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**MEN AND WOMEN IN A COLONIAL CONTEXT: A
DISCOURSE ON GENDER AND LIBERATION IN
CHENJERAI HOVE'S 1989 NOMA AWARD-WINNING
NOVEL — BONES**

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Abstract

This article assesses the strengths and weaknesses of Bones in relation to how it portrays men and women responding to the challenges of a colonial situation which is dynamically changing. The main thrust of the article is that Hove is much more interesting when unmasking the cowardice and limitations of male characters using a style influenced by African Orature but his treatment of women characters is problematic. Consequently, his success is necessarily a controversial one and unlikely to satisfy the expectations of feminist thinkers and writers.

UNLIKE OTHER AFRICAN countries which experienced the cultural re-awakening which accompanied moves towards the attainment of independence in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Zimbabwe, then known as Rhodesia, remained under a harsh colonial rule until 1980. The prolonged settler rule and the subsequent isolation of the country from the rest of Africa severely undermined the birth and growth of Zimbabwean literature in English. However, during the latter half of the 1970s three writers had come to dominate the Zimbabwe literary scene. First was the unassuming but self-assured Charles Mungoshi, with his much-acclaimed *Waiting for the Rain* (1975). Second was the late Dambudzo Marechera, who stunned the international audience with his controversial *House of Hunger* (1978) which won the Guardian Fiction Prize. Third was the steady but relentless output by Musaemura Zimunya, whose poems were consolidated in the collection entitled *Thought Tracks* (1982). All three writers have gone on to publish other works which have secured them a prominent position in the evolving literary tradition in Zimbabwe. In many ways Chenjerai Hove, born 9 February 1956 in a small-scale farming area near Zvishavane, belongs to the same generation, but his literary prominence became much more visible after the attainment of Zimbabwe's independence.

It is obvious that Hove is a writer who grew up acutely conscious of the injustice meted out to Africans during the colonial era — an awareness that was probably strengthened when he attended the Catholic Marist Brothers schools at Kutama and Dete in the 1970s. He also trained as a

teacher in Gweru and taught English at several secondary schools while pursuing degree studies in literature and education with the University of South Africa (UNISA). During that time some of his love poems and stories in Shona were published in *Nduri Dzorudo* (1978) and *Matende Mashava* (1980), respectively. Fourteen of his poems in English, which were particularly inspired by aspects of the liberation war which he witnessed as a secondary school teacher, were published in *And Now the Poets Speak* (1980). Spurred on by his love for literature, he embarked on another Honours degree course in 1984 at the University of Zimbabwe, after which he resigned from teaching and became an editor for Mambo Press in Gweru. Since then Hove has worked as an editor for several publishing concerns as well as being writer-in-residence at the University of Zimbabwe. Hove also has the distinction of being one of the founding members of the Zimbabwe Writers' Union (ZIWU) and indeed was its Chairman from 1984 to 1992.

Chenjerai Hove's status as a serious creative artist was further confirmed with the publication of *Up in Arms* in 1982 and *Red Hills of Home* in 1985: both of these poetry collections received special mention by the judges of the Noma Award for Publishing in Africa, in 1983 and 1986, respectively. Like Zimunya and Mungoshi, Hove continued to distinguish himself in his writings in English as well as in Shona. In almost all these writings he seems to be haunted by the plight of the weak and vulnerable members of society, those who find themselves pitted against more dominant historical and social forces but are powerless to define and defend their own interests. In an unpublished essay entitled 'African literature: What shall we read?', he writes:

I seek to write books that remind us of what it is to be powerless or, indeed, to be powerful, and at the same time, strive to retrieve our historical conscience in an age when the worst can happen to both the weak and the strong in our societies made fragile by so many political and cultural forces.¹

This preoccupation is evident in his only novel in Shona, *Masimba Evanhu* (1986), and his radio play in English, *Sister Sing Again Someday* (1989). The latter is based on the plight of the so-called 'prostitutes' who were rounded up and bundled out of Harare to make way for distinguished visitors who attended the Non-Aligned Movement Conference in 1986. But the work that has particularly promoted Hove's literary prominence, especially with the international literati, is *Bones* (1988).² This was his first novel in English, one which won the 1989 Zimbabwe Book Publishers

¹ C. Hove, 'African literature: What shall we read?'; "The shape of the word", A collection of essays' (unpublished).

² C. Hove, *Bones* (Harare, Baobab Books, 1988).

Literary Award and the 1989 Noma Award for Publishing in Africa. Such has been the interest that it is being translated into Japanese, German, Norwegian, French, Danish and Dutch.

What is fascinating to observe, however, is that readers, especially those in Zimbabwe, have yet to agree on the nature and scope of Hove's achievement in *Bones*. Part of the problem arises from the thematic ambiguity of the text. On the surface, the novel is about the liberation struggle which gathered momentum in the 1970s and ended with Zimbabwe's attainment of independence in 1980. A closer examination, however, reveals the struggle more as a backdrop against which we are to grasp the full extent of Marita's suffering. The latter occupies the centre of the stage and promises to raise fundamental issues pertaining to the role and fate of African women who are caught up in a colonial situation which is dynamically changing. But, again, as will be shown later, such issues are handled in a manner which is ambiguous and problematic.

