

# Representations of Identity, History and Nationalism in Chenjerai Hove's Selected Poetry

**Rangarirai A Musvoto**

## Summary

This article analyses some of the poems in Chenjerai Hove's two collections of poetry: *Up in Arms* (1982) and *Red Hills of Home* (1985). I argue that the two collections focus on the contested subject of nationalism in Zimbabwe and its implications for both national and private identities. To trace how Hove's poetic narratives of history engage with this concept, the conceptual approach to this paper depends on historian Terence Ranger's (2005: 217) seminal classification of the active public historical versions in contemporary Zimbabwe into three categories: nationalist, patriotic, and academic histories. For the purpose of this article only nationalist history will be discussed because of its immediate relevance to the aspects of Zimbabwean history and nationalism that Hove raises in his poetry.

## Opsomming

In hierdie artikel word sommige van die gedigte in Chenjerai Hove se twee poësieversamelings, *Up in Arms* (1982) en *Red Hills of Home* (1985), ontleed. Ek voer aan dat die twee versamelings fokus op die omstrede onderwerp van nasionalisme in Zimbabwe en die gevolge daarvan vir sowel nasionale as private identiteite. Om vas te stel hoe Hove se poëtiese narratiewe van die geskiedenis met hierdie begrip omgaan, is die konseptuele benadering tot hierdie referaat onderhewig aan die historikus Terence Ranger (2005: 217) se seminale klassifisering van die aktiewe openbaar-historiese weergawes in hedendaagse Zimbabwe in drie kategorieë: nasionalistiese, patriotiese en akademiese geskiedenis. Vir die doel van hierdie artikel sal slegs nasionalistiese geskiedenis bespreek word, omdat dit direk van toepassing is op die aspekte van Zimbabwiese geskiedenis en nasionalisme wat Hove in sy poësie aanroer.

## Introduction

In his article, “Rule by historiography: the struggle over the past in contemporary Zimbabwe” (2005), historian Terrence Ranger makes an observation that in present-day Zimbabwe, there are three versions of history that are active in the public domain: nationalist, patriotic, and academic histories. Ranger’s identification and delineation of these three broad categories of history is designed to capture the polarised discursive spaces in which public histories in Zimbabwe are told and interpreted, but it does not in any way suggest that academics, nationalists and patriots are the only voices that vie to narrativise the history of the nation. For the purpose of this article, I will only focus on nationalist history because it best conceptualises Hove’s artistic vision in his two collections of poetry, *Up in Arms* (1982) and *Red Hills of Home* (1985), which are the focus of this article.

Nationalist history, per Ranger’s (2005: 220) definition, is history in the service of nationalism that “celebrated aspiration and modernisation as well as resistance”. As that definition implies, the concept of nationalism that underlies nationalist history’s ordering of the Zimbabwean past is an ambiguous one, underpinned by diverse and potentially incongruous phenomena – resistance may look to a past which modernisation rejects by definition and one can aspire to recover the past in a totally different future. The phenomenon of nationalism, from which nationalist history is derived, is contested and defined in many ways, but despite this, the common premise, on which most of its proffered definitions hinge, is the idea of an ideology that places the nation at the centre of its concerns and aims to promote its well-being (Smith 2001: 9). According to Smith (2001: 9), nationalism seeks to maintain the nation’s well-being through the attainment of three particular goals: national autonomy, national unity, and national identity. The over-arching importance of these three aspects to the goals of nationalism, leads Smith (2001: 9) to define nationalism as ‘an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity and identity for a population which either in part or as a whole constitute an actual or potential “nation”. Smith’s definition accentuates the conception that nationalism is concerned with a people’s political, social, economic and cultural emancipation while accommodating those forces that opposed the various forces of liberation (Alter 1989: 4-5). Competing nationalisms are evident in colonial contexts, such as Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe, both of which are the setting of Hove’s poetry discussed in this article) where nationalism informed both the ideologies behind settler hegemony and those that opposed it. The collision between the coloniser’s nationalism and the aspirant nationalism of the colonised at once reveals that in a colonial setting, nationalist consciousness is structured around the racism that divides the colonial space and that the sense of nationhood that these nationalisms seek to establish and protect is dissimilar.

In colonial Rhodesia, the setting of some of Hove's poems discussed in this article, the national consciousness propagated by Black Nationalist discourses imagined a Zimbabwean nation emerging from a transformed Rhodesia had to exist together alongside the nationalist awareness fostered by white Rhodesian nationalism. This latter authorised the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (1965), a break with Britain and a sovereign nation state dominated by Whites. This nationalism is largely ignored by Ranger and the nationalist history that he focuses on is that which served the colonized Blacks' nationalism and the effects of its continued use in Zimbabwe, after independence. In fact, Ranger observes that nationalist history's narratives of the past in Zimbabwe centre on the injustices of western colonialism and the black people's attempts to resist it. This explains why the events of both the first and the second *Chimurenga* under-pin nationalist narratives in Zimbabwe. However, the major shortcoming of nationalist history is that in its service of nationalism, it became woefully biased and created a narrow narrative that excluded certain events of the past and sections of the society from the nation.

