

# “In my work there is a constant conversation between the earth, nature and the sky:” Conversations inside and outside of conversations in Chenjerai Hove’s Ancestors

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## Abstract

Chenjerai Hove’s novel of 1996 called *Ancestors* is intriguing because of its wide variety of methods of narrating that operate side by side in one novel. Sometimes the story is told by a realistic male character called Mucha. He is the immediate and major narrator who tells us his story and the story of his family from a personal and realist point of view. At another level, Mucha narrates the family story from the point of view and spiritual instruction of Miriro and to a less extent, Tariro. Then the reader finds out that Miriro, who remained deaf and dumb throughout her short life occasionally tells us directly from the grave about what she ‘heard’ during her lifetime! She even remembers the sounds of birds and animals, people’s songs and conversations. Miriro remembers all the things that are normally not available to those who are deaf and dumb. Therefore, a mathematical and accurate reading of this novel by one of Zimbabwe’s internationally acclaimed writers is not quite possible. To read it is an exercise akin only to moving towards an estimation of meanings.

## Introduction

This article puts forward the idea that one cannot tell what happens in Chenjerai Hove’s novel of 1996, *Ancestors* with a mathematical accuracy because the story is written in such a manner and language that you may not do that. Dream, memory and reality in *Ancestors* have no clear cut distinctions. Further, Hove experiments here with what I will coin ‘strand narratives’. Mucha largely tells the story in clear, fine, minutely detailed boyhood experiences and yet, beyond that he benefits from and participates in Miriro’s (and sometimes Tariro’s) narrative(s). He also operates from within very individualized narratives of other people in the family, living or dead, and the real biographical experiences of author, Chenjerai Hove himself. This paper is an attempt to explain the various positions of narrating that one finds in *Ancestors* and to spell out the effects rendered to the story itself by the various narrative positions.

## Who is Chenjerai Hove?

Chenjerai Hove is one of the more prominent voices in Zimbabwean Literature who burst onto the literary scene after Independence in 1980. Hove shares that

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**Memory Chirere** is one of the more visible contemporary Zimbabwean writers. Chirere writes mainly short stories and some of his are published in *No more Plastic Balls* (1999), *A Roof to Repair* (2000), *Writing Still* (2003) and *Creatures Great and Small* (2005). He has published short story books among them *Somewhere in This Country* (2006), *Tudikidiki* (2007) and *Toriro and His Goats* (2010). *Tudikidiki* and *Toriro and His Goats* each won the National Arts Merit Award in the respective years that they were published. E-mail: mchirere@arts.uz.ac.zw

position with other world renowned Zimbabwean authors like Shimmer Chinodya and Yvonne Vera. Hove has fourteen poems in the trendsetting Zimbabwe war poetry anthology 'And Now The Poets Speak' (1981). Hove has published a number of individual poetry anthologies that include 'Up In Arms' (1982), 'Red Hills of Home' (1985), 'Rainbow in The Dust' (1998), and 'Blind Moon' (2003). Maybe after only Musaemura Zimunya, Hove is the most anthologized Zimbabwean poet. He has also written a number of household novels: *Masimba Avanhuh*? (1986), *Bones* (1988), *Shadows* (1991) and *Ancestors* (1996) *Bones* won the prestigious "Noma Award for Publishing in Africa" in 1989 and it has remained Hove's most prominent publication. One may suggest that Hove writes about the powerless of society – women, children and the poor.

### **Ancestors, the story and enigma**

At the centre of Hove's somewhat beautifully dense novel, *Ancestors*, is the indefatigable figure, Miriro. She is at the time of the story, a female ancestor, who was born and had lived deaf and dumb herself. She dies tragically when she hangs herself because she had been forced to marry a local drunkard. Although long gone, Miriro, through Mucha, a female predecessor (who is not deaf and dumb), now sees and recalls the past before her own birth, after her birth and after her tragic death. Miriro appears to Mucha in dreams and sometimes in some kind of trance akin to spirit possession.

### **First strand narrative**

*Ancestors* marks a turning point in Chenjerai Hove's prose both in matters of content and form. With *Ancestors*, Hove is working, arguably with more creative narrative techniques than in *Bones* and *Shadows*. In what I will coin 'the first strand narrative' in *Ancestors*, Mucha the immediate and major narrator tells us his story and the story of his family from a personal and realist point of view, from his birth in the early 1960's and as the family moves from the Tribal Trust lands to the Purchase Areas where their hard working peasant father farmer is transferred as promotion by the colonial masters. Mucha continues with the narration up to the time when his mother is divorced with her second husband. Mucha proceeds with the narration until to the point when the family migrates to Fanwell's, his brother's place. That first strand ends with Mucha, now a fully-grown man, in the 1980's, sitting at his deceased father's home for a memorial ritual. This first strand of the narratives is the family story as Mucha consciously knows and remembers it.

