

“In This Wound of Life ...”: Dystopias and Dystopian Tropes in Chenjerai Hove’s *Red Hills of Home*.

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Summary

This article is a reading of Chenjerai Hove's poetry volume *Red Hills of Home* (1985) as a *dystopia*. It locates this text within the context of the evolving postcolonial realities of the first decade of Zimbabwe's independence. It argues that the text is informed by a dystopian import and sensibility in which forlornness, hopelessness, angst, bewilderment, pain, and betrayal mark the lived experiences of the mainly subaltern subjects who people its world which is fragmented and framed by larger forces beyond their control. It further argues that Hove mainly employs the figure of a dystopian family, together with the technique of defamiliarisation, to represent not only an existential dystopia, but also a dystopian postcolonial society, and an equally dystopian civilisation. So, it is through dystopia that Hove is able to fashion out a metalanguage with which to critique various aspects of human life and existence, Zimbabwe's postcolonial conditions, and capitalist modernity. Because of Hove's nativist sensibilities, the Bantu philosophy of *ubuntu*, and Acholonu's motherism theory are employed to explore the ontological and gendered dimensions of the dystopian perspectives in this poetry volume.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel interpreteer Chenjerai Hove se digbundel *Red Hills of Home* (1985) as 'n *distopie*. Die teks is geleë binne die konteks van die ontwikkelende postkoloniale werklikhede van die eerste dekade van Zimbabwe se onafhanklikwording. Ek voer aan dat die teks gevorm word deur 'n distopiese impak en bewustheid waar troosteloosheid, hopeloosheid, angs, verbystering, pyn en verraad kenmerkend is van die lewenservarings van die hoofsaaklik ondergeskikte mense wat sy gefragmenteerde wêreld bewoon en omring is deur groter magte waarvoor hulle geen beheer het nie. Verder voer ek aan dat Hove die beeld van 'n distopiese gesin – asook die tegniek van defamiliarisering – gebruik om nie slegs 'n eksistensiële distopie uit te beeld nie, maar ook 'n distopiese postkoloniale samelewing en 'n ewe distopiese beskawing. Dit is dus met behulp van distopie dat Hove 'n metataal skep waarmee hy die verskillende aspekte van die menslike leefwyse en bestaan, postkoloniale toestande in Zimbabwe en die kapitalistiese

moderniteit ondersoek. As gevolg van Hove se nativistiese bewustheid, word die Bantoe-filosofie van *ubuntu* en Acholonu se moederisme-teorie aangewend om die ontologiese en vergenderde dimensies van die distopiese perspektiewe in sy digbundel te ondersoek.

Introduction

Literary dystopias are closely related to utopias. If anything, the dystopian emanates from the utopian in as far as it acts as its antithesis, so the existence of one presupposes the possibility of the other. As Booker (1994a: 3) puts it, “dystopian literature is specifically that literature which situates itself in direct opposition to utopian thought”. The utopian represents the ideal, while the dystopian is the nightmarish, in more or less the same way that notions of heaven and hell, respectively, are cast in Christian cosmology. However, as Booker (1994a: 3) notes, notions of utopia and dystopia are relative: “what one person considers an ideal dream might be another person’s nightmare”. In colonial Zimbabwe, the best example of such a dystopia would be in Mutswairo’s allegorical Shona novel *Feso* (1956) which was a critique of the colonial dispensation. The text makes visible the fact that the colony, for the coloniser, was largely imagined and lived as a veritable utopia, while for the colonised it was mainly quintessentially dystopian.

The term dystopian literature represents a broad range of literary works, and the notion of dystopia is understood differently by different people. For purposes of this article, Booker’s observation is pertinent here:

Dystopian literature ... constitutes a critique of existing social conditions or political systems either through the critical examination of the utopian premises upon which those conditions and systems are based or through the imaginative extension of those conditions and systems into different contexts that more clearly reveal their flaws and contradictions.

(Booker 1994a: 3)

Utopian and dystopian thinking have also characterised much of Western thinking, from biblical times to the present. One readily finds these in the notions of paradise and the fall of man, in notions of God and the devil, and in much of the Enlightenment binarisations such as civilised and uncivilised, and current notions like developed and undeveloped countries. Conventional Western literary dystopias include such texts as Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949).