For example, as Ranger (2005: 218) observes, nationalist history fails to show the various and often contradictory levels on which Rhodesian colonialism operated, while ignoring the contradictions in the black nationalist movement itself. The discourse is further stretched in contemporary Zimbabwe where ZANU PF uses nationalist history to legitimise its hegemony over the nation because it inscribes itself at the centre of the nation, as a party that ended the injustices of colonialism.

Terrence Ranger's conceptualisations of nationalist history is important in the analysis of Hove's two selected poetry texts because both of them are preoccupied with different aspects of nationalism at different time periods of the Zimbabwean nation's history. The collection *Up in Arms*, for instance, while published in 1982, was written during the 1977/78 period at the height of Zimbabwean nationalist war (as Hove recalls in an interview with Flora Wild 1988: 35) and, unsurprisingly, the poems in the collection were influenced by that war. Hove's poetic voice in these poems affirms the vision of conventional nationalist narratives; it orders the colonised space according to mainstream nationalist history so as to deny agency to colonial narratives with a view to legitimising the Blacks' goal of attaining self-rule. Simultaneously, he interrogates mainstream nationalist narratives not to subvert them but to unpack the grand voice of the nationalist narrative so as to trace the various micro-narratives within it. By contrast, the tone of some of the poems in the collection, *Red Hills of Home*, marks the beginning of Hove's disillusionment with the new Zimbabwean nation state and in some of the poems there is a tentative and often critical questioning of the achievements of the nationalist struggle endorsed in *Up in Arms*. Thus, this article also traces Hove's growth in a sophisticated political understanding which is marked by a corresponding growth in his sophisticated poetry.

### ***Up in Arms and Red Hills of Home: Problematizing the Nationalist Narrative***

To trace the movements and shifts in Hove's nationalist vision, I shall analyse four poems ("A Masquerade", "A Boy", "A War-torn Wife" and "A War-time Wife") from *Up in Arms* and two poems ("Delirium in the Street" and "Sagged Hope") from *Red Hills of Home*. The liberation war which informs Hove's poetic vision in *Up in Arms* was itself a manifestation of the varieties of acts of nationalism in Rhodesia. Although an act of nationalism, the liberation war was a radical act that required solidarity from the oppressed Blacks and the poet contributed to this solidarity. Hove's poems in this collection can be read as historical artefacts, that is, as poems whose vision was shaped by specific moments in history. But when considering poems as historical artefacts, Stephen Matterson and Darryl Jones (2000: 127 quoting John Barrel) argue, questions, such as when they were written, whom they were addressed to and the function of poetry in that period, should be considered. When Hove wrote the poems in *Up in Arms*, poetry by Blacks in Rhodesia was generally addressed to black people's nationalism and their efforts to gain freedom through the liberation struggle. This preoccupation of the work by black poets can be seen in the collection *And Now the Poets Speak* (1981), which anthologises poems by various black Zimbabwean poets, most of these poems written after the liberation struggle, but about the struggle.

"A Masquerade" can be read in terms of Harlow's resistance poetry because of its problematisation of historical narratives that justified the colonial presence on the Zimbabwean space. While the poem does not explicitly assert any polemical history, the poem's vision primarily deconstructs the civilising motif at the centre of the colonial narratives of history so as to disclose to the colonised the self-serving purpose of the colonial historical narratives and the fraudulent processes that construct Blacks' identities in the colonial setting. The poem reads:

A masquerade in turmoil  
 tossing heaven-bound darkness  
 on peppered tongues, they came.  
 They came bound to pretence, to malice,  
 with home-made head-loads of histories  
 Distilled in huge stately palaces  
 of heroes felt in the head.  
 Tramps, blessed by archbishops  
 they came, to spread blessed leprosy  
 through soiled habits, afterment

Heralded, chronicled, they came  
 as heroes, venturing through guidance  
 on unreserved faith and unheroic know-how  
 Shunned through edited history

*JLS/TLW*

and taken as parcels to imperial heroes;  
only carriers of white heroes' success.  
Editing said: Nehanda .... witch  
Chaka ... man-eater  
Native ... savage  
Black ... evil  
So they said when they came,  
Swollen with heroic pus  
vomitted by their societies  
Like the Pizzaros, they came  
to gnaw, to nibble and be heralded  
Through censored history chapters.

So now a medicine man comes,  
Forces bitter roots  
own all cancerous throats.

