

## Ignatius Mabasa's MAPENZI and innovation in The Shona novel of Zimbabwe

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*This paper sets out to explore the innovativeness of Ignatius Mabasa's Mapenzi (1999) (Fools), a recent Shona novel of Zimbabwe. Much of that innovation is stylistic and structural and it naturally impacts primarily on the meaning of this novel and on the Shona novel in general as story-telling medium and cultural carrier.*

The first parts of Rino Zhuwarara's "Zimbabwean Literature in Shona" entry to Steven Serafain's Encyclopaedia of World Literature ably summarise the general nature of the Zimbabwean novel in Shona from 1980-1984:

"Shona is the term coined by missionary scholars to describe mutually intelligible dialects spoken by Karanga, Korekore, Manyika, Zezuru and Ndau people who comprise three quarters of the current eleven million population of Zimbabwe. All have rich oral traditions which, through language, myths, legends and folktales, have shaped, to some extent, the texture of written Shona literature which emerged in the late 1950s. The literature itself can be divided into three broad categories – those texts set in the pre-colonial era (before 1890), those dealing with the colonial situation (198-1980) and those exploring the issues of the post-independence period.

"The writing of Shona novels starts in the 1950s with the publication of Solomon Mutswairo's (b. 1924) FESO (1956; Devil Thorns) and Patrick Chakaipa's (b. 1932) KARIKOGA GUMI REMISEVE (1958); **The Lonely One of the Ten Arrows**) and others. Noticeable is the yearning for a once glorious Shona past characterized by communal values and a common identity. The novels themselves are a result of blending of elements of Shona legends and folktales with aspects of the western novel. As for the majority of novels dealing with the colonial situation and which, at present, constitute the bulk of Shona literature, they are largely about the disintegration of Shona cultural values. Of interest is the way most of these eschew the political, hardly question the socio-economic-system and tend to see social and political problems in terms of weaknesses of individual characters hence their being didactic and moralistic. This trend is evident in Bernard Chidzero's (b.1927) NZVENGA MUTSVAIRO (1927 : **Dodge the Broom**) and Chakaipa's (b.1932.) DZASUKWA MWANA ASINA HEMBE (1967); **The Pots have been Cleaned for Beer Brewing**). Those which tend to be more critical of the colonial situation are very few and exemplified by Thompson Tsodzo's (b.1947) PAFUNGE (1970: **Think About It**) and Aaron Chiunduramoyo's (b. 1950) ZIVA KWAWAKABVA (1976)

**Know Where You came From).** Obviously the state-controlled Literature Bureau established in 1953 as well as the influence of missionary teaching affected the nature and orientation of the Shona Novel. It is only after the attainment of independence in 1980 that the Shona novel becomes explicit on the suffering caused by colonial oppression and the Zimbabwean war of independence. Mordecai Hamutyinei (b. 1934) *ZVAKANGA ZVAKAOMA MUZIMBABWE* (1984: **Life Had Become Difficult in Zimbabwe**) and Mutsvairo's *MWEYA WANEHAND* (1988: **The Spirit of Nehanda**) are fine examples. Since then vibrant creativity has taken place with more novels coming out almost every year. However the vibrancy is not always matched by experimentation with form and style except in Charles Mungoshi's (b. 1947) *NDIKO KUPINDANA KWAMAZUVA* (1978: **That Is How Time Passes**) and *KUNYARARA HAKUSI KUTAURA?* (1983: **Is Silence is not Communicating?**). In these novels psychological realism and the stream of consciousness techniques are used to explore the inner lives of characters and the philosophical implications of human existence. In all, over one hundred and twenty novels had been published by 1996 and there is no doubt that the novel as a genre has been the dominant one in Shona literature.