Writing in *The Herald*, Leonard Maveneka argues: 'In *Bones*, Hove has focused on the neglected sector of our community, the peasants, and has used a very original device — allowing them to speak for themselves.'³ While on the whole Maveneka is positive in his appraisal of *Bones*, throughout he remains judiciously hesitant to point out with emphasis and conviction the specific nature of Hove's contribution to modern African writing. On the other hand, the response of the international audience is best summarized by Lan White:

Bones is a marvellous book, drawing on its Shona lyricism to create an English idiom which persuades more completely than anything else I have read, that this is how the war was experienced in rural Zimbabwe. It is a difficult book to get through not, as has been suggested, because the narrative is confusing, but because the writing is so eloquent, such a sheer delight to read, that the eye keeps pausing to re-read and relish instead of proceeding.⁴

Although Lan White goes on to focus on Hove's vision, it is obvious that he is much more fascinated by the quality of the language which is constantly haunted by a sense of the poetic. The following comments are designed to underline the strengths and acknowledge the weaknesses of *Bones* in so far as these are reflected in Hove's treatment of men and women responding to colonialism.

Stated briefly, the novel is about Marita as a wife in a peasant community, as a labourer on a vast commercial farm, as a mother whose only son opts to fight for freedom, and, finally, as a woman whose

³ L. Maveneka, 'Peasants find a voice in human relations story', *The Herald* (1 August, 1988), 4.

⁴ L. White, 'The language of two novels from Zimbabwe', *Southern Africa Review of Books* (Feb/May, 1990), 3-4.

experiences symbolize those human aspirations which revolve around the need for freedom and self-fulfilment. But the story is told from the point of view of Janifa, whose voice is only one of the many voices in this novel which register, in their varied and sometimes contradictory manner, responses by a defeated people desperate to adjust and survive in a harsh colonial world.

It is significant that *Bones* is set on a large commercial farm whose fields are described as 'stretching forever as if they were the sky'. In contrast, areas occupied by Blacks are 'not very good for donkeys to live in', a place where 'people and dogs eat from one plate'. At a stroke the vast commercial farm becomes a strategic and powerful symbol which captures the central contradictions and tensions which revolve around the issues of land and which constitute an essential feature of the Zimbabwean experience. At the edges of that huge White farm is a pathetic African drama characterized by deprivation, hence the sense of horror with which Chisaga recalls the past:

Do you remember how the whole Muramba village came here to look for work when they heard a new farmer was coming to open a new farm? Some came with their children, their dogs and cats and all they could carry. Manyepo was here, fuming as if the villagers had annoyed him by coming to offer their sweat to him.⁵

Being alluded to by Chisaga are those demographic pressures which forced many Blacks to forgo the peasant option especially during the 1930s and 1940s. Shortage of fertile land plus the numerous taxes which settler governments imposed on an already impoverished peasantry compelled many destitutes to seek employment in the mines and factories which were mushrooming all over the country as well as on the White-owned farms. All these were economic institutions of the settler state which were forever hungry for cheap Black labour. Thus intensified the process of proletarianization which almost became synonymous with the brutal exploitation of Blacks. In addition, the African had to suffer the proverbial abuses associated with White racism — itself a facet of colonial ideology which, in its irrational way, tried to justify the exploitation which was going on. Hove captures the colonial attitudes and practices of that time through Manyepo, who occupies the topmost social and economic position of an essentially hierarchical society. Manyepo has the brutal style of a slave-driver and a voice which echoes that of his literary ancestor, Charlie Slatter, in *The Grass is Singing*. The question is: How do African men and women respond to the repression and exploitation inherent in the colonial state?

⁵ Hove, *Bones*, 43.

Bones has the distinction of being one of the first novels in Zimbabwean literature to focus on African reaction to colonialism from the point of view of gender. On the one hand are a group of African males anxious to be accommodated by the new colonial dispensation. On the other hand are Marita and one or two of her female disciples whose outlook and sensibilities clash with those of their male counterparts.

Playing the historical role which Ayi Kwei Armah in *Two Thousand Seasons* has dubbed as that of the Askari is Chiriseri, 'the baas boy'. He is second-in-command to Manyepo and a loyalist, notorious for using language to humiliate and cow recalcitrant workers of the likes of Marita. It is as if the original act of brutal conquest of the so-called native at the turn of the last century has to be sustained in a form characterized by a one-sided domineering discourse which systematically diminishes the self-esteem and confidence of Blacks. More significantly, Chiriseri's role has elements of what Frantz Fanon calls 'the collective auto-destruction'⁶ of the native in so far as the venom of the foreman is directed against his fellow victims. As such he is the colonial version of the overseer associated with the slave plantation — a man whose job security depends on his ability to brutalize those under him:

You women over there, stop gossiping about the latest love potions and get on with your work. You were not brought here to share your gossip with baas Manyepo. He brought you here to work. If you are too old to work, then say so and baas will get someone to take your place. Do not smile at me as if I am your husband. As for that woman with a terrorist for a son, she will one day feel the harshness of my arm, I tell you. You came here to look for work on your own and if you think baas persuades anybody to keep you here, you are dreaming. Baas knows all the things you do which you think your terrorist son will help you with. If you think you come here to fill the baas's forests with shit, then I tell you one day you will eat that shit yourself.⁷

In Chiriseri's case, the relentless vulgarities of his diction are an index of the brutal confrontation between capital and labour. He becomes an extension of the master, a tool of a system to facilitate the process of primitive accumulation in which Manyepo is involved. Physical threats and psychological abuse contained in the foul language are designed to create a permanent sense of insecurity in the workers. What seems to inspire him in his job is the illusion of belonging to the more powerful side; and, of course, the illusion of exercising authority over his less fortunate brethren. Chiriseri remains addicted to the grim and blind cruelties that go with his job and very little can be expected of him in terms of progressive

⁶ F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London, Penguin, 1967), 42.