(1982: 24)

That colonialism as a form of nationalism needed legitimating discourses which justified its high moral intentions has been noted by various historians and critics. Historian Victor de Waal (1990: 17) for example, observes that colonialism justified itself as a civilising mission battling ignorance, superstition and savagery. De Waal's observation provides useful insight into the signification of the poem's title and the overall meaning of the poem. The title of the poem – repeated in the first line – is a metaphor that evocatively captures and deconstructs the pretence that directed the discourses and processes behind the colonial moment in Africa. It is through this metaphor, on which the poem's central motif of deception and the associated leitmotifs are structured, that the persona asserts his nationalist vision which subverts colonial history's ordering of the colonised space. What is also significant is that at the time when Hove wrote this poem, the theme that he explores in it was not new to either African literature or Zimbabwean literature, but he raises it as an ideological tool of resistance to colonial authority alongside the active armed confrontation of the liberation struggle.

That the persona reveals colonial history's ordering of the colonial space to be a contrived exercise ("... home-made head-loads of histories/distilled in huge stately palaces") is important; it allows him to interrogate colonial identities as well. This is so because, if identity is to an extent conferred by narrative, the persona's condemnation of the colonial narrative as fraudulent disrupts the centre/margin spaces that identities are made to occupy in a colonial setting. The three last lines of the first stanza (probably the climax of the persona's criticism of the deceit behind colonial presence) further reveal the inter-link between narrative and identity by suggesting that it is the colonial narrative that "dignified" the coloniser's stature when they came to Africa. This is expressed through the imagery that implies that even the marginal identities of the metropolis ("tramps blessed by archbishops") were

venerated by the centre's narratives which disguised them as harbingers of civilisation when they were packaged for Africa.

Indeed, as Patrick Brantlinger (1985: 200) has observed, some Whites who came to Africa had their subordinate status at home reversed; they became great leaders and teachers in Africa pioneering and blazing the trail for civilisation. The oxymoronic expression "blessed leprosy" further points to the disguise of the civilising mission, in as much as it reveals the contradictions of the effects of the West's view of the benefits it was conferring which to the colonised would seem like fatal infection. But the expressions: "blessed leprosy" and "tramps blessed by archbishops" also have a deeper signification which specifically alludes to the deceiving role that Christianity played in authorising the coloniser's domination of the colonial space. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (1997: 10) observed that colonial misrepresentations were reinforced by religion, Christianity mostly, in which God and purity were seen in terms of whiteness, while sin and Satan were characteristics of blackness. The following lines from the third stanza illustrate this point further:

Editing said: Nehanda ....  
Witch/ Chaka ... man-eater/  
Native ... savage/  
Black ... evil.

The persona's tone is derisive; it mocks the arbitrariness of the binary of civilisation and darkness along which colonial forms of knowledge ordered the colonised space. The lines also significantly highlight the unevenness of the colonial discursive space where prevailing images and identities are created by those who have authority and control over narratives of history. The figure of Nehanda as the object of colonial narratives' denigration illustrates the point.

Nehanda, who participated actively in the first *Chimurenga* of 1896 and was hanged by the white settlers for her role in it, is regarded in the then suppressed mainstream black nationalist discourses as a spiritual figure who laid the foundations for the *Chimurenga* war of the 1970s. Her demotion in the colonial narrative to a witch discloses the unbalanced organisation of the discursive space. The roots of this unevenness is well captured by Brantlinger (1985: 198) who argues that, in their writings about the "dark" continent, Victorians relegate all African kings to chiefs and all African priests to witch-doctors. But the difference with the identity that colonial narratives construct for Nehanda is that this identity was designed to conveniently shift her role from a figure of political resistance to a figure playing on the fears of a superstitious people.

In this context, the persona's re-evaluation of the colonial narrative's marginalisation of such an important figure in Blacks' construction of history forms part of nationalist history's search for a rallying point of resistance. His memory of the colonial narrative's construction of Nehanda also reminds the

reader that Blacks in Rhodesia could see the 1970s struggle as a continuation and fulfilment of that of 1896, and the violence with which the colonizers established themselves in the colony. Through the figure of Nehanda, the past and the present are linked through black memory which served to counteract official Rhodesian history and the latter's narrative practice that even as late as the late 1970s usually referred to the arrival of the Pioneer Column as creating a new and legal authority over colonial space. Furthermore, the Rhodesian Front government still insisted that the Whites' domination of the colonial space and the war they were fighting against black nationalists were to preserve civilisation. By foregrounding the "othering" of Nehanda, a figure from which the second *Chimurenga* also derives its identity, the persona creates a pro-nationalist consciousness because he provides a specific way of remembering the past for Blacks which implies that they should salvage and revere the denigrated identities of their histories.