It is told in an unhindered and unmediated second person narrative, using the pronoun 'you', suggesting that Mucha is aware that he is telling a typical story because if it happens to him, it can also happen to 'you' the reader/listener. At this level, the story is mundane as it is a mere boy's view of what is happening to his insignificant father in a whole wide and powerful Rhodesian colonial set up. The system has power to give and take, so much so that when 'he (father) has been to the endless meetings with the LDO, the land development officer; your father comes home, restless, like a ghost walking in broad daylight' (Hove, 1996, p.21) because the LDO represents the white colonial system. And whenever 'the LDO mumbles something to your father, the elders move in closer so that they do not miss any words from his mouth. He had refused to shake hands with them, even the outstretched hand of the chief.' (Hove, 1996, p.33) Finally when 'your father's face glows with pride at the new Master Farmer's Certificate awarded

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him by the two white men, your heart burns to talk with your mother.’ (Hove, 1996, p.34)

This sensitive narrative of a boy, looks, hears and smells everything from the periphery of action. He is acted upon by the white system as it acts on his father. The narrator is invisible and his strength is only in narrating from behind the scenes. That is why in one of his dreams, he experiences this;

Your father too is one of the birds, flying away with the other birds. Flapping his wings, circling in the sky, rising and rising into the sky until he is a mere dot flying away, swallowed by thev dark clouds. You call him to come back, to return to you, not to leave you alone. But it does not help... (Hove, 1996, p.35)

In this strand, Mucha’s life is one of ‘wondering where your father has been’, imagining forests and animals in faraway places and the words he has always wanted to say to his father ‘want to burst out of me, to flow like a stream down the hillside...’ (Hove,1996, p.36.) This is, however the entry point to the story, the axis on which all events and non events hinge. This strand provides various gaps through which the narrative comes back to the real world to give the reader some kind of release from this story that is tagged in multiple times. You may argue that Hove is suggesting that from within smallness and invisibility, lies a very powerful ability to see and name reality. The experiences of those who are powerful come to us (the readers) through a seemingly weak medium.

### **The second strand narrative**

In this strand, Mucha narrates the family story from the point of view and spiritual instruction of Miriro and to a less extent, Tariro. Mucha himself claims that he is “a hearer of endless tales, stories to which I belong but could not assist in making.” (Hove,1996, p.12) The stories of Miriro’s life on earth pour out into Mucha’s mind when he is “sleeping in the depth of the night” (Hove,1996, p.12) or when he is “sitting down there under the cool shade of a tree.’ (Hove, 1996, p.12) 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 by her father to marry a local drunkard and this occurs over a hundred of years before Mucha. 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. Miriro speaks words to Mucha:

They are the words I have shared with this woman who is a mere dream, the storyteller who tells female stories to so many deaf ears. They are stories about the female blood in me, blood that has been neglected by so many tales which father has hidden away from me. As I wake from the sleepless night, I see the words written on the blue sky, following me like my shadow. I hear them in her voice, Miriro’s, the one who is awaited, the one yet to arrive, the one who departed before she arrived. (Hove, 1996, pp.45-6)

As she manifests herself to Mucha, Miriro is seemingly aggrieved, most probably for being forced by her father into a loveless marriage during her times in the land of the living. It is not clear how she intends to settle her score, if at all. But at some point there are suggestions that she intends to do harm to Mucha’s father. One day when Mucha’s father is given a ride on a

neighbour's tractor, Miriro causes the accident when the tractor comes to a river, casting a spell on it and causing it to fall into the river:

Then the funny part of it is that a woman, deaf and dumb, came over. She was watching the whole scene, not in the least worried about helping you... I shouted at her, trying to make her help... Your face covered with blood, her eyes open and clear, she was just standing there. 'I am angry.' Those were her only words, so heavy with the pain of her heart and soul. (Hove, 1996, p.46)

Miriro also comes close to harming Mucha himself as well and he cries out in his letter to his father:

Who is this deaf and dumb woman? Who keeps haunting my nights? Do you know her/ I wish you did, so you could tell him to leave me alone. Sometimes she comes to me in the middle of the night, claiming me, wanting to take me away with her. I talk to her and she begins to cry. She cries until early in the morning, wanting to take me with her. (Hove, 1996, p.47)

On the other hand, Tariro is the girl who is given away in a forced marriage to a Zambian man called Musindo in 1958 just as in the cases of Miriro and Mucha's mother. In his dreams, Mucha, who is Tariro's brother, receives indications from Miriro that Tariro is dead, wherever she is. She is shown as 'a bare grave', indicating that even if Tariro is alive in Zambia, she is as good as dead. The voices of the two women, driven away to marriage by their fathers, haunt Mucha. He is constantly aware of their voices as protest. His hearing of their voices becomes a kind of guilt conscience on behalf of the male line in the family who are in the tradition of forcing young women into marriage.

