

DISILLUSIONMENT, FRUSTRATION, PROTEST AND ANGER: *PALAVER FINISH AND BLIND MOON*

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ABSTRACT: *The paper closely examines Chenjerai Hove's Palaver Finish and Blind Moon through the application of Historical Criticism. Blind Moon and Palaver Finish complement each other in presenting Hove's disillusionment, frustration, protest and anger at the level of betrayal displayed by political leaders of independent Zimbabwe. While Hove still shows his passion for historicity, his version of events in Zimbabwe around the year 2000 seems compromised by his apparent detest for ZANU (PF) which he accuses of taking the people's revolution off the rails through corruption and violence. In the process, Hove also confirms that he has dumped the revolutionary party and some ideals of the struggle for independence to sometimes pose as a propagandist for the newly formed Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) which was formed in 1999, oblivious of the emotive and yet unfinished business of the land question which had occasioned the often chaotic and yet necessary Land Reform Programme implemented by the ZANU (PF) government. This ideological somersault seems to be occasioned by the love lost between him and the ZANU (PF) government which he allegedly accuses of persecuting him into exile in 2003. The paper concludes by affirming that, indeed a writer as a social being cannot stay free from contamination by social circumstances of his time.*

Key Terms: *Historical Criticism, Disillusionment, Frustration, Protest and Anger.*

1.0 Introduction

Palaver Finish and *Blind Moon* are artistic offerings by Chenjerai Hove born out of the turbulent period of Zimbabwe's post-independence political chaos, specifically focusing on the period before parliamentary elections of 2000 right up to the bloody presidential plebiscite of 2002. Zimbabwe, during this period, smarted from political polarisation as a result of the entry of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) into the political arena to give credible opposition to ZANU-PF's two decades of uninterrupted rule.

Hove stands out as a critical and yet subjective voice in his depiction of this unfortunate historical phase of Zimbabwe's history. He is driven by the conviction that history as captured by historians is grossly inadequate because "a historian is one who thinks and analyses history" (Hove, 2002:57) as opposed to a writer who "feels history, be it colonial or post colonial" (Hove,

2002:57). This is a confirmation of a writer's subjectivity in the depiction of historical events. As will be seen in this article, Hove's vision of history around the year 2000 is, in most cases, infected by his emotions of frustration, dejection, revulsion and anger towards what he sees as a case of missed targets because of greed and selfishness by those wielding political power.

1.2 History as depicted in *Palaver Finish* and *Blind Moon*

Hove displays outright disillusionment, frustration, protest and anger towards the ZANU-PF leadership which he accuses of reversing the people's struggle and taking the masses of Zimbabwe to the "Dark Ages" (Hove, 2002:37) as he writes in "*The New Millenium in the Village*" in *Palaver Finish*. It is the anger, frustration, and disillusionment which seem to blur his vision of history, and resultantly, in some cases, reducing him to appear like an MDC propagandist. From the subtle criticism in his earlier works, Hove in *Palaver Finish* and *Blind Moon* names and attacks those he accuses of being behind the anarchy. He attacks political leadership for allegedly using violence and destruction to gain and retain political power as captured in the poem "trail" in *Blind Moon*:

on your way
to the house of power
you left footprints of blood
so many broken hearts
so many broken brains
so many broken bricks (Hove, 2003:3).

The endless trail of innocent blood shed on the altar of political expediency is what Hove attacks perhaps with the hope of reminding the political leadership of their commitment to the poor and vulnerable masses to ensure that there "are no corpses on the road to the ballot box" (Hove, 2002:81).

The volatile and strife-ridden historical context of *Palaver Finish* and *Blind Moon* arose out of what Hove believes to be a desperate attempt to hang on to power by the ZANU-PF, in spite of dwindling support from the people. In the short story, "*Africa's Abused Soldiers*" and throughout the collection of essays in *Palaver Finish*, Hove looks at how ZANU-PF, faced with waning popularity owing to the economic slump which was occasioned by the president's impulsive decisions to award gratuities to veterans of the liberation war in 1997, and the subsequent military incursion into the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to fight on behalf of that country's government, led the country into unprecedented economic downturn which riled the majority of Zimbabweans especially the poor (Hill, 2003).