The extremities of the deracination of the African identity within the colonial narrative seem to be reason enough for the liberation struggle. This is why the persona closes the poem with the lines: "So now a medicine man comes, /Forces bitter roots/Down all cancerous throats." The metaphor of the medicine man figures anti-colonialist consciousness and the liberation struggle of the 1970s as cleansing exercises that redeem both the identity and history of the other. The way the persona ends the poem also amounts to what Ngugi (1997) and Harlow (1987: 87) term the "taking of sides". This is the unequivocal stance against colonialism that resistance poems adopt because of the historical processes from which they emerge. In fact, as Harlow (1987: 38) curtly observes, to tackle the problem of ideological apparatuses of imperialism is already to take sides. The fact that the poem identifies the colonial narrative as the source of black identities' denigration corroborates Harlow's perspective because it implies that black nationalist discourses formed within the Rhodesian space and the *Chimurenga* war are a struggle between usurpers of black identity and dignity, and the Blacks who sought to regain them. This inscribes the liberation war as a necessary interventionist act that saves the colonised Blacks from further humiliation.

In this regard, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (1997: 19 quoting Amilcar Cabral), is probably right to observe that if the colonial process is a negation of the historical processes of the dominated people, then national liberation is a negation of a negation because it deconstructs the deconstruction wrought by the colonial narrative. Although significant in analysing the closure of the poem, Ngugi's argument shows that anti-colonialist nationalism is an ideology that also operates on binaries as the discourses of domination that it rejects. Nevertheless, while the overall tone of the poem is bitter, contemptuous and radical in posture in its interrogation of identities embedded in colonial history, Hove is not merely reacting to the colonialist theory of pre-colonial barbarism; the objective of his nationalist vision in this poem is also to reveal the negative impact of the colonial narrative on the racial other so

that they understand the need to take part in the liberation struggle and other acts of nationalism.

In contrast to “A Masquerade”, in the poem “A Boy”, Hove’s nationalist vision shifts focus from histories that legitimised colonial conquest to processes that maintain grossly unequal power relations in the colony. The poem identifies and criticises the practice of naming as one such process which the colonial subject uses to devalue and dominate the racial other. Underlying the persona’s nationalist discourse in this poem is the conception that certain rights and privileges have been denied to the Blacks in the practice of naming. Thus the persona’s concern in this poem is not primarily to criticise the histories behind the colonial presence, but with the moment in history and the means through which the black subaltern who has been infantilised by colonial discourses of control rediscovers his history and identity. The poem reads:

When brother will you be?  
How will you be?  
For you are not yet  
A “boy” you are called  
by milk-plastered lips  
and you undo your hat  
to bare that musty dome,  
Yet a “boy” you remain.  
Your unpensioned thirty-year job  
(unpensioned even in kind)  
You have faithfully groomed,  
While bosses go and come,  
Renewing that boyishness,  
Inheriting you and the garden,  
But ever “boy”, never “man”.  
Maybe a bigger garden will  
Turn you to a field man.  
Did you tell your boss  
You have fathered, husbanded like him!  
Or does he know your son  
Lectures to professors in exile?

Booted on ancient buttocks  
By weak-boned madames  
Who rob your humility  
Implanting slavery and hate,  
Even yoking you  
With manufactured allegiances,  
Yet your blood-felt rhythm speaks  
When history chapters allow.

(1982: 23)



The rhetorical questions in the first and second lines have a tone of impatience; they bring a sense of urgency to the need for decolonisation because of the directness with which they ask the colonised man, to reconsider his identity in the colonial space. The third and fourth lines which remind the “boy” of his degraded condition in the colonial order intensify the urgency to regain his humanity (brother). One of the structural components of nationalism as Peter Alter (1989: 7) observes, is consciousness of the uniqueness or peculiarity of a group of people particularly with respect to their past subordination. In this poem, in as much as the term “boy” universalises the racial other’s “inferior” identity, its antithesis “brother” universalises the racial other’s humanity. “Brother” seeks to establish a sense of community among the oppressed so as to promote a collective consciousness against colonial domination. It is apparent here that the persona sets two opposing ideologies against each other (“boy” and “brother”) to create a tension that reveals to the other the importance of control over discourse in identity construction and the liberating potential of nationalist constructions of identity. By representing the politics of discourse in the colonial space in this way to conscientise the “boy” of his plight, the persona places responsibility for selfdiscovery in the hands of the racial other. This echoes Fanon’s concept of decolonisation described as a creation of a new man; and this creation owes nothing to any supernatural power because “the ‘thing’ which has been colonised becomes man during the same process by which it frees itself” (1968: 33). The connection between process (active participation) and humanisation that Fanon speaks of here becomes even more evident in the poem if one considers that the sense of urgency and the probing tone of the opening lines also seem to imply that the subaltern has accepted his inferiority, a fact to which he has to be alerted so that he takes full responsibility for his emancipation and realisation of a fulfilling identity.