“Now that the censorship of the colonial period is gone and writers are relatively more free to write on any area of their interest there has been some vibrant literary fermentation taking place in Zimbabwe since 1980. A less servile literary tradition in Shona than the colonial one is likely to emerge soon if only Shona writers could experiment more with form, style and writing techniques.”<sup>1</sup>

Coming sixteen years after Charles Mungoshi's *Kunyarara Hakusi Kutura?* which had been generally perceived as the most innovative novel in Shona, Mabasa's *Mapenzi* is arguably more innovative. The hype raised by this recent novel is far more feverish than that raised by other earlier innovative novels; Raymond Choto's *Tongoona* and Vitalis Nyawaranda's *Barika Remashefu*. These are novels that had previously challenged Mungoshi's novel in matters of structural and stylistic innovation.

In a review by John Gambanga, *Mapenzi* is described as “... abstract. Ugly but beautiful...” and Mabasa “could be the Shakespeare that we have been waiting for.”<sup>2</sup> At the University of Zimbabwe where I teach, I have often heard it mentioned, with remarkable ‘authority,’ that “Mabasa is a madman.” He has even been considered “a distant relative to Dambudzo Marechera,” the late prize-winning Zimbabwean writer who wrote almost entirely in the English Language. There was even debate whether Mabasa's is a novel or just a heap of broken images.

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<sup>1</sup> . R Zhuwarara, draft of his “Zimbabwean Literature in Shona” entry to S. Serafin's Encyclopaedia of World Literature, Harare, 1990, pp1-2

<sup>2</sup> J Gambanga, book review, Daily Mirror, Harare, 3 November 1999, p12.

Having known Mabasa myself since our boyhood, I can safely say that at least he is not mad and he is no relation of Dambudzo Marechera of **The House of Hunger** fame. However the legend around Ignatius Mabasa serves to confirm that his novel has definitely extended the Shona written narrative to considerable margins even if Zimbabweans are yet to agree on how to place **Mapenzi**. However, it has already been voted amongst the twenty-five best books of Shona literature since 1950 at the just ended Zimbabwe International Book-Fair(2004 edition).

**Mapenzi** has, however, a humble centre and plot. It is basically a story about one Hamundigoni - a veteran of Zimbabwe's 1970s war of liberation. He says he has just been expelled from the teaching field because the authorities allege that he is not mentally stable. Hamundigoni reminisces loudly and aggressively about his experiences. His presence and story touches nearly everyone in the novel.

The creation and use of central characters of Hamundigoni's temperament is a serious innovation on its own in Shona literature. Hamundigoni is a wanderer, going from place to place; censuring careless speakers, rebuking pretenders and social hypocrites, chiding mean and selfish relatives, criticizing the status-quo, singing the latest tunes...He is a man of no fixed abode but you sense that he has a private destination – the Truth!

Although a character like him is not new to Shona experience since such characters people Shona orature, Hamundigoni has no equal in written Shona literature. Maybe T.K. Tsodzo's Phainos Kamunda in **Pafunge** comes closest to Hamundigoni. However Phainos is not as central to **Pafunge** as Hamundigoni is to **Mapenzi**. In Zimbabwean literature in English Mungoshi's Garabha in **Waiting for the Rain** comes closest to Hamundigoni although the later is calmer, reserved and less talkative allowing only the drum to carry his poetry and messages.

Maybe Hamundigoni is in the mould of the Shakespearan clown as in the case of Feste in **Twelfth Night**. Hamundigoni is uncensored and sometimes nonsensical. Of course He can also be very comic, warm and likeable. He is the thin veneer the author uses to lampoon the A-Z of contemporary Zimbabwean society. One senses that the hazy suggestion that Hamundigoni is mentally unstable is the author's technique to avoid open and conscious attack of social vices.

In fact Hamundigoni usually declares that he is not mad at all! And yet whenever he is incensed, he declares that everyone is mad: "Mapenzi vanhu vaye! Tiri Mapenzi tese, mazipenzi,"<sup>3</sup> (These people are mad. We are all mad people, mad.)