Historians like Chung (2006) allege that in 1997, the president of Zimbabwe had used his excessive constitutional powers to take unilateral decisions in the case of the gratuities for war

veterans and incursion by Zimbabwe into the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) war, making use of an enabling provision in the constitution which had been crafted on partisan and euphoric basis by Eddison Zvobgo, the then legal secretary of ZANU (PF) (Chung, 2006). Slowly, the political leadership, according to Hove, consolidated its position as a dictatorship which unleashed widespread violence against its own people as portrayed in the poem “*to a dictator*” where Hove attacks the leadership for betrayal of the ideals of independence:

in your time
you took away
the flowers of our freedom.
in your time
the weak defended your weakness,
and the land cried;
the moon too
was dark
in your time (Hove, 2003:10).

The poem refers to the restive years from 1999 in Zimbabwe that saw Zimbabwe abandoning any principles of democracy and supplanting them with despotism because of autocratic and despotic leadership styles (Hove, 2006). Hove seems to have a conviction that the military had become a wing of ZANU-PF and, together with armed militia, used extreme violence against perceived opponents of the government. This is what “*Violence, Tear Gas, Handcuffs and Democracy*” reflects. The ensuing events in Zimbabwe after the formation of the MDC reflect anarchy in Hove’s view:

Zimbabwe is in a state of anarchy. The laws that our
parliament has made have been thrown into the rubbish bin.
The ruling party thinks anarchy can be cherished for political
expediency (Hove, 2002:45).

This state of lawlessness according to Hove (2002) was created as the ruling party sought to keep a hold on power. Unfortunately this led to a sad disruption of normal lives amongst the majority of Zimbabweans. The poem “*what are you doing?*” attacks the alleged terrorism of ZANU-PF militia which results in the creation of a wistful situation where

the joyful songs die
from lips that starve.
the birds that sing
are shot dead
and the militia determine

the red colour of the sky.
village kings kneel
to the murderers
in prayer to be spared another
death (Hove, 2003:30-31).

This, according to Hove, confirms the absence of the rule of law which he unfortunately blames entirely on the ruling party. Because the militia has overwhelming power and acts with impunity, it is seen as determining the “red colour of the sky” (Hove, 2002:30). “*Collapse of Law: Collapse of Conscience*”, shows revulsion towards the war veterans whose claims for gratuities, in Hove’s view showed lack of conscience yet the payment of gratuities to war veterans is not unique to Zimbabwe but is a world-wide practice. These soldiers to Hove lack the humility and sacrifice epitomised in Hove’s poem “*Death of a Soldier*” where the freedom fighter dies “Homeless, a glorious rover” to “cleanse the land he manured” (Hove in Kadhani and Zimunya, 1981:135). “*Death of a Soldier*” shows a freedom fighter who dies a humiliating and painful death and there is no doubt about his selflessness which contradicts the “charlatans” (Hove, 2003:57), who were led by Chenjerai Hunzvi (Rupiya in Raftopoulos and Savage, 2004) to terrorise the peasants and workers well after independence.

In short, Hove seems to be saying that all progressive Zimbabweans, made sacrifices: some with material resources and others making the supreme sacrifice of offering their own blood to see Zimbabwe free. He believes that those in towns would send money and food to the fighters in rural areas and they would provide safe havens for those hunted by the colonial regime. As for peasants, Hove argues in that,

In rural areas villagers were left without a chicken to their name. They sacrificed their all to feed and shelter ‘the children of the soil’. The rural businessmen, agricultural officials, nurses and teachers were often pillars of the struggle. And yet, today, they are rubbished by the so-called war veterans (Hove, 2002:7).

Hove, in this way, seems oblivious of the fact that the war veterans became restive as they saw those in positions of power using their positions to accumulate wealth. Raftopoulos and Savage (2004) believe that the absence of a proper rehabilitation programme for the war veterans was likely to manifest itself in the way it did.