More explicitly than in “A Masquerade”, in this poem the persona’s nationalist vision seems to endorse the rediscovery of neglected historical narratives as one way of rehabilitating the dislocated identities. This is suggested in the lines which read: “Did you tell your boss/ You have fathered, husbanded like him!/ Or does he know/ Your son lectures to professors in exile?” The parenting metaphor suggests that the black man in the poem deserves respect, however, in colonial parenting metaphors the respect that should go with it is diminished and the man derisively described as and reduced to a mere “boy”. The lines render visible the obscured narratives of the other by suggesting the “boy” (the subaltern) has silenced histories and suppressed identities worth revealing. The “boy” cannot be equal to the master because he neither has political power nor authority over narrative to construct himself as an equal. This suggests that the boy’s “inferior” identity is not natural; it is just that the dominant narratives construct him ever as a boy and never as a man. Here, Hove’s vision refuses to define resistance in visible military terms; rather it describes resistance by the way it gives the

coloniser and the colonised a common identity as human beings. It appeals to basic biological identities to enable the racial other in Rhodesia to imagine themselves as people capable of moving beyond the restrictions of identities imposed on them.

Because of this aspect, the identities and histories that the poem discloses and seeks to assert for the subaltern are not of epic and heroic proportions; they reveal what Njabulo Ndebele (1991: 55) terms the ordinary lives of people, which should be the “direct focus of political interest because they constitute the *very content* of the struggle, for the struggle involves people and not abstractions”. But what complicates or rather contradicts the persona’s vision is his celebration of the boy’s son who lectures in exile. Although the status of lecturing in exile invalidates the fixed inferiority of the African which the coloniser assumes, exile during the colonial years was normally in the metropolis – the centre of the colonising power (usually Britain for Blacks from Rhodesia). This conflicts the general thrust of Hove’s nationalist vision for two reasons. First, the identity of the boy’s son that he celebrates is located in the centre that Hove disparages as the originator of discourses that subjugate the other in “A Masquerade”. Second, the apparent success of the boy’s son emanates from the same restrictive discursive space that is occupied by the boy. This suggests the existence of inner spaces within the larger limiting space that can be appropriated at an individual level to subvert colonialism’s restrictions. In fact, it is those Blacks who had appropriated tools of colonialism such as some positive aspects of colonial education, who were behind the emergence of most nationalist movements in Africa. This demonstrates the limitations of some anti-colonialist nationalist discourses that homogenise both oppression and resistance. This racial essentialisation makes it impossible for them to celebrate the breaching of openings within oppressive systems without contradicting themselves.

The persona’s celebration of the boy’s personal success as a successful academic subverts his own anger that no space has been provided for the boy to realise his fulfilling self. This incongruity also discloses the disharmony that often exists between private and public histories as well as between private and public identities. Ndebele (1991) captures this problem when he argues that it is not possible to have a personal history that is not political because the personal is influenced by the political in as much as the political is influenced by the personal. The caveat here is that although the two are often at odds their full significance can only be understood in terms of each other.

It is important to underline that the essential difference between “A Masquerade” and “A Boy” is that in the former Hove’s nationalism is located in the regeneration of the disfigured pre-colonial past and the identities it represented (suggested by the historical figures of Chaka and Nehanda), while in the latter, African identities are presented as subject to continuous and unavoidable change. In “A Boy”, notwithstanding the tensions between

private histories and public histories, Hove's vision is more about the opening up of the discursive space to allow the expression of suppressed historical discourses and the rediscovery of lost histories and identities. This is suggested in the closure of the poem: "Yet your blood-felt rhythm speaks/ When history chapters allow." As these lines suggest, Hove is not only concerned with restoring past identities but also with creating new identities that in as much as they are rooted in the past, are also realised and re-realised in an ever-changing context. A local embodiment of this context is the private and personal identity of the "son who lectures to professors in exile." Consequently, Hove's use of poetic narratives to rehabilitate the misrepresented histories and identities of the colonised as part of the broad nationalist project can be best understood in terms of Harlow's (1987: 33) observation that "poets like the guerrilla leaders of the resistance movements, consider it necessary to wrest that expropriated historicity back, reappropriate it for themselves in order to reconstruct a new-world historical order". But to reappropriate what has been expropriated, Njabulo Ndebele argues, requires a radical rearrangement of dialectical poles – where, while in the past, the thesis was the oppressor, it is now the oppressed confidently introducing new definitions of the future to which the oppressor will have of necessity to respond. Hove's interrogation of the forms of knowledge behind colonial domination in "A Masquerade" and his "humanization" of the subaltern in "A Boy" implicitly calls for the centre to respond and rethink its presence and role in the colonised space.