**Mapenzi** also introduces to the Shona novel a new form of naming chapters. The publication of **Kunyarara...** and **Tongoona** introduces to the Shona novel the technique of using characters' names as headings for chapters. If the heading of a chapter is

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<sup>3</sup> Ignatius Mabasa, *Mapenzi*, 1999, College Press, Harare, p22

“Lorna”, for instance, the whole chapter becomes Lorna’s experiences narrated by her from a first person narrative.

However in that regard, Mapenzi makes Kunyarara... and Tongoona seem very innocent and common-place. Mapenzi has characters’ names as chapter headings, too but it does far much more than that. Some chapters are not necessarily narrated by the character whose name is indicated as the heading. For instance in the chapter called “Landlady” pp74-80, the narrator is actually another character called Bunny. The landlady herself comes in later in the chapter. Another example: In the chapter called “Heaven” pp80-84, the girl Heaven does not narrate the story but she is actually referred to alongside other characters by an evidently third person narrator. You could say Mabasa takes up Mungoshi and Choto’s technique but quickly innovates it.

Above and beyond that, Mabasa sometimes employs chapters that are narrated by neither of his characters nor the intrusive narrator. Two chapters in Mapenzi – the first and the last- are simply entitled – “Munhu” (person). That voice of munhu is a voice of an unknown entity which addresses a not so definite audience. It asks no questions and expects no answers. It is a voice not attributable to a single person - dead or alive but it has a popular feel to it. The voice assumes that members of the audience have also experienced what is being narrated.

When Munhu’s voice opens the novel, it is abrupt and self indulgent that the reader turns to the front cover to ascertain if indeed he/she has picked a novel and not a philosopher’s diary.

Munhu then abruptly quits until the last and one-paragraph-long-chapter. This anonymous voice reminds one of the masked dancer who sees you but knows that you won’t be able to identify him. The masked dancer is not a practice amongst the Shona people although it is for their neighbours in the North and East.

If the above seems mischievous and titillating, then the chapter narrated by a dead woman – Tanya’s mother – is startling. “Mai Tanya, dead as she is, reflects on the wrongs of her lifetime. In Zimbabwean literature in Shona, the dead rarely speak. This is a kind of preserve of the novels in English as seen in Kanengoni’s Echoing Silences and Chenjerai Hove’s Bones. In all the moments that the dead have spoken in the Shona novel it has been in the convention of “possession”, or “conscience of the living” or in dreams. However in Shona folk-tale the dead sing (like the living) and they also sing from above the tree-trunks and from beneath the solid rocks.

The debate on whether African writers should use African languages or European languages is well documented and well known. The divide is clear: Ngugi wa Thiongo and others on one side and Wole Soyinka and others on the other side. The sad part of this debate is that it has been raised at the expense of the other debate: should we stick to perfect standard Shona, Zulu, Chewa, Gikuyu, Ibo e.t.c.? or, should the African writers write “realistic” texts that show that the Shona, Zulu, Ibo etc speakers are picking words

and phrases from European and some other non-African languages? The novel Mapenzi has ignited such a debate in Zimbabwean literary circles.

John Gambanga finds Mabasa “making excessive use of English in a Shona novel” and this amounts to “daily assassinating our beautiful language, allowing it to play second fiddle to others. That is wrong and unpatriotic.”<sup>4</sup>

But a much younger reviewer, Laura Chiweshe argues that whilst notions of standard Shona are appealing, nobody speaks pure Shona. The so called pure Shona sounds heavy, stiff and sometimes ridiculous. She continues to point out that African languages should not behave as if they haven’t benefited from and in return, fed into neighbouring and far away languages.<sup>5</sup>

An example of this “language mixing” is given on the following examples taken from Mapenzi:

- He has a good job kune imwe company iri mutown.
- Akatondipromisa basa next year.
- I hate chalk dust nekuswera ndichikwamatata kuvanhu ini.
- Ko nhai magi asikana, do you think it is too late kuti utsvage...<sup>6</sup>