⁷ Hove, *Bones*, 16-17.

consciousness — hence the contempt with which he is regarded by Marita. At best he can only be a mimic of his master. His role is somewhat similar to that played by African messengers and constables in Chinua Achebe's novels, *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*.

Next to Chiriseri in terms of social hierarchy is Manyepo's cook. Chisaga enjoys the dubious distinction of being knowledgeable about the domestic life of his master; he also enjoys the tainted pride of a house-servant whose role is far removed from the rigours and sweat associated with plantation work. For Chisaga, sheer proximity to the master constitutes an achievement of sorts. And his philosophy is that of Uncle Tom who is forever anxious to acquiesce and lie low for purposes of survival. Further, Chisaga believes in the gospel of silence as if in acknowledgement of the impact of the one-sided discourse represented by Manyepo and his boss boy.

Fascinating to observe is Chisaga's relationship with an oral tradition known for its capacity to distil the collective wisdom of the community through its proverbs, idioms of expression and general sayings. Chisaga reaches out for this wisdom in so far as it buttresses his sagging ego and justifies his acquiescence to Manyepo. 'A chief's son is a nobody in other lands', he intones for the umpteenth time, not realizing the irony that Manyepo is more of the stranger than he is. 'He has bad and good in all of us', Chisaga generalizes in his moralistic manner and justifies Manyepo's excesses as natural: 'One day is cloudy, the next is cloudy and rainy, but the next is plain and naked sky.' Hove succeeds here in showing how the Shona proverbs and idiomatic expressions are used by Chisaga in an unconscious way as a mask which obscures the hollowness of the man. In his attempt to rationalize his embarrassing and self-demeaning attachment to Manyepo, the Shona proverbs and sayings become a mere shell, part of the verbalism bereft of those insights which relate one to his environment in a creative and meaningful way.

Chisaga would like us to believe that his inferior position in regard to Manyepo is natural and God-given, as is reflected in the images of his language:

Seasons leave room for one another. Rain, dry, cold, rain, dry, cold, rain, dry, cold. Look at me now, poverty is like a stubborn friend. Always with me, but I look with the eyes of my own village and say, — the leaves fall but they will come back again one day. The stars die, but one day they will come back after the sun, their enemy, has left the dancing arena.⁸

Chisaga harbours the illusion that his turn to enjoy the fruits of the earth will come one day. But how this is to be achieved remains a mystery!

⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

In a sense his analogical reasoning which likens the cyclic patterns of the seasons to the changing of the old order in which Manyepo dominates amounts to self-deception, more so when his role continues to sustain the *status quo*. It is a glaring fact, however, that his job as a cook is traditionally associated with women and, as such, is a mockery of his pride as a man. Here we are reminded of the acute sense of humiliation Nnaife's wife feels when she sees her husband washing the underwear belonging to the wife of his White master in *Joys of Motherhood*. Being suggested in Hove's novel as well as in Buchi Emecheta's, is that colonialism brutally assaulted the egos of African males by offering them roles hitherto reserved for women in a traditional context. The feminization of the male in the new colonial dispensation is symptomatic of a society which has lost its capacity to hold its own and survive in accordance with the demands of its own values and beliefs. Circumstances have emasculated Chisaga so much that, should he be humiliated beyond endurance, his only recourse would be to perform petty and unhygienic little acts of revenge — such as adding nappy water or mucus to Manyepo's food. As if to underline the widespread feeling of impotence on the part of the African male, Chisaga cites the case of Muringi and Chatora who feed Manyepo's dogs with their own faeces to prove that they are at least better than the dogs of the master!

In regard to Chisaga, Hove has created a memorable caricature of an African male bereft of any noble principles or ideals to live by. Chisaga's critical consciousness remains rudimentary and ahistorical: in fact, his mind is forever imprisoned in a wishy-washy and self-serving analogical reasoning which unconvincingly justifies his humiliating position as a permanent underdog. Even his dreams about the future are appropriately tailored, as not to disrupt the *status quo*. He sees change as a long-term evolutionary process about which he can do very little. As a form of compensation for thwarted growth Chisaga's life becomes centred around an almost infantile desire to gratify those basic appetites in man — a trait he shares with Gitutu wa Gatanguru in *Devil on the Cross*. As such he does not hesitate to prey upon his fellow victims, as is exemplified by his attempt to seduce Marita and his ultimate brutal raping of Janifa. Finally, there is also a way in which a satiric impulse simmers underneath the ostensibly serious tone, threatening to blow apart the solemn and platitudinous stupidities of Chisaga's ironic confessions. The contempt with which we respond to Chisaga's activities and justifications underlines, at the level of emotion, what a people should never allow themselves to be reduced to under any circumstances. The same applies to Chiriseri's significance in the novel.

Lower down the social scale is Murume, who, as his generic name implies, represents the plight of the ordinary male worker on the farm.

Murume is painfully conscious of the countless insults and innumerable moments of humiliation which he has endured together with his long-suffering wife. His position is further weakened by the fact that he does not have children who will succeed him as labourers on the farm — especially when his only son has left to join the freedom fighters who are a threat to Manyepo's life and interests. Consequently, Murume is tolerated rather than accepted by Manyepo. In addition, Murume has the misfortune of being married to a defiant woman whose speeches about Manyepo's ill-treatment of workers cannot be silenced. Ironically, instead of taking the side of his wife in opposition to Manyepo, Murume is, like Chiriseri and Chisaga, anxious not to offend the all-powerful master. Rather, he is keen to cling to what he perceives as one of men's privileges over their spouses. 'A man with a beard must control his wife', he repeats the traditional but outdated saying, thus unwittingly underlining his own impotence. Murume perceives his role as that of a labourer who has to keep his irrepressible wife on a leash so that Manyepo's work is done without disruption.

