Charles Mungoshi “and other writers”

(By Memory Chirere)

Since Zimbabwe turned twenty-five, a year ago, the spirit of Silver Jubilee has gripped the Southern African nation. In nearly every sphere of life, organisations have come up with various Silver Jubilee awards. These are awards given to people who are considered to have been the cream in their own fields of practice in the past twenty-five years of Zimbabwean independence. We have seen awards in Sport, Music, Tourism, Sculpture and others.

In the literary arts alone we have seen the very prestigious Seventy-Five Best Books Awards of over a year ago. These were awards given to authors whose works have been voted into the top twenty-five for each of the three Zimbabwe’s major languages-Shona, Ndebele and English. Then just on 3 March 2006, the National Arts Merit Awards had a Silver Jubilee section that had a Literary Arts slot.

Looking at the two major literary awards you discover that Charles Mungoshi has been extremely dominant. It might be correct to say that in Zimbabwean Literature, we have reached a point where we can talk about Charles Mungoshi “and other writers.” It is because he has pushed ‘out of town’ all other writers living or dead!

In the recent Zimbabwe 75 best books project, Mungoshi appeared in the top 5 lists in both English and Shona categories – a feat completed by no other Zimbabwean writer. Ruzvidzo Mufudza, a short-story writer and essayist, even joked in The Daily Mirror that had any of Mungoshi’s works been translated to Ndebele, he could also have led in that category!

On 3 March 2006, Mungoshi appeared on the final list of the recipients of the Silver Jubilee Literary Awards, alongside veteran Shona novelist Aaron Chiundura Moyo, pathfinder literary critic, George Kahari and Ndebele novelists, Ndabezinhle Sigogo and Barbara Nkala. He had beaten other hot nominees: fellow writers like Chenjerai Hove, Tsitsi Dangarembwa, Mordekai Hamutyinei, Thompson Tsodzo, Pathisa Nyathi, Ben Sibenke and the late Dambudzo Marechera and Yvone Vera.

Even when Zimbabwe’s prime university – the University of Zimbabwe – conferred an honorary doctorate degree (Doctor of Letters-Dlitt) to Charles Mungoshi, three years earlier, on Friday 14 November 2003, this was a first because since Zimbabwe’s independence, from colonial rule in 1980, at least no individual has been honored by the university, with an honorary degree, for creative writing alone.

The three separate and independent occasions that Charles has been honored must be a pointer to some specific impeccable achievements. Dr Charles Mungoshi’s literary profile is compact. He is a novelist, poet, short-story writer, playwright, film scriptwriter, actor, editor, translator, and consultant.

While each of the other prominent writers of Zimbabwe like Vera, Marechera, Chinodya, Chiundura Moyo and Sigogo have tended to write only in English or Shona or Ndebele, Mungoshi has written convincingly in both Shona and English. In 1975 alone, for instance, Mungoshi published two books: Waiting for the Rain (a novel in English) and Ndiko Kupindana Kwemazuva (a novel in Shona). These two works exude separate amazing qualities that one wonders how they could have been written “back to back.”
That ambidexterity was no fluke because later, in 1980, Mungoshi repeated a similar feat, publishing *Inongova Njakenjake* (a play in Shona) and *Some Kinds of Wounds* (a short-story collection in English.) Does Mungoshi write simultaneously with two pens - one in the left hand and the other - in the right hand? Where does he get the time? Why do his simultaneous books stay clear away from one another’s focus and style?

In fact between the years 1970 and 2000, a period of 30 years, Mungoshi made an average of one major publication in every one and half years and won a prize of sorts for each of them. Indeed Mungoshi’s name has been associated with winning prestigious prizes – Noma Award (1980/84/90/92), Commonwealth Writers Prize (1997), P.E.N. Book Prize (1975/81/98)

Mungoshi handles a broad range of literary genres and styles in a way that is yet to be surpassed by anyone in Zimbabwe. If the novel as in *Makunun’unu Maodzamoyo* (1970) or *Waiting for the Rain* (1975) offers the man a wider axis to explore and develop ideas, maybe his shorter bursts of inspiration find acute expression in shorter fiction as in *Coming of the Dry Season* (1972), *Some Kinds of Wounds* (1980) and *Walking Still* (1997). When that is done, the man does not linger long and suffer for he also broke into poetry in *The Milkman doesn’t Only Deliver Milk* (1981). Feeling maybe trapped with traditional literary forms, he could, and as happened in 1995 with *The Axe and Gwatakwata*, get into writing for the screen. Not apologizing for it, or looking back, he can go into acting itself. For instance he appears as “the journalist” in *Zivakwa wakabva*, “the store-keeper” in *Makunun’unu Maodzamoyo* and as Trebonius in *Julius Ceasar* (produced by Andrew Shaw.)