Combined, Mucha, Tariro and Miriro's family experiences span a period of about a hundred and fifty years. Its continuous narrative, spanning over at least three generations, makes Ancestors rather challenging to fully comprehend as the reader must constantly determine the exact speaker at any given time. Sometimes Mucha speaks for himself and yet sometimes he is listening to what Miriro is saying about herself or other people.

This idea of other people speaking through a separate living person may easily pass for spirit possession. This is common in African Shona traditions. Spirit possession is a paranormal and or supernatural event in which it is said that spirits, gods, demons or other disincarnate or extraterrestrial entities take control of a human body, resulting in noticeable changes in health and behavior. Depending on the cultural context in which it is found, possession may be considered voluntary or involuntary and may be considered to have beneficial or detrimental effects. In an interview with Katrina Daly Thompson (Harare, 23 May 1996:28) Hove has this to say about the relationship between Miriro and Mucha:

I use a different narrative mode... But it is also very Zimbabwean... Because it is like a dream. And I use the Shona belief in spirit mediums. The woman who died, the woman who is actually the story-teller, died when she was young... so now I resurrect her in the book, and now she can more than see, she can more than hear, she can more

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than talk... So the narrative is as if you are listening to yourself telling yourself the story.

### **The third strand narrative**

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 conversations. She remembers all the 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...” (Hove, 1996, p. 17) 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.”(p.17)

Maybe the situation in the above quote is the most difficult and most intriguing part of the novel *Ancestors*. Suggested here is a deep form of sublimation of reality. This dramatizes to the maximum Hove’s belief of multidimensionalism and the idea that the inside can look at itself from the inside and that all that is not seen today is in fact seen in other ways different from the way of the eye or the ear. Death has given to Miriro the power of omniscience, the power to go back and participate in older experiences. It is precisely why Hove believes that memory is fluid and maybe the novel form will always be insufficient when it comes to reconstructing reality. In his *Shebeen Tales*, a book that comments on social issues, Hove writes:

Memories do not well up chronologically, they are associative. Memories cut across linear time and colour events and facts from the point of view of various imaginative and emotional palettes... This multidimensional experience should be simultaneously danced, sung, written, painted and sculpted. On its own, a novel can never finish a story. (Hove, 1997, p.14)

### **Fourth strand narrative**

Although *Ancestors* is not Hove’s autobiography, it must be stated here that this novel has autobiographical elements. Chenjerai Hove was born in Mazvihwa area in Zimbabwe some forty kilometers outside Zvishavane in Southern Zimbabwe. 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. (Katrina Daly Thompson interview: Harare, 23 May, 1996, p. 28) This is important as it helps us appreciate that 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. It might mean that some aspects of *Ancestors* are the author’s own ‘fictionalised history’ and a considerable portion of this narrative is from the author’s own life.

In one interview with the local press, Chenjerai Hove reveals that *Ancestors* “is the nearest to a family biography that I have written.” (memorychirere.blogspot.com: 2009) 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.'" (2003, p. ix)

### **Dream/memory language**

Away from the above levels (strands) of narrating, Hove uses what I choose to coin dream/memory language. This is a language that flows like it were rendered in a dream in which the dreamer is haphazardly reminiscing. Here Hove's language emerges from a rather foggy background and it has no clear edges and as you read, you are invited to slip away from reality to dream and even dementia. This presents the most fluid moments in this novel. For example, in the middle of describing a woman's birth pangs, the narrative gradually takes a smooth aside, dwelling at great length on the previous moments in the life of the same woman when she is intimate with her husband long before she gets pregnant with the child that she is bearing today:

The fertile woman did not even see the sooty roof whose pattern would have normally excited her when she thought about lying in her own hut with a man to whom she had yielded the secret juice of her dark body. The man would touch her and she too would touch him, singing inside themselves... (Hove, 1996, p.10)

