

Reading Chenjerai Hove's Ancestors (By Memory Chirere)

Part One:

Ancestors: A background

In this article, which will run in segments, we will discuss Chenjerai Hove's novel of 1996 called Ancestors. In doing that we realize that Ancestors is currently a set book on the Zimbabwean Advanced Level Literature syllabus.

I have had opportunity to chat widely with teachers and students of Literature, establishing various ways of reading and interpreting Ancestors. Some students were sad that their teachers were asking them 'to do such a strange novel!' They wanted to know if anyone in his or her right senses could ever understand Ancestors? Why were we not asked to do Bones, they complained. At least Bones is easy, they reasoned. The more subtle ones wanted to know if I understand Ancestors at all. Was there a plot in Ancestors? Could I identify the major themes in Ancestors for them?

I told them: Let us read the novel first and talk later.

We realize that, to date, there is no commentary or study guide to Ancestors. That is indeed a setback. Teachers and their students usually need ready-made critical material to augment their own criticism.

But sometimes the absence of ready-made notes is a blessing in disguise! We should be prepared to 'open up a new path in the forest.' We must not be afraid to be the very first voices on the meaning of literary texts from our own authors. Study guides should not be worshipped. They are written by people like us who have their own subjective views on literary texts. We must read the text and develop our own ideas.

In one interview with the local press, Chenjerai Hove revealed that Ancestors "is the nearest to a family biography that I have written." And in a poetic introduction to his latest poetry collection called Blind Moon, Hove volunteers that he once developed fears and dreams akin to Mucha's in Ancestors. His actual words are: "I used to dream that I was flying. And my father used to think that I needed a traditional healer to cure me of that. I refused the attention of the healer. Young as I was, I said, 'Why should I not dream like that? It is so beautiful to fly.'"

It might mean that some aspects of Ancestors are the author's own 'fictionalised history'. In saying that, care should be taken to stress that Ancestors is not necessarily Hove's life story and history, blow by blow.

Fictionalised histories couch up only the essentials in the writer's life with other material. *Ancestors* is not Hove's autobiography.

Chenjerai Hove was born in Mazvihwa area in Zimbabwe some forty kilometers outside Zvishavane, about fifty years ago. There was a family of two sisters and seven brothers. Around 1964 their family moved to Copper Queen farming area in Gokwe East and here he completed his education at Ungwe.

This is important as it helps us appreciate the panoramic descriptions of rural landscape and the sensibilities of an African countryside in *Ancestors*. The migration of Mucha's family from a Tribal trusts Land to a Purchase area has very close echoes to the same migration in Chenjerai Hove's family in search for better farming lands and other fortunes. The author is therefore working with very familiar people, environment and issues.

Hove began to write at school. He went to Kutama Mission and Marist Brothers Det. Maybe that is why there is a strong interface and conflict between traditional African life and Christianity in *Ancestors*. You realise that the main character, Mucha, like Hove, spends nine months every year at Mission school reading books and worshipping God the white man's way. He comes back for three months every year and resorts to the 'traditional regime.' He suffers from some kind of confusion in that ensuing cultural conflict. He also wonders whether he goes to school in order to move away from the village or to understand the village and his people. Such contradictions are well captured in *Ancestors*.

Hove trained as a teacher at Gweru Teacher's College in the mid seventies. By then his appetite for books and writing had already grown remarkably. He taught for two years before joining Mambo Press in Gweru as editor. In such a literary environment he became prolific, writing and publishing his love poems in Shona, alongside other poets in books like *Nduri DzeRudo* and *Matende Mashava*.

Maybe that explains those long passages in *Ancestors* that dwell on what it means and feels like to fall in love or to woo a girl. Hove is at his best when describing the pains and follies of lovers, especially secret lovers. Of all Zimbabweans writing in English, Hove could be one of the best at describing the emotion called love.

Hove became chairman of the Zimbabwe Writers Union from 1984 to 89. He enrolled with the University of South Africa and graduated in Literature and English Language. He furthered his studies in the same area with the University of Zimbabwe. In 1991 he became Writer-in Residence at the University of Zimbabwe, a position he held until 1994.

Although writers like Dambudzo Marechera, Musaemura Zimunya and Charles Mungoshi became prominent much earlier than Hove, he only became known after Independence. He has fourteen poems in 'And Now The Poets Speak' (1981). Hove has published a number of poetry anthologies that include 'Up In Arms' (1982), 'Red Hills of Home' (1985), 'Rainbow in The Dust' (1998), and 'Blind Moon' (2003). Coming only second to Zimunya, Hove is one of the most anthologized Zimbabwean poets in English. He is a poet through and through.