In contrast to the two poems already analysed, in "A War-time Wife" and "A War-torn Wife", Hove's vision moves out of the discourses that do not problematise black's anti-colonial nationalism and looks at it with a more critical eye. If in the poems already discussed, Hove's ideological stance seems conveniently (although implicitly) to justify developments such as the liberation war, in "A War-time Wife" and "A War-torn Wife" he reveals and traces contradictions that are present within the discourses of nationalism and the liberation struggle. For example, in both poems he uses the domain of the private space to highlight the contradictions in both black's anti-colonial nationalism and Rhodesian nationalism which are suppressed when the narratives of these opposing nationalisms are told from the public and popular domains that serve political expediency.

"A War-time Wife's" narrative account of Black's experiences of nationalism and *Chimurenga* war for instance, draws from various strands of personal and public historical consciousness and thought, that free Hove's nationalist discourse from the linearity and over simplifications of popular nationalist narratives. The persona in this poem recalls the experiences of the *Chimurenga* struggle in terms of contradictions, ambivalences and paradoxes. The thrust of his narrative invites new and critical ways of looking at nationalist history and the liberation war. This is made possible by the poem's use of the figure of a pregnant woman as its metaphor for *Chimurenga* war

and how it was experienced by Blacks who supported it. This metaphor also brings into the *Chimurenga* narrative the private experiences of ordinary people that are written out of the official war discourses which polarise experience through broad generalisations such as coloniser and colonised. The poem reads:

Full with child  
 a long parallel waiting: an anxiety;  
 Together living, dying  
 with nine-month torrents,  
 Torpedoed with bulging wars  
 and swelling with fragrant hope  
 knotted to pain, pleasure and resentment;  
 Living, dragging on weary muscles  
 Till one day, maybe one night,  
 raids rupture hope in expectancy:  
 Fertility perishing in thatched graves  
 to drive lead-like tears  
 Down slippery times  
 and swallowed by history's gorgons.

(1982: 10)

The significance of using pregnancy as a metaphor to capture the experiences of nationalism and the liberation struggle lies therein that the contradictions of pain and hope felt during both processes are comparable. This is suggested in the lines “Torpedoed with bulging wars/and swelling with fragrant hope” where, the physical pain of the growing pregnancy is counterbalanced by hope, which is aware that every day that passes gives anticipation of delivery. The experience of it is a “bitter-sweet”, an ambivalence that encompasses multiple feelings: “pain, pleasure and resentment”. These contradictions are well captured in Alter's (1989: 5) observation that, while nationalism can mean emancipation and opportunities, it is also a repository of dangers. The conflicting feelings and experiences felt during the state of pregnancy enact the contradictory experiences of the liberation war, with hope on one side, and pain and hazards on the other and possibly some other feelings and experiences whose depths cannot be grasped.

It is also possible to read the poem as a text made up of two metaphors that sustain each other: pregnancy involves painful growth of a new birth. These two metaphors maintain the paradox which gives the poem its compelling power to re-imagine the *Chimurenga* war. Charles Mungoshi in his introduction to *Up in Arms*, writes that Hove is a poet “who concedes that life (peacetime/wartime) is essentially painfully; yet he has seen enough to know that without pain there is no pleasure, and vice versa. This awareness makes him a virtuoso of paradoxical expression” (2). Hove's masterly use of paradox in this poem, and the various possibilities of communication and imagination it unleashes, implicitly warns against the dangers of unquestioningly sub-

scribing to what have become the acceptable and standard representations of the *Chimurenga* war. Paradoxes, ambiguities and contradictions that are part of Hove's nationalist narrative, coupled with the different narrative voices that he uses which are often located in private domestic spaces (see the analysis of "A War-torn Wife" below), emanate from an awareness that individual consciousnesses of nationalism and *Chimurenga* is never going to be the same in all individuals who make up a nation and that there is need to rescue from generalisation how both are imagined and represented. The nature of this consciousness varies from uneducated peasants such as Marita in Hove's seminal novel, *Bones* (1988), to guerrilla fighters in the bush, and from the factory worker to the exiled. These different responses depend on an individual's location in history and as a result, different individuals' memory and recollection of *Chimurenga* are bound to vary.

In the poem, "A War-torn Wife", Hove's nationalist discourse broadens as it imagines and narrates the war in Rhodesia from the perspective(s) of Whites against whose domination black nationalists waged the war. This portrays the war itself as a culmination of two contesting nationalisms. As already noted, while for the black nationalists, the war was to end the injustices of colonialism, for the Rhodesians, the war was necessary to protect a racially exclusive Rhodesian national identity from black nationalists whom the Rhodesians identified as terrorists. However, as already mentioned, the poem represents the war from a private Rhodesian perspective.

This war!  
I am tired  
of a husband who never sleeps  
guarding the home or on call-up,  
Never sleeping!

Maybe inside him he says  
"I am tired of a wife  
who never dies  
so I could stop guarding".