When it suits him, he can also hit the road and present papers in Zimbabwe and across the globe. The numerous invitations he has received are testimony to his status as an unofficial cultural ambassador of Zimbabwe. He refers with relish particularly to his positions as *Visiting Lecturer* at the University of Florida in the 2000 Spring Semester and *Resource Person* at Netherlands’ Groningen Children’s Book Year Workshop in 1996. Since 1980, Mungoshi hasn’t gone for a year without giving a paper in places like University of Florida, Iowa, Durham University, Amsterdam, Cambridge University and many more.

Of course there are writers who choose one form, lay eggs, hatch and settle like what Vera had done with the novel. But Vera’a prominence as writer tends to be diminished by the perceived obscurity of her writings, which clearly have more audience abroad and not at home. She also did not write in Shona or Ndebele. There is Marechera who inspired a whole post Independent generation but he died much earlier, with some eighteen years to go into the Zimbabwean Silver Jubilee.

Of course Mungoshi’s hopping from form to form hasn’t always produced the best for and by him. The case of his poetry comes to the fore. In fact he is not very well known as a poet and his *The Milkman Doesn’t Only Deliver Milk* is the least prescribed of all his books, because arguably, he writes less poetry. He refers to poetry in one interview as “only a sideline, a mere finger exercise” in his continuing endeavour to condense language to a spare state of fine precision. Mungoshi’s poetry exudes the styles and philosophies of his more celebrated prose but he doesn’t dwell long enough on poetry to create a tradition and does not seem to be coming back to it soon.
His drama has not been outstanding too. University of Zimbabwe dramatist, Samuel Ravengai, recently argued that Mungoshi’s drama, Inonogve Njake-njake, does not lend itself readily to directing as stage drama. It is because much of its “action” is very internal. Inongove Nakenjake strikes one as a “novelist’s play” and could be quite demanding to stage directors. Suggested here is that Inongove Nakenjake could have been much more successful as a novel.

Despite his success, Mungoshi is not always as inspired as a sunbird. Writing in a Budding Writers of Zimbabwe Journal in 2002, he admits that he is often victim to the writer’s block: “One of the worst things that can happen and often happens – to a writer is to fall into the doldrums, that scary place where nothing happens at all…Ndiko Kupindana Kwemazuva had just been published and then I found myself completely dry. Each time I wrote something down, I quickly destroyed it in disgust. Anything I wrote looked like the worst I had done in my life. I became depressed. I was scared of my writing desk…”

The greatest strength of Mungoshi is the life-like feel he has for people. He has sympathy for the under-dog, without over-writing. His characters belong to believable circumstances, place and time and are endearing. With use of deceptively simple language and plot comparable only to Mozambique’s Luis Honwana’s and maybe South-Africa’s Ezekiel Mphahlele’s too, Mungoshi tells stories about things you didn’t quite know about people you know.

For Mungoshi, writing is not external. It is participatory. It is not a profession or hobby it is life. He says about writing parts of Waiting for the Rain: “I was living in it (the story didn’t happen in the past. It is a drum. It is happening, it is playing now.”

And maybe unknown to him, Charles Mungoshi helped introduce and popularize the techniques of psychological realism and stream of consciousness. At attainment of independence African scholars in the Department of English of the University of Zimbabwe found Mungoshi’s quantity and quality of work very useful in arguing for a course on works by Africans on the English language. The Rhodesian academics had often argued that there were not enough of such works to be studied in schools, colleges and university levels.


But then the name of Mungoshi is likely to remain with us in Literature, long after Charles. His young brother David has a literary graph that is still rising. His several publications and fresh scripts demonstrate that he might go beyond his elder brother’s exploits.

mchirere@arts.uz.ac.zw