This explains the indulgent poetics one finds in his prose. He has written a number of novels: *Masimba Avanh* (19), *Bones* (1988), *Shadows* (1991) and *Ancestors* (1996) *Bones* won the “Noma Award for Publishing in Africa” in 1989 and has remained Hove’s most prominent publication.

One might suggest that Chenjerai Hove is one of the more prominent voices in Zimbabwean Literature after 1980, alongside Shimmer Chinodya and Yvone Vera. As seen in *Bones* and *Shadows* and his poems, Hove writes about the powerless of society – women, children and the poor. He speaks passionately about it, sometimes in abstraction: “Poetry is a way of laughing and crying. Humanity is a queer mixture of laughter and sorrow. It is in the songs and dances of my birth that I drink the waters of poetry...in poetry I am part of other voices in other hearts, but I am also part of the voices that are ignored...”

There has been debate on what kind of vision Hove has beyond crying for and with the weak. Is he a blind humanist whose duty is only to cry with no social agency? Could his crying be his important contribution to the human struggles? There has also been hot debate in the local media about why he is currently in self-imposed exile in Europe. Married in 1978, Hove is a father of five.

Part two:

Ancestors: Narrator narrating other narrators

Of all the novels of Chenjerai Hove, *Ancestors* is the least known and discussed. *Bones* which won the 1989 “Noma Award for Publishing In Africa” was so huge a success that it tends to overshadow all what Hove wrote afterwards.

In their impatience, readers and scholars tend to erroneously conclude that everything after *Bones* – the other novels, *Shadows* and *Ancestors* – are either poor versions of *Bones* or that they do not open, for Hove, new content and form. But all those are only subjective readings.

Shadows, it has been argued, does not incorporate the major struggles of a nation as much as *Bones*. *Shadows* is sometimes considered as ‘a private story’ that is ‘an offshoot of *Bones*’ only as far as style is concerned. However a critic called Mxolisi Sibanyoni prefers *Shadows* to *Bones*. He thinks that *Bones* is too much of a Nationalist text and that it deliberately sets out to be “a monument to commemorate the martyrs of the Zimbabwean Liberation struggle.” He adds: “*Shadows* subverts many of the Nationalist orthodoxies apparent in *Bones*.” Such notions are amazing as they seek necessarily to attack all ideas associated with venerating the liberation of Africa. The notion that Nationalism is a limiting ideology needs reexamination as it ignores the complexities in which Nationalism emerged and developed. *Ancestors*, Hove’s latest novel has been judged by some as ‘obscure’ and even ‘difficult.’

But the Advanced Level literature students in Zimbabwe, who are studying *Ancestors*, will know that their exam is not about liking or disliking a text. It is about coming to terms with how a text says what it sets out to say. That too is clear but can be limiting also, as students at Advanced level do not necessarily

have opportunity to dwell on what they 'dislike' about a novel. Hopefully, the Advanced Level students will unearth some special traits to *Ancestors*. Hopefully they are not reading *Ancestors* for exam purposes only.

Ancestors marks a turning point in Hove's prose both in matters of content and form. With *Ancestors*, Hove is working with a more creative narrative technique than before. The narrative technique in *Ancestors* is more common with Latin American Literature, especially as in *The Gringo* by Carlos Fuentes. For these writers, 'narrating the narratives of a non narrating narrator' is a common literary practice. You find here various strands of narratives in one narrative and pretence towards refusing to use a narrator at all.

In the first strand narrative in *Ancestors*, Mucha the immediate narrator tells us his story and the story of his family as it moves from the Tribal Trust lands to the Purchase Areas. He continues up to the time his mother is divorced with her second husband. He proceeds until the family migrates to Fanwell's place. That first strand ends with Mucha, now a fully-grown man sitting at his deceased father's home for a memorial ritual. This first strand of the narrative is the family story as Mucha consciously knows and remembers it.

The second strand narrative is the subterranean narrative. In this one Mucha narrates the family story from the point of view and spiritual instruction of Miriro. Miriro is a female ancestor who was born and lived deaf and dumb. She dies tragically when she hangs herself because she has been forced to marry a local drunkard. Through Miriro, Mucha sees and recalls the past before his own birth. Miriro appears to Mucha in dreams and sometimes in some kind of trance akin to spirit possession.