Chenjerai Hove’s prose and poetry during the turbulence of the turn of the new millennium in Zimbabwe also seeks to paint a situation where the ruling party seems to use money to gain political mileage as summarised in the poem “*kokoriko*” in *Blind Moon* where Hove makes a

subtle reference to ZANU-PF through reference to the party's symbol of the cock which makes a "Kokoriko" sound when cockerelling. Unfortunately, from the metaphorical allusion, the party has been mortgaged to those with mercenary agendas, hence,

the village dies.
a man with money came,
bought the cockerel-
the only one left in the village.

kokoriko is gone-
like the village-
on the ticket of money
(Hove, 2002:38).

This might be alluding to the abandonment of socialist policies in favour of capitalist ones by the ZANU (PF) government.

The use of violence by political leaders is also, according to Hove, a remnant and legacy of the colonial regime. Because Smith, the last colonial prime minister of Rhodesia, used brutality and prioritised the acquisition of military hardware, the new government seems to have consciously or unconsciously inherited this trait. In the essay "*Africa: Reality and Imagination*", Hove argues that

we inherited violence, prisons, handcuffs and guns from
the West after they had destroyed our own institutions.
Our post-colonial leaders came to power with instruments
of repression firmly established (Hove, 2002:33).

It is this violence which has created numerous exiles in the form of Zimbabwean exiles in foreign countries (Hove, 2002). Hove sees violence as largely behind forced migration. In his autobiographical reflections in "*Shades of Power: Colonial and Post-Colonial Experiences of a writer*", he makes it clear that the displacement and violence suffered under colonial rule is now happening again, but sadly under black rule.

Palaver Finish, further observes that the soldiers in Zimbabwe during the restive years of bickering and conflict with the newly formed Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), became the primary violators of law and order by breaking into public places like bars to beat up revelling members of the public before committing outright theft of the money from the cashiers. The soldiers, "raid every day, armed with guns and sticks, beating up everyone, asking them why they voted for the opposition" (Hove, 2002:2). The extent of the violence makes Hove in the

poem “*Blind Moon*” present nature as indifferent and helpless in the face of this bloodshed. The moon is a

blind moon,
doomed to see
all these corpses.

blind moon
so blind
doomed to see
all these shadows
of political corpses.

blind moon,
it is better to remain blind (Hove, 2003:32).

Hove is showing that nature is blind to the gross violations of the rights especially when most political violence happens at night when the moon shines. This indifference of nature is conveyed again in Hove’s other poem, “*sunk*” where he moans and laments what has happened to the once promising nation:

our moon was sunk
our sun was sunk
both red with planetary tears,
of blood from our own veins

help us cry for our moon
help us cry for our sun
help us demand our smiles back (Hove, 2003:35).

The moon and the sun are also symbolic of the movement of time. By referring to sinking of the sun and the moon, Hove depicts how the time for the toiling citizens was wasted on unproductive agendas.

Hove also believes that alongside physical violence, language is manipulated negatively to do a lot of harm to government enemies. Use of violent language by politicians and the media in general engenders a culture of violence and can encourage civil strife. This is so because, as Ngugi (1981) rightly observes, language conveys culture, and vice versa. In “*Collapse of Law: Collapse of Conscience*”, Chenjerai Hove argues that

corruption begins with the corruption of language. If a senior politician uses vulgar language in public, that is the beginning of corruption... Once language degenerates into a vehicle for untruth, people are engulfed in a form of corruption (Hove, 2002:5).

Through satiric humour in the short story “*Palaver Finish*” Hove presents his frustration with this corruption of language which manifests itself sometimes in “voluble yet meaningless deliberations” (Muponde and Primorac, 2005:57). The apparently ordinary and uneducated man has realised the vanity of endless ‘palaver’ or talk and he would not speak any more:

A silent foolish man is a good man. A palaver foolish man is a palaver dangerous man. A silent politician without palaver is a wise man. Politician with too much palaver is dangerous man (Hove, 2002:26).

This is a clear indictment of the political leaders who expend effort on talk and nothing else.

This deceitful conduct of the political leadership leads to violence to gain power at whatever cost. This is why in the poem “*trail*” the leaders’ ascendancy to power is marked with disregard for the wishes of many people because

on your way
to the house of power
you refused to listen
to the tunes of birds:
the birds of your conscience (Hove, 2003:8).

