct indictment to this party which has caused untold suffering to everyone else but themselves.

However, for comic relief, the poet does not fail to provide us with love poems sandwiched between the acidic political ‘commentaries.’ For example, the poem *Souls* tackles the subject of love, bringing out the theme of love’s realisation through intimacy and the joys thereof. Here, we have a tale of lovers who have been separated for a long time, but have been brought together for a short time. So they want to make maximum use of their time by making love in the best way possible. What is of interest in this poem is its form and diction. One long stanza which makes up the poem probably represents a long period of separation as well as a long sexual encounter the lovers have. It is only one stanza long, emphasising the love concept of oneness, inseparable “Souls” of lovers.

The diction decorates this poem into a lovers’ paradise. Phrases such as “pricked my soul,” “a heart beats to a soul,” “body perfumed,” “body drenched” create a romantic atmosphere. Likewise, words such as desire, arrival, piercing, touched, come and womb allow the readers to eavesdrop into the bedroom of these lovers. This bedroom scene is portrayed in such a way as to create a vivid cinema of the act without being necessarily pornographic. So by giving us several romantic poems like this one, the poet is probably communicating that although the society’s social hymen has been brutally rented, the moral fabric pathetically broken, the political organism out rightly “buddizzed,” human relationships still continue. This comes as a consolation, a flicker of hope, a faint light at the end of the tunnel. Therefore, this society is not yet totally doomed, after all!

Well, one wonders why Hove is so critical of his society, his country and the state in general in his poetry. In *The Red Hills of Home*, he bombards the injustices of the colonial system; in *Up in Arms*, the poet denigrates the Rhodesian army; and still after independence in *Rainbows in the Dust*, he lambasts the post-colonial dictatorial regime. One is compelled to question Hove’s egotistic pessimism, why he is seemingly intoxicated by the neurotic desire to criticise. Nothing can be further from the truth, for Hove’s colleague and fellow writer, Dambudzo Marechera, has the answer when he exhaustively explains a poet’s relationship with his society in the following manner:

I don’t know that the writer can offer the emerging nation anything. *But I think there must always be a healthy tension between a writer and his nation.* ... As long as he is serious, the writer must be free to criticise or write about anything in society which he feels is going against the grain of the nation’s aspirations (Marechera, in Veit-Wild and Schade, 1988: 19) (my emphasis).

Hove is, therefore, only living up to these parameters. Such critics are needed to check our human follies such as segregation, selfishness, ambition and an unquenchable thirst for power which cause some of us to desire to rule until kingdom come.

**CONCLUSION**

In a nutshell, Chenjerai Hove’s poetry is dominated by a passionate voice that critiques his society. His eagle’s eye peruses the political, social and economic situation. He denigrates the greedy elite who exploit and oppress the proletariat, starting from the racist Rhodesian society in *Red Hills of Home, Up in Arms, And Now the Poets Speak and Patterns of Poetry in Zimbabwe*. The post-independence society is not spared the criticism either, as it is lambasted in *Rainbows in the Dust*. In the latter-day works, the poet takes to task the ruling elite who abuse, exploit and forcefully silence the peasant population using its superstructure such as the police and the army. However, hither and thither the poet presents lighter moments where he tackles social relationships such as love, probably for the purgation of the readers’ emotions. We have noticed a clear-cut shift in style from the invisible persona in the colonial and war poems to a narrative one in the post-liberation war poems. The reason could be that in the latter case, he wants to reach out to every lay person with his message. Generally, the success of his poetry lies in the copious supply of imagery and symbolism. These, together with hyperbole
and carefully selected diction, are the vehicles through which he effectively communicates with his African audience.

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