Whilst Mucha's own reminisces capture events at the level of realism, Miriro's reminisces fill in historical gaps as they give to Mucha first hand details of what happened in the family before he was born! In addition, Miriro's voice acts as the all-seeing force that tells Mucha the immediate thoughts of family members, in the present and in the past. Combined, Mucha and Miriro's family experiences span a period of about a hundred and fifty years. Such a double strand narrative is the first one of its type in Zimbabwean Literature. This makes *Ancestors* rather challenging to read, as the reader must constantly determine the exact speaker. Sometimes Mucha speaks for himself and yet sometimes he is listening to what Miriro is saying about herself or other people.

But this narrative threatens to do more than the double in that Mucha has insight into other family members' narrative. For example Mucha becomes privy to the personalized narratives of his mother, Tariro and even his father's. One could call this: Parallel stories within a story, told by one person as he tells his story and the story of one ancestor who lived and died deaf and dumb!

The double narrative is 'blind.' It goes very haphazardly across the ages and generations from 1850 to 1989 to 1960 to 1920 to 1970... creating a very hypnotic and complex maze.

Adding on to this charm is the fact that Miriro who remained deaf and dumb throughout her short life is telling us what she 'heard' during her lifetime. She remembers the sounds of birds and animals, people's songs and

conversation. She remembers all things that are normally not available to those who are deaf and dumb. However it is important to stress that she can only 'hear' the sounds of the old world NOW, "many years after I have died..." and "Many years later, after I have died, I can speak. I can tell my story to all hearers. I can say all the words of the world... My joys and sorrows cross all the rivers of time and distance, hearing voices from across generations of families and homes. I hear voices of young women courting before I was born."

James Gibbs thinks that by augmenting Mucha's experience with those of a woman from the past who was deaf and dumb, Hove creates a problem that he never overcomes. Gibbs is certain that the constant shifts of narratives in *Ancestors* only manage to alienate the reader and denies Hove opportunity to pursue the multiplicity of themes that he opens up.

Indeed many broad subjects like migration, oppression of women, loss of land, missionaries, love, colonial impact are lumped together and given a cursory glance. One feels that this is a flitting novel that does not allow the reader to settle comfortably on any theme. It is a broad family history that pretends to unfold with reckless abandon.

In his anger with *Ancestors*, Gibbs complains: "I am tired of the shifts; (in this novel) wearied of the elegiac and apocalyptic. Even the episodes about the grandfather's grave are allowed to become maudlin!"

The frustrations of Gibbs with *Ancestors* are understandable. However one needs to tolerate that this here is Hove's biggest experiment. It is a very deliberate thing and more work went into 'how to tell the story' than the story itself. Hove experiments with many things - narrative, character, confession, protest, hybridism, feminism, spiritualism, magic realism... He also borrows very heavily from dream, hallucination, memory and the Shona concepts of ancestry, *mamhepo* and *Ngozi* 'the avenging spirit.'

Part three:

Ancestors: the plot, language and women

Chenjerai Hove's novel called *Ancestors* is told in a very complex way. You cannot tell what happens in this story with a mathematical accuracy because the story is written in such a manner that you must not do that.

This novel is a huge and very conscious experiment, which shows that some Latin American writers like Fuentes, Marquez and Allende influence Hove. For these writers a story must be able to sustain itself at various levels. Dream, memory and reality must not have distinctions. Such experiments are meant to charm and mesmerise the reader.

However despite the various strands of narratives we saw in *Ancestors*, Mucha largely tells the story. Mucha's reminiscences can be fine, minutely detailed boyhood experiences. But when Mucha benefits from Miriro's narrative, the reminiscences are full of omniscience of an all-seeing God. Sometimes everything transposes into the very individualized narratives of other people in

the family, living or dead. It is imminent that Mucha is brother to Tariro and they have younger and older siblings who include Fanwell and Jairos.

During her girlhood, Mucha's mother is offered in marriage to a carver and a drum player who is old enough to be her father. On his death, she is inherited by one of his sons with another woman. Shona custom has it that all children born out of such a union (Mucha and his siblings) automatically become children of the deceased.

Tariro is later given in marriage to a distant friend of their mother's inheritor and it is not very clear from the narrative whether she lives on or dies during the span of the story.

Hove's English Language in *Ancestors* as seen previously in *Bones and Shadows*, has very close echoes to the Shona language. It is literal translation from Shona to English most of the times. Critics have referred to it as "Africanised English" or simply "Hove's rural idiom."

Hove's novels can be read for the sheer lyricism of the Shona language that resonates articulately from beneath the English language. Some of it: "Son of my sister...instead of hasting your days in drink and women, come let us work the rich soils of these new lands together. You will be my hand and I will be your keeper, your heart, your everything." Some more: "May the ancestors give us more people like you so the land can be livable... In drink, your ancestors and mine shake hands and say: see, our children know how to share the earth."