John Gambanga’s frustration is understandable but it is clear that he doesn’t consider the language use in Mapenzi very closely. It is not Mabasa who assaults the Shona Language in the novel. It is the characters who code-switch from Shona to English thereby portraying their social and academic status. The young tend to code-switch but the old like Maud’s mother, sticks to a “standard” Shona and its idioms. It would however be unrealistic and “out of character” for an “educated” person like Magi to speak in traditional Shona and its archaism.<sup>7</sup>

Alongside the argument for or against the pursuit of a purist language in African writings it is important to state that to date, Mapenzi is the first Shona novel which dwells graphically and directly on the motions of love-making. Two examples include the description of the sexual encounters between Saru and Eddie in the toilet and that between Sebastin and the prostitute near the tuck-shop. The narrative makes you see and hear the two pairs of lovers going through the sexual act.

For the Shona people love-making cannot be a subject for open talk unless sanctioned by the convenience of specific place or company. However the writer is caught up between cultural norms and the narrative dictates of the moment of the story. William Chigidi a popular playwright justifies the use of uninhibited language:

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, Gambanga

<sup>5</sup> Laura Chiweshe, Literary Forum in **The Sunay Mail**, Harare, May, 2004, p3

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, Mabasa, **Mapenzi**, p49

<sup>7</sup> Memory Mubata, “Innovation in Ignatius Mabasa’s Mapenzi,” Honours Dissertation, department of African Languages and literature, University of Zimbabwe, Harare, 2002, p21

“...my language is for real living characters and not pretensions ones. Traditional scenes demand traditional language, but modern scenes demand modern language. I want to make people see themselves and to stand outside themselves to reflect on their inner nature...”<sup>8</sup>

It appears that by choosing a narrative form (that tends towards going to the depths of experience), Mabasa has also chosen (conscious or unconsciously) a new culture and language register that knows no inhibition. In a novel that sets out to dwell on “experience as it is,” the writer cannot avoid scenes and words that are generally considered vulgar, rude and disrespectful. As the Shona novel “develops,” it appears some of its branches are bound to be set aside only for “special readership” thereby rendering the novel private.

Away from vulgarity, Mapenzi radically defines the meaning of **text**. Mapenzi ‘strays’ across the forms – prose, poetry, epistle, dream, song – as it unfolds, recalling Ulysses by James Joyce. For the first time in Zimbabwean literature, here is text that is not for permanently married to one form. There is recurrent inclusion of aspects of popular culture, especially contemporary song. For instance in one of his long narrations Hamundigone sings one of Zimbabwean singer Simon Chimbetu’s songs:

Shirikadzi inochema-chema mwana  
wangu dangire nagotwe  
Kana waenda kuchirungu  
Ndinyorerewo tsamba  
Ndinyorerewo ndizive wakadini  
Ndonyorere ndizorodze pfungwa<sup>9</sup>

(My son the first and lost, when you go  
to the white-man’s city, write one so  
that I know how you are getting on.

There are also very active references to the real songs of Oliver Mtukudzi, Thomas Mapfumo and others. Hamundigoni also refers and recalls text from Charles Mungoshi’s Ndiko Kupindana kwamazuva. Those who come from different traditions will learn that in Zimbabwe’s written literature we had not seen as active references to contemporary art forms as in Mapenzi. This novel affords itself privileges to be both art and art critic.

It is difficult to be ascertain what this novel means to Shona literature. Its highly experimental style and structure renders it a very philosophic novel. It deliberately

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid, Memory Mubata, Honours Dissertation, p24

<sup>9</sup> Simon Chimbetu, ‘Chirikadzi’ from album ‘Marxist Brothers’ Greatest Hits of early music,’ ZMC productions, Harare, 1997

chooses its readership among people of a certain intellectual level. It is no accident that Mapenzi concerns itself with the degreed characters, middle class characters and thinkers.