Interesting to observe in regard to Murume's role is how the traditional patriarchal ideology in which a woman's position is naturally subordinate to that of a man is insisted upon, not for the benefit and cohesion of the African family but for the profit which Manyepo stands to gain from the sweat of Marita and other labourers. Furthermore, even the understandable desire by Marita and Murume to have more children, as tradition demands, would end up creating more youthful and therefore stronger labourers for Manyepo. What one sees here is a situation in which colonial capitalism stands to gain from the very traditions, practices and beliefs of the indigenous people. What Murume's role reveals here is a much more complex and larger process pertaining to how colonialists harnessed the indigenous social structures and practices for the accumulation of capital. In a chapter entitled 'Gender, ideology, economics and the social control of African women', Elizabeth Schmidt writes:

By forcing women to submit to male authority, the colonial regime both advanced its own project and mollified a potentially powerful opposition force — that of chiefs, headmen, and other senior men. Thus the origins of female subordination in Southern Rhodesia were not solely the result of policies imposed by foreign capital and the colonial state. Rather, indigenous and European structures of patriarchal control reinforced and transformed one another, evolving into new structures and forms of domination.⁹

⁹ E. Schmidt, *Peasants, Traders and Wives: Shona Women in the History of Zimbabwe 1870-1939* (Portsmouth, Heinemann, 1992), 99.

The difference, of course, in Murume's case is that he is too weak to impose his full authority on Marita because colonialism has removed his material base (land) and thrown him into a wage economy which exploits him.

Compounding Murume's dilemma is that he is a vacillating character whose reverence for Manyepo borders on fear. Part of his problem is the belief that the misfortunes of his family are the result of an ancestral curse or evil spirit, hence his refrain about 'shadows'. He laments ineffectually: 'Too many shadows in our life. It started long back Marita.' In a way, Hove, like Mungoshi in *Waiting for the Rain*, underlines the mysticism which often has the unintended effect of obscuring the perception of those seeking to understand historical forces which impinge negatively upon their lives. Murume's dilemma, like that of any worker, is rooted in the history of conquest and, as such, is economic and political in origin rather than spiritual *per se*. Unfortunately Murume's belief in mysticism amounts to an alibi for doing nothing about his family's plight — more so when his budding critical consciousness is imprisoned by that mysticism. In Murume, Hove has portrayed a figure of pathos notable for his timidity and vulnerability — a man whose name is a mockery of his manhood, and a source of endless embarrassment.

The picture that emerges at this point is that of a generation of African males so thoroughly domesticated by the ideology of colonialism that they have come to doubt their own potential to change or influence their fate. All the three male characters, with their uneven levels of consciousness, are simply out of depth and incapable of challenging the settler order. Robbed of their self-confidence, lacking in conviction and seemingly over-awed by White invincibility, they will remain loyal to the very system which dehumanizes them. They constitute the various parts of a chain of repression which transmits violence from the topmost layer of colonial society represented by Manyepo down through the weaker layers, predominantly African and male, until it reaches the lowest rung of that hierarchical society represented by African women and children. In other words, Hove's success here lies in the manner in which he captures a rural version of a cycle of violence spawned by the colonial intrusion. The cycle of violence may appear to be not as graphic and dramatic as that in Marechera's *House of Hunger*, but its impact is no less debilitating.

Pitted against the collaborative stance of the older generation of African males is the response registered by Marita and other female figures in the novel. First and foremost Hove is anxious to portray Marita not only as the proverbial victim of the exploitative colonial practices, but also of the patriarchal attitudes of African society. Marita's tribulations pre-date her arrival at Manyepo's farm. As a peasant wife in the so-called 'Reserves', she suffers untold miseries when she fails to conceive. She is

branded a village witch — 'a hen that ate its own eggs'. Her dreams about marital bliss and motherhood are shattered early in her life, more so when her husband is dutifully advised by the community to marry another woman who can safeguard the name of her husband by producing sons. Marita becomes a pariah in a community which, ironically, is already marginalized by the forces of history. When he ultimately succeeds in having a son, fate does not allow her to relish the joys of motherhood. Her only son leaves the farm and becomes a guerrilla fighter, thus reducing her again to a childless woman. Compounding this particularly painful and personal dilemma is the destitution which afflicts the majority of Blacks. She can only survive as a labourer on Manyepo's farm. In fact she is described as part and parcel of the exploitable natural resources for Manyepo. As readers, her plight reminds us of Granny's famous speech in *Their Eyes were Watching God*:

Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything so far as Ah been able to find out. May be its some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power but we don't know nothing but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man to pick it up. He pick it up because he have to but he don't tote it. He hands it to his womenfolk. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see.¹⁰

There is no doubt that the author's intention is to portray through Marita's life-experiences a character whose capacity to suffer seems infinite. Apart from being a lonely and isolated figure labelled a witch for her apparent barrenness, Marita is subjected pitilessly to back-breaking toil, only to receive derisory food rations since she does not have children on the farm. The grave and persistent deprivations allotted her in life amount to an affliction which is worsened by the tensions and anxieties brought about by her son's disappearance. Unfortunately, her husband's indifference to her overriding emotions about her son almost amount to a callousness which she has to suffer. It is not surprising that she can only share her tormented and tortured existence with a fellow woman, Janifa. Murume is too timid, too brutalized by history to be able to offer comfort to anyone.