Most of the above definitions of dystopia are with reference to works of fiction such as prose and possibly drama, and not necessarily to poetry. However, poetry is often used as a vehicle of social criticism, and in this respect can have dystopian energies, elements, and impulses. Booker (1994a: 3) stresses the flexibility of the notion of dystopian fiction: “Virtually any

literary work that contains an element of social or political criticism offers the possibilities of such [dystopian] readings". Booker (1994a: 3) further adds that "dystopian literature is not so much a specific genre as a particular kind of oppositional and critical energy or spirit". If anything, there are different degrees of dystopianess. It is in this light that Hove's poetry volume *Red Hills of Home* is being read here as a dystopia.

The dystopian import has always been a characteristic of many Zimbabwean literary works, *in particular those written in English*, from the colonial days to the present, from the first generation writers as categorised by Veit-Wild (1993) to the current third generation. Referring to the Zimbabwean post-independence dispensation, Vambe (2010: 95), citing Gramsci, characterises it as being in "the interregnum", a "crisis [which] consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born". The old that is dying is colonialism, and the new that cannot be born is meaningful post-independence transformation. So, historically, the utopian notions of independence that many had during the fight for freedom were turning dystopian. Some of the literary texts published in the early days of Zimbabwe's independence registered this sense of disillusionment, for example, Marechera's *Mindblast and Other Stories* (1984). This sense of dystopia was set against a cultural nationalist narrative that attempted to foreclose other competing and contesting narratives and foreground only one possible reality; a veritable utopian one.

Red Hills of Home (1985) belongs to this early post-independence period and shares the dystopian impulse with these other texts. Hove has been read by some critics as having autochthonous inclinations, and the nativist elements in his works have been discussed by various scholars such as Veit-Wild (1993), and Engelke (1998). It is in the light of this autochthonous inclination of Hove that this poetry volume is here being analysed as a dystopia through the prism of the indigenous Bantu philosophy of *ubuntu/Hunhu*, and for purposes of infusing a gender dimension, through the lens of Acholonu's (1995) Afrocentric theory of motherism. *Ubuntu*, in the words of Tutu (1999),

speaks of the very essence of being human A person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or oppressed, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are.

(Tutu quoted in Swanson 2007: 58)

In the Zimbabwean Shona language Hove belongs to, *ubuntu* is referred to as *hunhu* (Samkange & Samkange 1980), but the term *ubuntu* will be used in this article. In Zimbabwean society, oral literatures, such as folk tales, have always been implicated in the discursive construction of cultural identities, and therefore were bearers of the philosophy of *ubuntu/hunhu*. *Ubuntu*, and the oral literature referred to here, were attempts to create an ideal society, and

therefore are essentially anti-dystopian. Dystopia in this context can therefore be conceived in terms of the negation of the philosophy of *ubuntu*, and much of the oral literature attempted to foreground those identities that were a negation of this.

On the other hand, Acholonu's (1995) Afrocentric motherist theory foregrounds the complementariness of gender roles in many precolonial African societies as opposed to their hierarchisation as in Western ontology and epistemology. In the words of Acholonu,

[p]atriarchy, the system that places men on top of the social and political ladder, seems an inappropriate term for describing the organization of the social systems of the African peoples. This is because several African societies reflect systems with ranging degrees of dual-sex hierarchies in which men and women exist in parallel and complementary positions and roles within the society.

(Acholonu 1995: 233)

This theory is important in reading Hove's *Red Hills of Home* as a dystopia in terms of how it helps expose the disjunctions and disruptions visited on the complementariness of gender roles and other relationships in the African societies.

As discussed by Engelke (1998), Hove fits uneasily into Veit-Wild's (1993) categorisation of Zimbabwean writers into a first generation and a second generation. Veit-Wild lumps Hove with the second generation of Zimbabwean writers that includes the likes of Charles Mungoshi, Dambudzo Marechera and Musaemura Zimunya, whose works register a sense of alienation and disillusionment with the then prevailing circumstances of entrenched white colonial rule and an ongoing war of liberation by African nationalists. These writers, however, positioned themselves differently in their relationship to the nationalist project, and are also characterised by formal diversity, making Veit-Wild's lumping of them a bit problematic. As Veit-Wild herself points out, Hove's nativist inclination and “collective voice links him back to the public voice of the first generation, the attempts of the early writers to recreate a national history, a national identity” (1993: 318).