(1982: 9)

That the poem represents the war from the white Rhodesian perspective comes out in the term "call-up" in the fourth line of the first stanza. In this war, conscription applied only to young white, coloured and Asian males who were ordered by the Rhodesian Front government of Ian Smith to defend Rhodesian nationalism. The poem imagines and questions the whole idea of the war from within the domestic space of a white Rhodesian family. The purpose of imagining the war from such a perspective is to represent the experiences of a white Rhodesian who is compelled to defend a Rhodesian nationalism that he does not believe in. This comes out through the tension presented in the thoughts of the wife and her husband, a white Rhodesian

soldier. These thoughts are revealed via the parallelism on which the structure of the entire poem rests. The persona utilises this stylistic device to reflect that the experiences and perceptions of the 1970s war, (a product of two contesting nationalisms) were different and that it is misleading to speak of its history through one common narrative even within the framework of the broad ideological visions represented by Rhodesians and black nationalist forces. Both wife and husband express weariness with Rhodesian nationalism whose ideological discourses portrayed Whites as united against Blacks.

Even in their weariness with the war, both husband and wife are not allowed a homogenised stance. While it is true, as Anthony Chennells (2002: xiii) notes in his preface to Dan Wylie's book, *Dead Leaves: Two Years in the Rhodesian War* (2002), constant call-ups interrupted the lives of many white families, the wife and husband in this poem interpret this interruption from different perspectives. For example, if in the first stanza, it is the wife's thoughts that are used to critique the war through an examination of her husband's role in it, in the second stanza the husband's perspective is accommodated through the shift initiated by the use of the adverb "Maybe". "Maybe" as it is used here connotes the possibility of other forms of consciousness that do not subscribe to the grand Rhodesian ideological narrative about the war because it allows the wife to widen her viewpoint of the war by trying to imagine what could possibly be the husband's point of view. In this way, the persona does not allow the wife's thoughts about the war to dominate, but rather he shows contesting micro-narratives within the Rhodesian nationalism that challenge its visible narratives of uniform patriotism.

The significance of using the domestic sphere as narrative space is that it subjects Rhodesian nationalism to scrutiny through another lens. This lens is formed out of the subjectivities and intricacies of private identities whose usually undisclosed narratives are not always in harmony with those of public identities and histories. In this poem, the narrative of the internal voices of wife and husband manifests the latent cracks within the official Rhodesian discourses which presented Whites as united in defending a racist nation state. Even black nationalists' narratives, as already noted, are implicated in the omission of private experiences and aspirations which could have contradicted the nationalist meta-narrative.

Probably, the contradictory forces within the nationalist meta-narrative are best represented in some of Hove's early post-independence poems in the collection, *Red Hills of Home* (1985). As already mentioned, the vision and tone of *Red Hills of Home* signal the onset of Hove's disenchantment with the way the ruling party has chosen to manipulate the nation to serve the selfish ends of a small elite and the two poems that I analyse here ("Delirium in the Street" and "Sagged Hope"), tentatively and often critically question the accomplishments of *Chimurenga* and the nationalism of the 1970s which Hove endorses in the poems discussed from *Up in Arms*. These poems are

marked by a reflective, brooding and contemplative tone, whose tenor, although not as strident as that in Hove's later poetry collections, *Rainbows in the Dust* (1988) and *Blind Moon* (2003), effectively takes stock of what happened in the past and its significance to the present.

The poem "Sagged Hope", highlights Hove's disappointment with post-independence through a reflective and self-evaluating voice as follows:

My soul leaks,  
I refrain from containing hope.  
It does not pay,  
for all will leak  
and children will pick  
whatever they salvage of it.  
Even the little thin cheery voices  
pour scorn on me  
for I have lost  
and I walk like a skinned ghost  
with hope sagged, all gone.

(1985: 26)

The persona's direct acknowledgement that it "does not pay" to have hope signals disillusionment which in turn suggests the yawning gap between the reality in Zimbabwe and the idealism of nationalism. Thus, the poem suggests that the emancipatory potential of Zimbabwean nationalism has not been fully realised and through its tone, which also borders on resignation, it urges an honest and sober assessment of history for the sake of both the present and the future. "Lost", "leak" and "sagged" – central images on which the vision of the poem rests – suggest a depleted fullness and a collapsing structure and here, they figure the pessimism which was beginning to replace the enthusiasm and hope of independence as evocatively evidenced by the persona's resolve not to entertain hope because it will end in disillusionment.

The same subject runs throughout "Delirium in the Streets" where the persona fuses images of wounds – "bruised soles" and "bruised hearts" – with metaphors of "sagging hearts" and "unfinished journeys" to render pathos in the disillusionment and loss that he feels. The tone that the persona adopts is wistful and melancholic as he expresses a feeling of hollowness emanating from unfulfilled aspirations:

I bare my back  
While the raindrops roll with their moist lick:  
These openings,  
are they the promise of tomorrow in today?  
Blending yesterday and tomorrow  
through me of bruised soles and hearts?  
I belt my trousers and start again  
for the journey is long and feet bruised:

What shall my children inherit?  
 Could it be bruised soles married to sagging hearts  
 all in unfinished journeys?  
 Fragments of conversations  
 Pavements littered with broken engagements  
 Empty bits of wrapping paper  
 An owl above my head,  
 Flying home with a ruinous chorus behind.  
 Delirium in the street,  
 Why did I come here?