If only the political leaders would have ‘two ears and one mouth’, to underscore the need for listening to advice and reduced unnecessary rhetoric, as advised in the folktale “*Two Ears One Mouth*”, they would avoid a miserable end to their political lives. Though rooted in orature, “*Two Ears One Mouth*” is undoubtedly dealing with the contemporary African situation in general and the Zimbabwean situation in particular because the parallels to the fictional characters are all too clear to be misunderstood.

Closely related to the abusive use of language is the issue of censorship. Censorship is the withdrawal or modification of information which is supposed to pass on to the public domain in order to create certain impressions which favour the interests of those in power (Hove, 2002). In “*Culture and Censorship*”, Hove believes that power is an instrument of censorship. Perhaps Hove is informed by legislation passed after 2000 as the ruling party restructured state structures

to make them immune to the incessant political pressures. Two pieces of legislation, Public Order and Security Act (POSA) and Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) were passed in 2002 allegedly “to restrict the activities of the opposition and civic forces in the public sphere and to control the independent press” (Raftopoulos and Mlambo, 2009:214).

Hove sees the need to control information by the state as absurd, reflecting ZANU-PF’s hatred of rural teachers and rural buses as well as the private media. In “*Rural Teachers, Rural Buses and Violent ZANU (PF)*”, Hove looks at the political leadership’s desperate bid to block ideas from flowing into areas it regarded as uncorrupted. Rural teachers, in Hove’s view, were harassed and searched in case they carried the ‘subversive’ *Daily News*, an independent newspaper which the powers that be believed to be telling lies to discredit it. In “*The Fear of Ideas*”, Hove concludes by saying, “At worst, a dictatorship will burn books and bomb printing press” (Hove, 2002:64) in reference to the bombing of the *Daily News* printing press in 2001 by suspected ZANU-PF functionaries (Hill, 2003).

Hove’s historical writing could therefore be seen as an attempt to recover the lost conscience, “the conscience of bones, blood and footsteps” (Hove, 1988:5). He has deep reverence for Nelson Mandela, the first black South African president whose selflessness saw him spending twenty six years under incarceration by the South African apartheid regime. Indeed, Mandela deserves such recognition because his reign was marked by peace, reconciliation and tolerance as well as voluntary exit from office. Hove glorifies him in the poem “*mandela*” by saying that Mandela gave

flowers of the heart
just as others gave bullets
and tears for their inheritance (Hove,2003:51).

Unlike Mandela, most African leaders lack proper moral standing. To Hove, the death of morality on the part of leaders and thinkers inevitably leads to a death of conscience. Hove seems to have the conviction that most African leaders have failed to live up to the challenges of leadership and in the process leave an indelible legacy of violence and misgovernance.

There is no doubt that by keeping track of dates and content of particular significant developments in Zimbabwe and in Africa in general, Hove’s writings become clearly historical. *Palaver Finish* and *Blind Moon* portray Zimbabwe’s historical realities. Their depiction of certain events and perspectives serves, however, to confirm that history cannot escape the trappings of subjectivity. The writer being an emotional being is likely to ignore objectivity even where it stubbornly exists.

The depiction of the political terrain by Chenjerai Hove where violence seems to be perpetrated entirely by ZANU-PF is ostensibly unbalanced in the case that when the MDC was formed in 1999, the leaders advocated *jambanja*, which is *Shona* slang for violence (Hill, 2003). In fact, the roots of the MDC lie in the violent mass stay-aways which were led by the ZCTU which had as its president and secretary general then, Gibson Sibanda and Morgan Tsvangirai respectively who then took leadership of the MDC upon its formation. Even the MDC party symbol of an open palm was construed to be a sign of a slap *mbama* in *Shona*. As ZANU-PF chanted its, *Pamberi ne ZANU-PF, Pasi neMDC (forward with ZANU-PF, Down with MDC)* the MDC chanted, *Chinja maitiro (change your ways)* and *Mugabe Mudenga, roverai pasi, bwaaa! (lift Mugabe high up and then crush him down)*. Violence was incited perpetrated by both sides. Later in 2005, The MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai, openly declares at a rally that if President Mugabe did not leave power voluntarily, he would be removed violently. To blame violence entirely on the ZANU-PF government might be an imprecise observation. What ZANU-PF government could be guilty of is the use of disproportionate state force against the MDC.