Likewise, Hove fits incongruously into Appiah's (quoted in Engelke 1998: 25-28) categorisation of African writers into two stages: a nativist and realist one (stage 1) in which African writers like Achebe produced works that were essentially complementing the nationalist project, and a post-realist and post-nativist one (stage 2) in which they become disillusioned with the shortcomings of the post-independent ruling elite. Hove combines the nativist elements of the first stage and the post-realist elements of the second stage.

Hove's medium in *Red Hills of Home*, unlike in much dystopian fiction, is poetry. So he does not face the same constraints as most African writers of dystopian fiction who write in the novel literary form as discussed by Booker (1995: 58): “African writers of dystopian fiction face special complications in

their attempts to explore new cultural identities within a quintessentially bourgeois form that seems inherently inimical to the utopian imagination". Poetry was an integral feature of precolonial societies in Zimbabwe, and so does not impose the same constraints as the novel. In Zimbabwean Shona and Ndebele precolonial societies, poetry has, among other things, functioned as a tool of protest, and for social criticism in a number of ways. *Bembera* (Kahari 1981: 78-101) poetry in Shona society functioned as a medium of personal protest, while in Ndebele society *imbongi* (Groenewald 2001: 29-57) poetry functioned both as praise poetry and as a tool of criticism and control of errant rulers. It is in these traditions that some of Zimbabwean poetry can be characterised, and for Hove, in whose works nativist elements have been discussed by various scholars (Veit-Wild 1993; Engelke 1998), this analogy is befitting.

The shortcomings of the novel in the attempts to envision alternatives to bourgeois culture, and other monologic cultural configurations are summarised by Foley:

the tendency of realistic narrative to dissolve contradiction in the movement toward closure; its characteristic opposition of the social to the personal, and its displacement of social critique onto personal ethical choice; its insistence upon the uniqueness, and often the superiority of its protagonist(s), its co-optation of the reader into agreement with the discourse occupying the apex of the text's implied hierarchy of discourses.

(Foley quoted in Booker 1995: 59)

Marechera, in his depiction of postcolonial Zimbabwe as a dystopia uses the Mennipean novel form in *Mindblast and Other Stories* (1984) to transcend the above limitations presented by the novel form. Arguably, the poetry form enables Hove to accomplish the same in *Red Hills of Home*.

Dystopias in *Red Hills of Home*

1 The Dystopian Family

The dystopian family is a central trope in this poetry volume. The family as the basic building block of society is central in *ubuntu* philosophy in line with its emphasis on the collective as opposed to the individual. It is through the family that one's individuality is transcended and one becomes part of a whole that goes beyond the family to encompass the extended family, the whole community and society. As Swanson (2007: 55) notes, "Ubuntu is recognised as the African philosophy of humanism linking the individual to the collective through 'brotherhood' or 'sisterhood'", and so "a person is a person through their relationship to others". The family in *ubuntu* is not strictly the nuclear one characteristic of Western societies, but the extended one. However, the

family figure that dominates this poetry volume is a nuclear family consisting of a father, mother, and children, that characterises most Western societies and so from the point of view of *ubuntu*, it is dystopian. It signifies the disjunctions wrought by global capitalism, and the transformation of postcolonial identities in line with the same. So, the trope of an absent/dead father, a destitute/dead mother, and despairing children permeates the whole poetry volume in which the figure of a dystopian family is a metaphor as well as a calibrating tool for a similarly dystopian society. A good example is from the poem “Alone” (p. 52) which begins thus: “We are alone now/ father got pregnant and left / to deliver in far away places .../ Mother died of an unknown disease” (p. 52). The complementariness of family relations has been disrupted by capitalist relations and their attendant egocentricism that have seen the father assuming a queer gender identity marked by his feminisation; a disruption that sees him turning his back on his family. This metaphor of a feminised father is dystopian, and shows how he has been a quintessential victim of capitalism, which here is masculinised. The orphanhood that marks the existence of the child persona and his/her siblings signifies the breakdown of the collective and the safety net that it provides. Capitalist, cash-nexus relations have torn through human bonds symbolised by the family as shown by the existential despair of most of the personas in most of the poems. In fact, the disruption in the realm of the family permeates the whole social body politic, and the dominant images and metaphors in the poetry volume are those which capture a sense of fragmentation, dislocatedness, raptureness, a lack of stability, and an absence of completeness or wholeness.