Through such language Hove reaches very high poetic pitches. He is also able, through that, to harness a certain spirit of place and a natural if not nativist feeling. In the prologue to his essays called *Shebeen Tales* Hove volunteers that: "In my work there is a constant conversation between the earth, nature and the sky."

In that note Hove is a disciple of Chinua Achebe who does his own version of this literal translation from Ibo to English in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. In an article entitled 'The African Writer and the English Language', Achebe argues for this kind of writing: "I feel that 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 the African surroundings."

But it is not everyone who praises this project. To start with, if you Africanise English, it is clear that you are enriching English at the expense of African languages! Some critics think that Hove is indulging in 'romantic writing.' Flora Wild even thinks that Hove's characters, as a result, speak like one another regardless of their different age groups and circumstances. The language of his characters fails "to make any distinction between facts and fiction, feelings and intellect.'

Ancestors is dominated by women's stories. The stories of Miriro, Tariro and Mucha's mother. It is not clear why the stories necessarily come through Mucha, a masculine medium. Of course Mucha claims that he is "a hearer of endless tales, stories to which I belong but could not assist in making." The stories of Miriro pour out into Mucha's mind when he is "sleeping in the depth of

the night” or when he is “sitting down there under the cool shade of a tree.” Mucha cannot control Miriro’s narratives because they are not his.

He has mixed feelings towards this kind of set up. Sometimes he thinks that it is right that Miriro speaks to him and through him because she never had opportunity, like all women, to tell her story. But sometimes he is annoyed and considers Miriro to be ‘a voice that comes and goes as it wills, with no respect for any barrier.’ Sometimes he is full of praise for the Miriro’s voice, saying that it “is a dark voice full of joy and sadness, telling its story, my story, our story.”

But once, at boarding school, Mucha is unnerved by the voice that he writes to his father back home protesting: “Who is this deaf and dumb woman who keeps haunting my nights? Do you know her? I wish you did so could tell her to leave me alone. Sometimes she comes to me in the middle of the night, claiming me, wanting to take me away her. I talk to her and she begins to cry. She cries until early in the morning, wanting to take me with her.”

It is not clear whether Miriro is taking Mucha hostage or is persuasive. She can be obscure and threatening too, saying to Mucha: “You have a story within you, and I am the story. It is this story which has made you live. Not to tell it is death. A story untold is the story of death. One who has a story inside them and does not tell it means they are harbouring death in their hearts, in their souls...”

The irony is that Miriro died without telling her story, her say about life. Given away in a marriage that she had not approved, she chose death by suicide. Maybe it suits her to haunt a masculine member of the family as revenge and as a warning that all those who are silenced are bound to seek alternative media.

But Kizito Muchemwa thinks each spirit possession in Zimbabwean literature so far could signify the ‘backward migration of the spirit’ that allows for the resurfacing of previously ‘suppressed discourses and identities. It allows (the spirit) to rediscover that which had been lost and discarded, those aspects that are too horrific to integrate and accept within a modern society.”

Beyond that type of ‘a return’ it is not known what Miriro sets out to achieve. Besides harping about being deaf and dumb and given away in marriage to a drunkard, Miriro does not set an alternative vision. She stays far away from the larger society and there is evidence that as her medium grows older and mature, she recurs less frequently. And in the final visitation, she fades away in a flame cloud with Tariro: “The two walk away from this land of ancestors in which they had lived with tears in their eyes and burdens in their hearts.” But the two are not assured at all that no woman in the family in the future will be given away in forced marriage.

Students should debate on whether Ancestors is a convincing feminist text. The female side of the family tree is portrayed as weak and hostage to the male side. The blurb argues that as Miriro and Tariro’s voices merge, the male hearer (Mucha) “realizes that he must listen to and take responsibility for their stories in order to repair the damage made by his male ancestors.” So the agency for change remains the responsibility of men.

Part four: Ancestors and the images of land tenure

The migration of Mucha's family from the unnamed Tribal Trust Land to Gotami puts on spot part of the Rhodesian Land Tenure system. The 'new' lands of Gotami on which Mucha's family settles make up one of the so called Native Purchase Areas created by the white Rhodesian system as it went about dividing land into phases for different uses.

In *Ancestors* Chenjerai Hove dramatizes that exercise casually but illuminating very typical images of land use and governance of land in Rhodesia. In fact it would not be possible for any reader to appreciate the issues in *Ancestors* fully without some general knowledge of the Rhodesian land tenure system.

