

Marechera-mania and Zimbabwean Literature

(By Memory Chirere)

In the Zimbabwean literary scene it might not be wrong to talk about 'Marechera-mania.' For many Zimbabweans it is not necessary to have read 'The House of Hunger' or 'Mindblast' to know Dambudzo Marechera. Although he died some eighteen years ago, Marechera is still public property.

For the ordinary teenager the name of Dambudzo Marechera is synonymous with rebelliousness. For the many young writers across Zimbabwe, the name is about razor sharp brilliance. There is the mental image of a stubborn, dreadlocked little man writing, writing and writing... The youngsters often think they are him – his vision, language and charisma.

Then there are a few Zimbabweans who care dearly about books and have read Marechera. They keep some of his books on their shelves. 'The House of **Hunger**' is the most well known and referred of them all. Reading it is actually considered to be a rite of passage. But even some people who cannot read or comprehend it want to keep it and refer to lavishly and out of context too!

Many undergraduates who read 'The House of Hunger' for the first time become visibly transfigured. They suddenly begin to grow their own dreadlocks. Some of them begin to miss classes, become deliberately unpunctual, and hand in assignments well after the deadlines – all in keeping with the 'Marechera tradition.' Indeed a kind of mania grips them well until into their final years.

It must be something to do with Marechera's very visible idiosyncrasy. That image of him as an outsider appeals to his many youthful admirers. He awakens in them a fine anger and madness. They allow him to live a second life by denying their own. Sadly several very promising students have fallen by the wayside, eaten up by what they think represents their hero.

In 1989 the Marechera Trust received a letter from an anonymous young writer in Chitungwiza. Part of it read: 'Dambudzo Marechera is

our prophet. I pray to him, I mean that I am continuing from where he left off. I have compiled four of my books, 'House of Sorrow,' 120 poems, 'Toil Don't Spoil,' 75 pages. I am still writing... Dambudzo Marechera is not dead.'

The more laid back readers prefer 'Mindblast.' That title fascinates them and it makes up for the 'difficult' language. The poems in this multi faceted collection are also unforgiving; wondering into Greek and Roman mythologies. On the bus, you see them smile at the Marechera wit in there and you realise that part of the joy is only in knowing that they are reading 'something by Marechera.'

But beyond this simple admiration, Marechera-mania extends to a longstanding tendency amongst some very serious younger writers of Zimbabwe to use 'Marechera style and vision' as a temporary launch pad into their own writing careers. Later, they tend to develop their own styles very different from his.

Marechera himself was open about influences behind his own writing. He said he did not find influences 'pernicious.' If anything writing under someone else's influence was like 'an apprenticeship.' He revealed that when he started writing, the English writer D.H. Lawrence 'was the skeleton in my cupboard.' Later there was Kerouac, Gunter Grass and others.

Prominent young Zimbabwean writers who began to write in the 90's like Ignatius Mabasa, Robert Muponde, Nhamo Mhiripiri, Ruzvidzo Mupfudza Phillip Zhuwawo and recently Tinashe Mushakavanhu, have been associated with Marechera in either the content or form of their writings. But the good thing is that, unlike their less gifted colleagues, they pick and develop their own versions of the master.

Robert Muponde is the most prominent of the 'Marechera apostles.' If you read his pieces in 'Nomore Plastic Balls' you find very vigorous Marechera echoes behind Muponde's improvising. There is that sweet and violent sadness of characters in circumstances that trap them. In a story like 'Touched,' there is the incisive first person

narrative stewing and agonizing. However where Marechera was outright defeatist, Muponde is hopeful and regenerative. In Muponde's short story called 'At the window,' the main character finds way out of the entrapment and angst. He finally discovers that several windows have opened elsewhere.

On hearing of Marechera's fall in August 1987, Muponde reveals that Marechera had actually read his pieces and ordered him to 'keep on writing.' In his eulogy, Muponde goes: 'The loud fall of a great mind-burying itself in the shadow of its shadow... you told me 'keep on writing.' And that is a command... I shall not attend your funeral, which is, but a mockery. I know you are living.'

Ruzvidzo Mupfudza is a great admirer of Marechera. In an article in one of the local dailies in 2001 Mupfudza admits that he had once walked in the shadow of Marechera. He later found his own voice: 'Now, I am grown, I have not stopped questing for and exploring new horizons... the roads and the journeys I take are mine and not Marechera's. Whereas he would balk at the thought of being labeled 'an African writer,' I have become a fierce Pan Africanist.'

Indeed Mupfudza's short stories, in several publications, show that he has evolved from individualistic writing to a form that searches and sometimes struggle with matters spiritual. From Marechera, he earned some verbal fires and an ability to focus. He has even evolved a certain kind of essay that goes round issues of culture and family.

Nhamo Mhiripiri has made a detour into what is often called the 'essay- short story' and is doing very well. But Philliph Zhuwawo who died young in 1994 had mastered Marechera poetics. Some of his published poems are pure Marechera property. One of them reads:

"We can sit in this sun
or beneath
it

God's footstools
So long as
I have a single beer...

When she crossed her legs on Farewell
She mentioned Ursaala Heidelberg
Then british airways. She was gone.

This dark little room where
the unmattressed bed
the tens and tens of books
the oversized jacket behind the door
the holed shoes
are POETRY themselves.”

Maybe the most interesting association with Marechera to date is Ignatius Mabasa. His trailblazing novel in Shona called ‘Mapenzi’ is considered to be the Shona version of Marechera’s ‘The House of Hunger.’ The reason could be Mabasa’s intense style and ‘freedom of expression’ in ‘Mapenzi.’ At its publication in 1999, John Gambanga, described it as “abstract, ugly but beautiful” and that after Marechera, Mabasa “could be the Shakespeare that we have been waiting for.” Mabasa has even been considered, erroneously as “a distant relative to Dambudzo Marechera!”

Tinashe Mushakavanhu is the youngest Marechera apostle. His recent story in ‘Writing Now’ called ‘City insomnia’ compresses place and time and finally splinters them in a very Marecheraic fashion.

But in some circles Marechera is considered retrogressive, degenerate and even dangerous. His writings thrive on a remarkable amount of defeatism, which asks for pain and death. In 1983 Mbulelo Mzamane found in Marechera’s fiction ‘an element of resignation and a devil- may-care type of attitude.’ Wole Soyinka, at the moment of reviewing ‘Scrap-Iron Blues,’ found Marechera to be ‘much too self consciously collegiate and even juvenile’ and engaging in ‘insecure skirmishing with ideas and literary references.’

As the debates continue, Marechera’s apostles continue to be inspired by him to develop further and further away from him. Whether you like it or not, it is the mark of great men to create traditions which grow with various permutations long after their departure.

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