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Tribute

## Chenjerai Hove (1956–2015)

In2East/Africa



Chenjerai Hove died on 12 July 2015 in the Stavanger University Hospital, Norway at the age of fifty nine (“Chenjerai Hove is dead”). Hove’s death from liver failure, a week after the death of another renowned Zimbabwean poet, Ms Freedom Tichaona Nyamubaya on 5 July 2015 (Arts Correspondent) adds to the enormous loss that the Zimbabwean and global literary community has suffered in the month of July 2015. The death of Hove, born on 9 February 1956 in rural Mazvihwa outside the colonial mining town now called Zvishavane, brought shock to many readers of his works of poetry, creative fiction and the journalese, as well as global supporters and fellow activists in the fight for writers’ freedoms and human rights.

Hove, a multi-talented writer, started off as a poet. His first poems appear in the renowned and black nationalist anthology *And Now the Poets Speak* (ed. M. B. Zimunya & M. Kadhani, 1981). Further single authored anthologies by Hove, which focused on pertinent social and political issues affecting Zimbabweans at different historical stages ranging from colonialism to the post-independence Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic front (ZANU-PF) dominated postcolonial space include *Up in Arms* (1982), *Rainbows in the Dust* (1988) and *Blind Moon* (2003). Hove’s poetry did not receive any major award but his deep mastery of the language and ability to speak intensely about history, the everyday experiences and yearnings for freedom echoes throughout his fictional and non-fictional work, as evident, for instance, in the rhyming and poetic forms evident in the novel *Bones* (1988).

Hove is well remembered for his creative fiction and non-fiction works, some of which won prestigious awards. Hove’s fictional works include the vernacular Shona written *Masimba Avanhhu* (1986), the Noma Award winning novel *Bones*, the novel *Shadows* (1991) and *Ancestors* (1996), whose thematic focuses include the portrayal of the ordinary black Zimbabweans as they attempt at living their lives meaningfully in their mostly rural and ordinary settings at different historical moments in the nation’s trajectories. The non-fiction works, mostly written in the journalese style, include *Shebeen Tales: Messages from Harare* (1994), *Palaver Finish* (2002) and various other articles

published in newspapers such as the South African *Mail and Guardian*, archived on its webpage as an author. Hove's fiction and nonfiction oeuvre, thus speaks of a versatile writer whose commitment to the trade and social commentary points to the activist identity which however led to his collision with the Zimbabwean authorities.

His activism, described as the mark of his cultural politics (Grundy) is noted in his work as the founding chairperson of the Zimbabwe Writers' Union 1984–89 and president of PEN Zimbabwe 1990–2007. During his tenures, he fought for writers' rights and turned public critic of the ZANU-PF government's post-1990s decline into autocracy through his regular articles in independent newspaper *The Standard*—some of the articles are in his collection *Palaver Finish*. He was subsequently awarded the German Africa Literary prize for freedom of expression in 2001 ("Chenjerai Hove is dead"). However, Hove suffered state secret police harassment which forced him into exile in 2002. Thus from 2002, Hove like his war of independence traumatised Marita in *Bones* who goes on the move in search of his son, embarks on his own travels of a traumatised writer in exile. He was hosted first in France and later in Norway at Stavanger 2005–07 and in the United States of America at Miami City 2010–12 by the International Cities of Refuge Networks, which supports writers under threat and living in exile (Grundy "Chenjerai Hove is dead"). He also held various positions as a writer in residence, such as the International Writers Fellowship at Brown University 2007–8.

His post-independent travels are instructive. They add on to his early life which saw him embark on educational travels to the Catholic Kutama College in Zvimba outside Harare, Marist Brothers in Hwange, Gweru for teacher training, and work-related travel as a teacher in rural Zimbabwe and a publishing editor in Harare. Sadly, the post-2000 travels were dislocating as he was away from his beloved home and family and ended with his death.

He was buried on his family farm in Gokwe, a reminder of his novel *Ancestors*, set in a fictional Rhodesian Native Purchase Area probably Gokwe, and an invocation that he has at last returned to the land of his ancestors. Nevertheless, Hove's chief writerly quality as a renowned poet and mentor of young writers was revealed at his burial ceremony. The poets Albert Nyathi and Chirikure Chirikure both performed the poem, "I will not Speak", which forms part of the poetry lyrics of Nyathi's popular song "Senzenina", and it was revealed for the first time to both the mourners and all Zimbabweans that the poem held highly in the nation's memory and popular culture was written by Chenjerai Hove (Arts Reporter)—a profound reminder of the great writer, mentor and lover of humanity that Hove has always been.

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