(8)

The persona perceives future identities as inextricably linked to current historical experiences and for him the future does not hold much hope. This is captured in the line which reads “for the journey is long and feet bruised” which outlines the depth of the immediate crisis that the persona faces. This crisis is also clinched in the line “... could it be bruised soles married to sagging hearts” where physical pain and mental pain are harnessed together. At a different level, the persona’s plight also characterises that of the newly independent Zimbabwean nation which glimpses an unexpected disillusionment as a result of some of the problems that it encountered in its early years. The metaphors of “broken engagements”, “fragments of conversations” and “unfinished journeys”, indicate abandoned commitments and suggest that there is still a desirable destination that could be sought if the wholeness/ completeness of commitment had been kept. They also metaphorise fractures and various “pockets” of identities within the ranks of the new leadership elite (most of them erstwhile nationalists), that among them, at post-independence, there is no unisonant way of relating to the new nation – a product of their “unity” of purpose when they were fighting for independence. Through these metaphors, the persona problematises the Zimbabwean ruling elite’s political rhetoric which emphasises self-rule as the ultimate objective of nationalism because he hints that independence has not been extended to a level where it can realise the aspirations of various Zimbabweans. At once, this re-presents *Chimurenga* and the nationalist discourses that underpinned it as some of various processes in both national and self-realisation and not an end in themselves.

## Conclusion

The discussion in this article has explored and problematised the ideological shifts in Hove’s poetry in his two collections: *Up in Arms* and *Red Hills of Home*. The argument demonstrated that although Hove’s visions of identity and history are mainly immersed in the conventional *Chimurenga* narratives of the 1970s and their discourses of resistance to colonial historiography and oppression, his voice transcends the nationalist project and speaks at various



levels that are beyond the expression of often-homogenising nationalist representations. This enables him to articulate the wide-ranging private and personal experiences and the sensibilities that were possible within the same context of colonialism in which nationalist discourses are formed. His revisitation of the colonial experience and the liberation struggle from a perspective that takes cognisance of the broad nationalist aspirations of both black nationalists and white Rhodesian nationalists and the obscured and often disregarded experiences of the private space, where private identities have to negotiate between the demands of the domestic sphere and those of the public space, enables him to represent with intensity the contradictions in the histories and identities that he captures. His poetic vision is conscious that accounts of *Chimurenga* and the experience(s) of colonial subjugation for the black subaltern have been told at a limiting national platform. The “national voice” that narrates the history of *Chimurenga* is controlled by the ZANU PF party elite who often manipulate the events of the liberation struggle to project the desired unifying national identity and to give their party an identity and image that it desires.

## References

- Alter, P.  
1989 *Nationalism*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Brantlinger, P.  
1985 Victorians and Africans: The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent. In: Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (ed.) “Race”, *Writing, and Difference*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, pp. 185-222.
- Chennells, A.  
2002 Preface. In: Dan Wylie *Dead Leaves: Two Years in the Rhodesian War*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press.
- Harlow, B.  
1987 *Resistance Literature*. New York and London: Methuen.
- Hove, C.  
1982 *Up in Arms*. Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House.  
1985 *Red Hills of Home*. Gweru: Mambo.  
1988 *Bones*. Oxford: Heinemann.  
1998 *Rainbows in the Dust*. Harare: Baobab Books.  
2003 *Blind Moon*. Harare: Weaver Press.
- Kadhani, M. & Zimunya, M. (eds)  
1981 *And Now The Poets Speak*. Gweru: Mambo Press.
- Matterson, S. & Jones, D.  
2000 *Studying Poetry*. London: Arnold.
- Ndebele, N.S.  
1991 *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture*. Johannesburg: COSAW (Congress of South African Writers).

REPRESENTATIONS OF IDENTITY, HISTORY AND NATIONALISM ...

- Ngugi Wa Thiong'o  
1997 *Writers in Politics: A Re-engagement with issues of Literature & Society*. Oxford: James Currey.
- Ranger, T.O.  
2005 Rule by historiography: the struggle over the past in contemporary Zimbabwe. In: Robert Muponde & Ranka Primorac (eds) *Versions of Zimbabwe: New Approaches to Literature and Culture*. Harare: Weaver Press, pp. 217-243.
- Smith, A.D.  
2001 *Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Wild, F.  
1988 *Patterns of Poetry in Zimbabwe*. Gweru: Mambo Press.

**Rangarirai A Musvoto**  
University of South Africa  
musvora@unisa.ac.za