Interesting to note, however, is that her singular misfortunes do not succeed in undermining her self-respect and dignity as happens to most characters on the farm. It is as if her capacity to endure hardships related to gruelling manual labour has been enhanced by her earlier personal tribulations in the Reserves. She even has the guts to challenge the slave-driving foreman at whom she lashes mercilessly with her blunt but truth-

¹⁰ Z. N. Hurston, *Their Eyes were Watching God* (London, Modern Classics Edition, Virago Press, 1986), 29.

telling tongue: 'What is the white man's loin cloth saying today? Has the white man wetted his loin cloth so much that it has the courage to drip its wetness on us? Go away and listen to your baas's insults.'¹¹ As a result of her defiant and persistent efforts, the workers are granted respite from the merciless toil. Indeed Marita becomes an unofficial spokesperson for all the workers and she does that at the risk of losing her job!

What seems to account for Marita's courageous disposition is a kind of radical innocence, an inviolable spirit in her which refuses to be overwhelmed by the brutal pervasions associated with colonialism. She possesses a simple, down-to-earth but unassailable sense of what is right and wrong and, as such, she has a certain raw strength which can be identified as an aspect of the rock-like integrity of the self that is sometimes associated with the peasantry. Marita enjoys a certain rugged moral authority which is conspicuously absent in all the male characters on the farm. Consequently, her husband remains in his own insecure and self-interested manner attached to her; even Chisaga, in his childlike, self-centred and predatory manner, gravitates towards her. She also radiates a certain warmth and passionate sincerity, so much that she becomes a mother-substitute-cum-sister to Janifa. In other words, Marita is an embodiment of the kind of spirit which most of the Black people unconsciously come to admire.

Closely related to Marita's moral authority is, of course, her allotted role as the outstanding underdog of history to whom anything that can go wrong in a lifetime happens. It is as if Hove sets out to create a singular woman character in African fiction, an African version of the legendary Sisyphus who is forever carrying the burdens of history with all the pain and suffering which that role entails. Certainly the raping of Marita by government soldiers amounts to a gratuitous abuse which exacerbates the plight of her overworked body and tormented spirit. Yet what remains of Marita after all the ravages of history have left their mark on her is that defiant spirit, that which is essential, the bones which metonymically are the bedrock and which cannot be destroyed.

For all her singular attributes, however, Marita's role is as outstanding as it is problematic. Our admiration for her is savagely qualified by the all too real problem that her defiance remains a gesture: it is part of the potential which is not allowed by the author to develop so that she can outgrow the crippling limitations of her environment. In a book in which feelings and emotions are the touchstone, Marita's consciousness, advanced as it is in relation to that of other workers, remains painfully inadequate for her to cope with the demands of a colonial situation which is dynamically changing.

¹¹ Hove, *Bones*, 17.

In fact, one can argue that she is never meant to attain the higher level of critical consciousness which can enable her to interrogate fully the nature of her relationship with history. For example, at a critical juncture in her life, when those forces which oppress her, and which are symbolized by Manyepo, are about to be removed by the guerrillas, she refuses to testify against him. She asks: 'Child, what do you think his mother will say when she hears that another woman sent her son to his death?' Lan White commends her for displaying 'the bedrock of rural charity' and for instinctively recognizing that the death of one's enemy is tragedy too. Obviously White is correct in so far as his interpretation is the one intended by the author, but is one which, in the actual struggle, betrays Marita's imperfect grasp of history and its demands. Her gospel of 'do unto others as you would like them to do unto you' is admittedly admirable and reassuringly Christian but, in the prevailing circumstances, misdirected and self-defeating. It is no wonder that Manyepo remains arrogant and morally blind, even after Independence. Also, at this particular point the novel offers us a sentimental version of the war, one which is kind enough to allow Marita to uphold her conscience as a mother — as if motherhood as a vocation is something above reevaluation.

It is quite within Hove's rights to claim that as an author he is entirely free to create a character whose subjective experiences are consonant with the peasant-cum-worker he has in mind. But the only problem here is that Hove is dealing with a specific phase of Zimbabwean history at a time when his generation is privileged enough to assess the extent to which Marita, as an artistic creation, typifies the essential features related to the experience of the liberation war. Such an evaluative exercise would seem to be expressly invited by Hove's dedication in the first pages of the book:

For the women whose children did not return, those sons and daughters who gave their bones to the making of a new conscience, a conscience of bones, blood and footsteps dreaming of coming home some day in vain.

Furthermore, in Irene Staunton's *Mothers of the Revolution*, readers are impressed by the fact that rural women who start off being relatively self-centred and narrow in outlook go through the kind of war experience which broadens and deepens their horizon so much that they attain a higher level of critical consciousness. More importantly, they achieve a sense of solidarity and commitment which transforms them from being mere victims of history into women who actively participate in the shaping of their future. Even the language of their dreams is specific and concrete: they dream about having more land, schools, clinics, jobs and, ultimately, a dignified role in society which fulfils their lives materially and spiritually.