Summary details from the London based *New African* magazine of June 2000 show that the massive land Tenure Act of 1930 changed the face of land ownership in Rhodesia and continued in series into the 1960's. The Act and its series excluded Africans from about half of the country's land surface area which made up the best farming lands. This despite the fact that Africans made 95 percent of the Rhodesian population.

It divided land as follows: Native Reserves (29 million acres), Native Purchase Areas (8million acres), European areas (49 million acres) and Forests (3 million acres), Unassigned Areas (6 million Acres). Then the black population was 1.1 million against the whites' 50 000.

In his novels and even in his poetry in *Up In Arms* and *Red Hills of Home*, Chenjerai Hove is keen on portraying how skewed the Rhodesian land tenure was. The Native areas, like the one Mucha's family finds itself in initially, tended to be overcrowded and subsequently the land lost its little fertility, tress, pastures and rivers.

The Muramba village in *Bones* is like Mucha's village. It is described as "not even good enough for donkeys to live in" and a zone where "people and dogs eat from one plate." In contrast the European areas were in very fertile territories that received heavy rains and were more suitable to all types of commercial farming activities.

But in *Ancestors* Hove is concerned specifically with the historic 'promotion' of a few 'elitist' Africans from the Native Areas to the Native Purchase Areas. The creation of the Native Purchase Areas, as hove dramatizes here was a very cunning move by the colonial masters.

Some research by Ranger and Cheater are also elaborate on the forces that led to the creation of the Native purchase Areas. At some point within the Native Areas emerged some African farmers who either tilled large acres of land or demonstrated a high level of entrepreneurship in the manner in which they farmed. As a result this elite group of African farmers were perceived as a danger to the colonial system because they would soon become frustrated by the limited farming space and poor quality of land in the Native areas. They would complicate the land question.

As a result the Native Purchase areas were created for such African farmers. The purchase areas were made spacious enough for individual farmers and their families but not large enough to allow the African farmers to compete with white farmers. The process would generally involve removing the entrepreneurial farmers from the Native Areas, train them to become 'Master Farmers' and exclude them from both the colonial and the Native areas societies as a way of isolating them.

In *Ancestors* Mucha's father is one such farmer who is 'promoted' into the isolation of such areas. He feels excited by his new land and happily removed from his poor folks in the Native area: "In these moments he forgets about you all, about everything, about the graves of his ancestors abandoned in far away lands. He is alone without the interference of the dead and the living..."

Sometimes these farmers made a good buffer zone between the European Areas and the Native areas. Rabger and Cheater cite Marirangwe area, southwest of Salisbury as one of the earliest Native Purchase areas in Rhodesia. The Africans still refer to them as Matenganyika (bought lands) maybe because they were offered on rent-to-buy conditions.

Before 'promoting' Mucha's father to the Native Purchase Area, the Land Development Officer, a white man, first entices him towards the idea of growing cash crops and engaging in commercial farming. He says to Mucha's father: "You must not grow crops just to feed the belly. You must feed the belly of the purse too, the purse."

Eventually he is transferred to the newly created Native purchase area of Gotami. Ironically Gotami's original people are first pushed off by the colonial masters "beyond those smoke-blue hills in the distance" in order to make space for the new class of black farmers.

Ownership or loss of land and space is an important issue in *Ancestors* as in all other novels by Chenjerai Hove. Evident is the colonial forces that take or give land and space. The removal of the original Gotami's people is well dramatized in this novel: "It is sad how Gotami's people were removed from these lands. One day the white man came to the chief. He drove his Land-Rover through the thick, dark forest. He knew what he wanted. He came to Gotami and told him: 'This land no longer belongs to you. By next week, when the moon shines, your people and you must move...'"

In the Native areas Mucha's father grows to dislike the poor soils. He becomes sleepless. When he moves across his fields, "he steps on the soil he has grown to love for many years and now feels detached from it... he now despises it like an unwanted child... He fingers it... Pitiful sand. Sand. Sand. An ocean of sand without end..."

The prospects of better land are not lost to the chief and the villagers in the Native areas. When Mucha's father receives the Master Farmer certificate and is promoted to the Native Purchase area his chief whispers into his ear enviously: "You are a nestling that has grown its feathers... If you do not fly, it is your own fault..."

In this novel, good land represents life and abundance. When Mucha's family settles in Gotami, their fortunes are very clear: "When your mothers plant seeds in Gotami's soil, the fields are green before you know it. It is like a miracle..."

Mucha's father becomes stupefied, too: "Your father stands on the edge of the field, on a hot moist day, listening to the voices of the maize plants talking... alone he walks the fields talking to the soil... An outburst of joy overpowers him like a man in a trance..."

(The End)

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