Another example; as mother is pining over the giving away of her daughter and exchanging harsh words with the child's father for it, subsequently leading to a fall out and divorce, she slips into being the bashful girl of long ago who is being wooed:

Your father and mother sit, on opposite sides of the fireplace... Words burn also: they cannot cross the fire zone. Words are spilled in the air, then the smoke catches them... You want to cry to both, to say to them: Father, words are burning! Mother, words are burning in the fire!... Mother's head is bowed, like one praying... with a tiny twig in her hand, fingering it, scratching the hard cement floor with the the stick as young maidens do when young men frighten them with words of love. I lose sleep whenever I think of you. I cannot eat. And when the young maidens hear those burning words, their supple eyes glitter with amusement. Lose sleep? Cannot eat? What sort of man is this who lies for the sake of touching the grass where the king's cattle graze? Then they remember... (Hove, 1996, p.122)

### **Hove's use of the English language**

Hove's English language in *Ancestors* and as seen in his earlier novels; *Bones* (1988) and *Shadows* (1991), has very close echoes to his native Shona language. It is a literal but very careful translation from Shona to English, most of the times. Critics have referred to it as "Africanised English" or simply "Hove's rural idiom." (James Gibbs (1997, p.1) 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:

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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. (Hove,1996, p.61)

The passage above demonstrates the importance that African Shona people bestow on relationships. The collective is the ultimate and Shona people are usually most poetic when talking about common good as shown in the passage below:

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. (Hove,1996, p. 64)

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 a 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.” (Hove, 1997, p.14) This refers to the limitlessness of points of reference found in his work.

### **Criticism of Chenjerai Hove**

However, James Gibbs (1997, p.1) 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, and as Gibbs rightfully points out, many broad subjects like migration, oppression of women, loss of land, missionaries, love and the colonial impact are lumped together and given a cursory glance in *Ancestors*. One feels that, maybe this is a rather flitting novel that does not allow the reader to settle comfortably on any issue to the end. It is a broad family history that pretends to unfold with reckless abandon and does not seem to do justice to every stated cause and event.

In his anger with *Ancestors*, Gibbs (1997, p. 2) further 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 *Ancestors* is Hove’s biggest experiment to date. It is a very deliberate way of writing and more work must have gone into deciding how to tell the story than the invention of the story itself. Hove experiments concurrently with characterisation, confession, protest, hybridism, feminism, spiritualism, magic realism... He also borrows very heavily from dream, hallucination, memory and the Shona concepts of ancestry, *mamhepo* (negative influences from the spiritual world) and *ngozi*, sometimes called ‘the avenging spirit.’

Flora Wild (1992, p. 317-18) even thinks that Hove’s characters, as a result, speak like one another regardless of their different age groups and circumstances.

The language of Hove's characters in this novel fails, in Wild's view, 'to make any distinction between facts and fiction, feelings and intellect.' (1992, p. 318)

### **The challenges of women's narratives in Ancestors**

One also notes that *Ancestors* is dominated by women's stories and that the project sets out to give space to women's voices. These are the stories of Miriro, Tariro and Mucha's mother. Then, 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." (1996, p.12 ) The stories of Miriro pour out into Mucha's mind when he is "sleeping in the depth of the night" (1996, p. 12) or when he is "sitting down there under the cool shade of a tree." (1996, p. 12)

You find out that Mucha cannot control Miriro's narratives because they are not his. As a result, he has mixed feelings towards this kind of set up himself. Sometimes he thinks that it is right that Miriro speaks 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.' (1996, p. 12) Sometimes he is full of praise for Miriro's voice, saying that it "is a dark voice full of joy and sadness, telling its story, my story, our story.' (1996, p.12) But once, at boarding school, Mucha is unnerved by the voice and writes to his father, complaining bitterly.

It is therefore 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... (Hove, 1996, p.179)

The irony is that Miriro dies without telling her story and having her say about things that happen in her life. Given away in a marriage that she had not approved, she chooses death by suicide. One may conclude that maybe it suits Miriro 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.

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.' (Hove, 1996, p.195) But the two are not assured at all that no woman in the family in the future will be given away in forced marriage.

### **Conclusion**

However, in the final analysis, *Ancestors* is an important book in Zimbabwean (and African literature) in so far as it demonstrates that the act of telling a

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story is complex. When we tell our story, it may run in and out of itself and the story contains within itself the capacity to splinter and reorganise in other forms at other times and spaces. This novel, as shown in this article, also shows that the act of listening, sometimes, is like working out a mathematical problem because the act of listening is a reconstruction of forces that collide, separate, and collide... constantly.

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