As for Marita, alas she remains the proverbial 'victim' especially when her vision about the future does not go beyond the return of her son. Even her views about the war of liberation are as limited as her horizon is. She views the war as being against

the bad things the white man has in his palms. If a child has dirt in his palm, do we cut away his palm in order to get the dirt off it? No, we take the child, spank his bottom a little bit. If the child wants to eat dirt, we take a stick to punish the child harder . . . Now, the white man has refused to remove the dirt in his clenched fist. So we have to take a stick and whip the white man. One day the white man will say . . . come my friends, you are not evil people. You are people who know the difference between dirt and cleanliness . . .¹²

In a sense Marita regards the liberation war as a crusade against the moral dirt which the settlers have accumulated through their exploitation and ill-treatment of Blacks, rather than being against the economic system which they have created for their exclusive material benefit. Further, Marita sees the war as a means to reconcile Blacks and Whites at the level of human relations. Thus her vision is reformist rather than revolutionary and very influenced by her moralistic outlook. Incidentally, a similar vision is reflected in one of Hove's poems titled 'A Masquerade' where the guerrilla fighters are seen as agents bent to 'cure' the ills of settler societies and to bring about a morally superior social order. In this respect Hove, like Chipamaunga in *A Fighter for Freedom* and Mutasa in *Contact*, seems more keen to underline the humanity of the subjugated African than to project a more viable social vision.

Without wishing to take away any credit to which Marita is entitled as the long-suffering mother Africa, it is only fair to point out that her role in *Bones* does not do full justice to the Zimbabwean peasants and workers who, as is well-documented in *Mothers of the Revolution, Peasant Consciousness and Guerrilla War in Zimbabwe* and *The Women of Zimbabwe*, played a decisive role which ensured the success of the guerrilla war in Zimbabwe. Peasants constituted the backbone of the revolutionary war and did not have the luxury to equivocate at critical moments as Marita does in this novel. And their participation was not a once-off affair forced upon them by the more radical generation. Rather, they are the ones who kept the issues burning and memories about the past alive. We are told:

It was the rural women, the ordinary uneducated women who took the lead in the 1960s . . . The women were talking about land, about the fact that their children had no schools to go to . . . Educated women felt threatened. They had been brain-washed.¹³

¹² *Ibid.*, 88.

¹³ R. Weiss, *The Women of Zimbabwe* (Harare, Nehanda Publishers, 1985), 12.

In a crucial sense what is implicitly at stake in *Bones* is the way the role of the peasant is likely to be partially vindicated and at the same time distorted to a considerable degree. Ultimately the issue boils down to how one understands history and the manner in which it is created, especially in societies such as ours.

One can actually argue that it is because Marita's role is so narrowly conceived that when she tries to hug the contours of the larger history of the land, especially on her journey to the city, she sounds unconvincing. In other words her politicization comes too late to sound credible and substantial enough to command the admiration and loyalty of the unknown woman. It is precisely because of her limitations that a more advanced historical consciousness has been conscripted, *deus ex machina*-like into the story, with all the oppressive arbitrariness which such an *ad hoc* measure entails. This is what is meant to establish a link, fragile though it remains, between Marita's defiance and Mbuya Nehanda's historic significance.

In historical terms Mbuya Nehanda is the woman who galvanized and inspired African forces to fight against the White settlers during the 1896 and 1897 uprisings. She therefore belongs to the period of primary resistance against imperialism in Africa. Just before she was executed by the settler forces for her role in the uprising, she is claimed to have said, 'My bones shall rise again.' It is from this prophecy, which has reverberated across generations of Africans, that Hove derived the title of his novel. As a writer, Hove is indeed correct to portray the liberation war of the 1960s and 1970s as having been partly inspired by the 1896-7 uprising — more so when the oppressed Africans came to see Nehanda as a larger-than-life figure, a living legend often cited by freedom fighters — as we see in Chinodya's *Harvest of Thorns*, Mutasa's *Contact*, Samupindi's *Death Throes* and Vera's *Nehanda*. Unfortunately, Hove does not demystify the legend in order to show how Nehanda's progressive historical consciousness can be an integral part of the peasant and worker consciousness that could inform the outlook and activities of people such as Marita and the unknown woman. Thus the workers on the farm appear a defeated lot who have to wait for the enraged but disembodied voice of Nehanda. This has the unintended effect of portraying the workers and peasants as passive, when we know from history that these were the backbone of the revolutionary struggle in Zimbabwe.

Interesting to observe is that Mbuya Nehanda's voice, with a tone which rebukes Blacks for remaining blind and passive, makes the rather predictable references to the bones of those who died in the 1897 uprising, the swarms of locusts which descended upon the land then and the diseases which are historically associated with that period. The voice then goes on to exhort the oppressed children of the land to rid themselves

of the usurpers. And all these references signal the kind of historical consciousness which, ironically, would not be beyond the scope of a worker such as Marita, if only the oral tradition, which is constantly alluded to in this novel, had been perceived as part of a viable counter-culture of resistance, as indeed it was during the colonial period. The fact that Marita works on a commercial farm should not necessarily imply that she no longer belongs to that oral tradition whose historic significance is dialectically opposed to the culture of silence implicitly advocated by Manyepo and blindly supported by Chiriseri and Chisaga. In fact, such a tradition would also account for the formidable strength of endurance which Marita displays.