The labour movement also has a hand in facilitating the economic decline in the late 1990s. As observed by Raftopoulos in Raftopoulos and Mlambo (2009:203)

By the end of 1997 some one hundred job actions had taken place, and in January 1998 food riots, in response to the steep rise in the cost of mealie-meal, erupted in the capital city and smaller towns such as Beitbridge, Chegutu and Chinhoyi.

The makes it clear that the labour movement is an accomplice in the economic decline through its engagement in economically destructive mass stay-aways and riots. Quantifying the one hundred job actions monetarily would reflect a significant knock on the national economy. What is even of serious concern is that the stay-aways themselves resulted in anarchy with widespread looting of private properties which the organisers of the stay aways claimed they represented. Indeed, the state can be accused of brutality but the government had a constitutional right to maintain law and order.

In addition to the stay-aways, foreign prescriptions to economic challenges from organisations like the IMF also had the net effect of alienating ZANU (PF) from its support base by removing encouraging removal of subsidies in areas like health and education (Chung, 2006). This is sadly not depicted by Hove in *Palaver Finish* and *Blind Moon*. Hove's writings by ignoring these complexities of the Zimbabwe historical landscape deliberately miss crucial key points in Zimbabwe's post independence crisis.

The conception of the land question Hove shows in works like *Bones* and *Red Hills of Home* is not sustained in *Palaver Finish* and *Blind Moon*. The Lancaster House constitution of 1979

which brought Zimbabwe's independence fell short of addressing the land question once and for all because "it protected property rights for 10 years, and dictated that 'European' land be acquired under a 'willing buyer, willing seller' agreement" (Alexander, 2006:105). This was a clear legalisation of the status quo because land transfer would be on the basis of full compensation (Wolmer, 2007). This effectively meant that at independence the land question was not addressed.

As land hungry ordinary indigenous Zimbabweans and former fighters agitated for land, the ZANU-PF government turned its attention to this unfinished business. In any case, the land occupations of 2000 and beyond were not the first such protests since independence. In the 1980s there were a number of occupations of land which, abandoned by its owners, was acquired by the government and transferred to the occupiers and in the 1990s, there were further occupations owing to the slow pace by the state in the land reform programme (Moyo, 2001). President Mugabe himself made an eloquent declaration that land was at the core of the struggles of Zimbabweans from the First Chimurenga up to the current struggles of the turn of the new millennium:

We knew and still know that land was the prime goal for King Lobengula as he fought the British encroachment in 1893; we knew and still know that land was the principal grievance for our heroes of the First Chimurenga, led by Nehanda and Kaguvi. We knew and still know it to be the fundamental premise of the Second Chimurenga and thus a principal definer of the succeeding new Nation and State of Zimbabwe. Indeed, we know it to be the core issue and imperative of the Third Chimurenga which you and me are fighting, and for which we continue to make such enormous sacrifices (Mugabe, 2001:92-93).

Against such a background, Hove's silence about the other side serves to show his partisan stance, a stance which is a far cry from his stance in his earlier works like *Bones* and *Red Hills of Home* which seem to be fairly balanced in their criticism of government.

It is unfortunate that Hove does not seem to see the value of the Agrarian Reform Programme which he dismisses as an act of political opportunism. Maybe it is because of his lack of interest in farming which made him turn down an offer of a farm from the government. Hove confesses his dislike for farming in an interview with Primorac (2007). This could be so because Hove wrote the two books in exile as a guest of the French in *Blind Moon* and the Norwegians.

One is left wondering what has infected and affected Hove's mind to the point of turning his back to his own heritage. Perhaps his stay in exile made him forget that land remains an invaluable legacy whether one works it like Okonkwo or is averse to land like Unoka (Achebe, 1959). Perhaps Hove could have quarrelled with the execution of the land reform, which sought to reclaim land from "Manyepo" (Hove, 1988) to its rightful owners.