Also related to Marita's historical role in the novel is the sub-text centred on the status and function of women in African society. Marita's barrenness and subsequent isolation and suffering raise critical issues in regard to how social attitudes can inflict havoc on the unfortunate women. These are some of the issues which have been vigorously pursued in such founding texts on African feminist discourse such as Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and Buchi Emecheta's *Joy of Motherhood*. Indeed the role of women has also come to the fore in the work of male writers involving no less than Sembène Ousmane in *God's Bits of Wood*, Chinua Achebe in *Anthills of the Savannah*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross*. Regrettably Marita's preoccupation with her thwarted motherhood unnecessarily precludes her from questioning in a refreshingly fundamental way the nature of her marital relationship with Murume as well as her relationship with the larger society. Even when she seems conscious of the importance of her body as a woman and advises Janifa accordingly, such consciousness remains rudimentary.

Furthermore, Marita's dreams about marriage remain conventional, particularly when she cannot perceive how the war can alter her status. Those issues pertaining to women's rights covering the social, legal and economic spheres, issues which commanded the attention of legislators immediately after the war of liberation, remain far above Marita's head.

Thus when Marita sets out for the city to look for her son immediately after the attainment of Independence, she is severely handicapped in understanding the forces pitted against her. She dies at the hands of an impassive and menacingly blind bureaucracy which has recently succeeded the colonial one. The implications are clear: the new neo-colonial era is part of a cyclical pattern of history in which the majority of Africans, especially women, are doomed to live out the miseries and injustices of the past. The narrative would have us believe, however, that Marita's martyrdom will inspire other women such as the unknown woman and Janifa to hold on to their principles and ideas, and, if necessary, die for them.

It can also be argued that the significance of Marita's death is never fully underlined in the narrative: notwithstanding the fact that Marita's martyrdom inspires her disciples, these do not constitute a movement dedicated to the realization of her ideals. Her returned son is maimed by the struggle and rejected as a marriage partner by Janifa. The latter has also been mentally crippled by her suffering at the hands of Manyepo and Chisaga and is determined to remain single. The unknown woman dies anyway trying to retrieve Marita's body for a proper burial. In any case all of them remain individuals, with no suggestion at all that they could constitute the nucleus of an alternative society. Thus when Janifa, as Marita's disciple, says,

But I will take the broken chains with my own hands and say . . . Do not worry yourselves, I have already removed them myself. I have been removing them from my heart for many years, now my legs and hands are free . . .¹⁴

we are left with the impression that Janifa is referring to her spiritual condition rather than to the socio-economic conditions which have ferociously impinged upon her life. Put another way, her situation is such that she withdraws from the more demanding external world into an inner world where her soul seems to be at home with itself. As readers we cannot help feeling that the author is simply removing the discourse about women from the concrete and therefore changeable world and placing it into the realm of the abstract.

What we have, therefore, is a novel in which Hove raises fundamental issues pertaining to the role of men and women in a colonial context which is about to change to a neo-colonial one. The role of African males in such a society is far from flattering, especially when men are depicted as historical sell-outs. Their perception of themselves as oppressed is, according to Paul Freire, 'impaired by their submersion in the reality of oppression'. But of course this is not to suggest that they betray the interests of their society because of their gender. Indeed the role of the more radical generation represented by Marita's son belies such an interpretation. It is a pity that Hove does not bother to dramatize how that generation becomes radical and different from the older and more timid one. More important, perhaps, is that Hove creates an assembly of male characters who come across as memorable caricatures who are meant to be a severe antidote to male chauvinism. His artistic strategy is to deflate in a brutal way the self-importance which males have always rushed to appropriate for themselves at the expense of women. When we take into account that Hove himself is a male, there is also something of a ruthless

¹⁴ Hove, *Bones*, 135.

process of self-criticism implicit in the many levels of collaboration with Manyepo noticeable in the role of the male characters in *Bones*.

Related to the stock-taking exercise which the novel demands from males is, of course, the desire to create more space for the female character whose actual historical significance has been either neglected or distorted. In creating a phalanx of female figures through Nehanda, Marita, the unknown woman and Janifa, Hove is attempting, in his own ambiguous way, to state the centrality of the woman character in the Zimbabwean experience. This is an aspect we see in Marechera's *Black Sunlight* (1980) and Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988).

In the light of the above, it is logical to argue that the roles assigned to women characters hardly break new ground in the context of Zimbabwean and, indeed, African literary discourse. What *Bones* successfully depicts is the frighteningly awesome extent to which the African woman has suffered at the hands of colonialists as well as at those of the men-folk. At its best the text captures the prodigious energy of Marita, her passion for life, her love for her fellow sufferers and her deep yearning for justice and a fulfilling existence. It seems that deprivation and denial are the hallmarks characteristic of the life of women caught up in a colonial and neo-colonial context. As such the text appeals to our conscience but it does not go on to suggest that women can indeed determine history and improve their lot in life as we see in Sembéne Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood* and Ngugi wa Thiongo's *Devil on the Cross*. The spiritual freedom which Janifa seems to realize at the end of *Bones* is significant but the question is: Can it be sustained in a context in which the socio-economic conditions are prejudicial to the interests of women?