Hove seems to be grossly intolerant in his criticism of the ZANU (PF) government. Whether ZANU-PF would emerge with spin-offs from land reform in the form of election votes would be something else. What is clear is that *Palaver Finish* and *Blind Moon* seem to have forgotten totally the pain and suffering inflicted on blacks by whites during the colonial period. It appears that Hove has abandoned the thinking he shows in his writings soon after independence where he felt that the developed countries should not continue to play big brother to Africa because "the land is here" (Hove: 1985:35). For Hove to reduce the whole conflict to black versus black is indicative of his partisan position.

One other glaring omission Hove makes is to show the real genetic make-up of the MDC. MDC was a product of strange 'bedfellows': employers and employees, students and peasants. There was a general thinking that ZANU-PF's removal from power would result in dramatic change of fortune to all classes of people (Hill, 2003). The truth as Ngugi (1986) observes is that at independence the economies of the newly independent states were secured in the hands of whites who owned the means of production and therefore wanted perpetuation of the status quo. The employers who joined hands with MDC were a manifestation of foreign capital, stolen from Africa through the likes of "Manyepo" in *Bones*. To a revolutionary party like ZANU-PF, a situation where white farmers would write cheques and give the MDC leaders openly was the height of political naivety and it invited an appropriate response for ZANU-PF. Unfortunately Hove ignores it.

Hove does not seem to appreciate that anything positive can be and has been done right by the government in the years of conflict with the MDC. In a way, he is caught up in the polarisation and feels more like an MDC party activist who is under instruction to offer negative criticism of ZANU-PF at every turn. His view of history, like all historical accounts, is seriously contaminated with subjectivity. For the construction of a true consciousness, there is need for a balanced depiction of reality failing which literature becomes a divisive and a misinforming tool. Unfortunately and to a very large extent, *Palaver Finish* and *Blind Moon* seem to terribly fail the objectivity test. Despite this apparent tendency to be one sided in his depiction of historical situations, one consistent trait of his writings still remains: his sensitivity to history, especially the history of the toiling masses of Zimbabwe who are robbed of their productive potential owing to betrayal by their political leadership.

Ultimately *Palaver Finish* and *Blind Moon* appear to be painting a bleak picture where “*kokoriko*” (Hove, 2003) is gone yet as of now, a good number of former peasants; the likes of Marita in *Bones* (Hove, 1988) are proud owners of land. Hove’s vision can perhaps be understood against the background of serious polarisation which engulfed Zimbabwe from 1999 onwards. As a mortal being, he had to make a choice, a choice which unfortunately makes him partisan. Hove’s choice to write the way he does can also be understood from the perspective that

The writer as a human being is himself a product of history, of time and place. As a member of society, he belongs to a certain class and he is inevitably a participant in the class struggle of his time (Ngugi, 1981:72).

Though the situation looks grim, Hove’s writings are not completely pessimistic. There is always a glimmer of hope. This is why in “*Streams of Power*” Hove declares his hope for Zimbabwe through the Shona proverb that “*chinobhururuka chinomhara* (that which flies will eventually perch)” (Hove, 2002:60) with reference to political leaders he thinks will eventually have their wings of power clipped. The essay “*Violence of Gokwe*” affirms the optimism by saying “you cannot trim a bird’s wings forever. One day it will fly, and fly high” (Hove, 2002:74). It remains unclear though whether Hove hopes for restoration of land to blacks or to whites.

1.3 Conclusion

While *Palaver Finish* and *Blind Moon* can be seen as a perpetuation of Hove’s historical literature which he started just before Zimbabwe’s independence from colonial rule, the dynamics of the Zimbabwean society around the year 2000 have the net effect of blurring his vision of events in Zimbabwe making his writing lack in critical depiction of perennial historical challenges like the land issue in Zimbabwe. It is uncontested that Zimbabwe suffered economic meltdown after about two decades of independence and that violence and corruption perforated Zimbabwe’s social and political fabric during the same period, but the root cause cannot and should never be ZANU (PF) alone. There is need to properly put the historical developments which lead to the turbulence of the post 2000 period in Zimbabwe into proper perspective, appreciating the fact that independence brought political and not economic freedom as well as interrogating closely the role of organisations like The International Monetary Fund (IMF) with their foreign prescriptions to economic challenges of African countries like Zimbabwe.

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