It can also be argued that what seems to have excited the imagination of international readers is not so much the feminist dimension of the novel, for this indeed remains embarrassingly rudimentary and not carefully thought through, but the manner in which the novel is written. In his essay entitled 'The African writer and the English language', Chinua Achebe wrote:

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 communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit new African surroundings.¹⁵

In this statement Achebe was alluding to the paradoxical situation in which African writers using European languages to express an African condition find themselves. They have to rework the language in such a way that while remaining accessible to the outside world it also attempts

¹⁵ Cited in Ngugi wa Thiongo's *Decolonizing the Mind* (Harare, Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1987), 8.

to do justice to the African experience. Such an exercise can arguably be called indigenization — that is, 'when a writer attempts to convey African concepts, thought patterns and linguistic features via the European medium'.¹⁶ In *Bones* there is a refreshing and daring boldness in the way Hove captures the rhythms of thought in a poetic language distinctly rooted in Shona vernacular expression. For example, here is how the anguish of Marita's disciple, Janifa, is rendered just at the point she is about to go insane:

Tears are not water. They must not be seen everyday. They are not water. The well of tears is not visited by anyone. No one knows the colour and shape of the well of tears. If tears are seen everyday, things are bad inside Marita. Things are bad. Dark things that eat you from inside until you grow as thin as me.¹⁷

Flora Veit-Wild is indeed correct when she says that the novel reads like a long prose-poem, and is lyrical and entrancing. She continues: '... it mesmerises the reader with its frequent and intense repetitions, simple vocabulary, repeated questions and exclamations and the intimate second-person style'.¹⁸ Apart from the poetic evocativeness of the language, which is not, one must admit, evenly sustained in the novel, Hove also relies on traditional proverbs, maxims and sayings which are transliterated from Shona. For instance, Chisaga and Murume seek to justify their subservient roles and the obsequious manner they relate to Manyepo by citing the traditional Shona proverb 'Mwana washe muranda kumwe', which he translates as: 'A king's son is a nobody in other lands.' Chisaga also attempts to make excuses for the outrageous behaviour of his boss by citing a traditional saying, 'Musha wega wega une benzi rawo, — Every village has its own fool.' The implication is clear — the worker, as tradition demands, should tolerate his boss's behaviour as natural. Furthermore, Manyepo's abusive tantrums as he berates the workers for their supposed laziness are aptly summarized by Chisaga when he says, 'He eats fire and vomits the embers.' This is creatively translated from the well-known Shona saying, 'Anodya marasha.' The objective of Chisaga is to urge his fellow Africans not to be so daring as to disappoint or challenge Manyepo.

Subverting the 'gospel' of subservience and conformity preached by Chisaga, Chiriseri and Murume are sayings from the same Shona language but this time used by women: for example, Marita keeps on repeating to Janifa that 'Men are like children' and it is all the more surprising they want to rule the whole world. The statement is based on a Shona saying,

¹⁶ C. Zabus, 'The Logos eaters: The Igbgo ethno-text', *Kunapipi* (1990), x, ii, 19.

¹⁷ Hove, *Bones*, 113.

¹⁸ F. Veit-Wild, *Teachers, Preachers, Non-believers: A Social History of Zimbabwean Literature* (Harare, Baobab Books, 1993), 316.

'Varume vanenge vana vadiki.' As such, women should be wary of them and safeguard their bodies from 'sexploitation'. Implicit in the meaning is that men may not be all that suited to exercising authority. In the same vein Janifa questions the wisdom of her mother who quietly proceeds to arrange a marital relationship for her with Chisaga so that she can be given the left-overs which Chisaga collects from his master's table. She asserts: 'My mother told me to eat of my own sweat, not to beg like that.' The statement is based on a Shona saying; 'Idya zvedikita rako kwete zvekupemha.' The idea is that one should be self-sufficient and independent and not depend on others. In a way most of these sayings and idiomatic expressions may come across as being more novel and exotic to international readers than to the Shona reader. Fascinating for the latter is the way Hove is either transliterating or modifying the original Shona expressions so as to suit his contextual purposes.

Unlike Marechera, who is very dependant on an innovative but standard English, and Mungoshi, who is meticulously adept yet cautious in his rendering of African experiences in English, Hove allows the rhythms and thought patterns of a Shona speaker to register much more forcefully in his writing. One is reminded of the language in those of Achebe's novels set in the pre-colonial past and the way in which their very mode of expression is designed to capture the process of thinking, philosophizing and image-making which takes place in peasant societies inhabiting a specific rural locale. In her criticism, Flora Veit-Wild argues that the language used by Hove in *Bones* 'recreates a world of sayings and proverbs and registers and a sense of oneness with the land and with tradition. It celebrates a form of Africanness which does not exist anymore.' She goes on to accuse Hove of presenting 'a monolithic view of African society'.¹⁹ Such criticism is misdirected and unfortunate, particularly when we see that people like Marita, Murume and other workers are a displaced people alienated from their traditional lands as well as from the fruits of their labour on the farm.

Furthermore, as has been shown in this article, their perceptions of their situation are far from being uniform. In fact, they are divided and therefore easy to exploit and discard. One could perhaps complain legitimately about there being an insufficient differentiation of the registers used by the various characters on the farm. Apart from that, there exists a strained relationship between oral tradition and the individuals who try to use it to justify their roles in the colonial context in which they find themselves. There is definitely no 'sense of oneness with land and tradition'. One needs to take into account the contexts in which these proverbs and sayings would be used under normal circumstances in order to appreciate the degree of fragmentation and rupture that is being signified in Hove's narrative.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 317.

In conclusion, it is important to state that *Bones* is a controversial success which is unlikely to satisfy the expectations of feminist writers and thinkers for reasons which have been amply demonstrated in this article. However, Hove should be given credit for experimenting with language in a way which refreshingly captures the modes of perception and expression associated with the rich Shona oral tradition. Such a creative and resourceful way of handling language, which he has again demonstrated in his latest novel, *Shadows*, places Hove in a somewhat similar position to that of Okara who experimented with Ijo and English in *The Voice*. The question that remains, however, relates to whether Hove's language experiment is helping to revitalize the language of the erstwhile colonial master or the Shona literary discourse.

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