The iconography in the poetry volume makes visible the fact that the complementary nature of gender relations inherent in *ubuntu* and motherism has also been torn asunder. However, this poetry volume disassociates itself from the reproduction of the stereotypical “dystopian families that have been made so by an aberrant masculinity that preys not only on women and children but also on itself” (Muchemwa & Muponde 2007: xix). In fact, in this volume, all members of the family are victims of a rampant, insatiable, and implacable capitalism at the centre of the dystopian family. Self-interest often mediates the relations of family members who can also prey on each other as the poem “Dear Father” (p. 67), in which the persona muses about his relations with his father, shows: “Was it today I had you for a meal? .../ Once we shared dreams: .../ But you ate the embers of a roaring fire/ and spat the flames on me” (p. 67). The cannibalistic metaphor and that of the father spitting the flames of a roaring fire on the son as markers of human relations are the quintessence of a dystopia, and are at variance with the tenets of *ubuntu*.

In fact, gender relations in the poetry volume are shown to be complementary rather than hierarchical. The metaphors of a despairing mother and of children make evident the fact that the absence of the father/husband

does not transform into some form of “liberation” or relief for the wife/mother and/or children as implied in Muchemwa and Muponde (2007) above, but render the family dysfunctional. Other images in the poetry volume are of forlorn and despairing partners who have either lost or been abandoned by their partners, for example, the poems “Once Partners” (p. 5) and “Since You Left” (p. 6). Because of the void so left, the personas have lost their anchorage, and life to them has lost much of its meaning, and so the persona’s tone in both poems is ruefully brooding and melancholic. Both personas feel disempowered and grounded by the absence or loss of their partners, something which resonates with Acholonu’s (1995) Afrocentric philosophy of motherism that views gender relations in most African societies as complementary rather than hierarchical, and rejects the term patriarchy or matriarchy as products of a Western epistemology, cosmology, and ontology. In their place, the terms patrifocal, and matrifocal are preferred as a reflection of the absence of hierarchical gender relations, stressing the symbiosis between the masculine and the feminine principles in these societies.

The negation of *ubuntu* and motherism in *Red Hills of Home* is also manifest in the manner in which the family figure and trope is deployed as a metaphor for hierarchical relations in the postcolonial state. In the Western Enlightenment imperial project, the family figure was deployed to affirm and naturalise hierarchies between coloniser and colonised (McClintock 1993: 63-65). Arguably, Hove also deploys it in the same sense to depict relations between the elite and the masses in the postcolonial nation state in the poem “Child’s Parliament” (Hove 1985: 43), and in the process makes visible some sordid continuities between the erstwhile colony and the post-independence dispensation. In the poem the children are a metaphor for the subalterns and the wretched of the earth, whose welfare is very low on the list of the priorities of the ruling elite as symbolised by the parliament. Since the nation, in Western epistemology, has always been conceived in feminine terms, the listless, helpless, despairing and impoverished mother stands for the nation that has not been able to provide succour to the common masses. The absent father stands for the state (which is often masculinised), the ruling elite, who have abandoned the welfare of the generality of the people. This is epitomised by the parliament which is wont to pursue egocentric agendas as the child persona laments: “[W]e hear there is a crisis/ members of parliament demand higher salaries, / so there is no debate about us” (p. 43). This dramatises the emergence of class-based fissures in the postcolonial body politic, a veritable negation of the philosophy of *ubuntu* in which leaders and the masses are one, and the spirit of sharing and mutuality mediates human existence. This is accentuated by the children being lumped together with vermin such as flies and rats, which is a metaphor of their status as the wretched of the earth. In surrealist fashion, the children are left to form their own parliament and debate with vermin, disease, and lifeless figures (statistics) of population increase (p. 44). The monologic discourse of the elite has marginalised the masses, so

“Child’s Parliament” represents the attempt to prize open discursive space in which dialogism rather than monologism is the norm. The child figure is also used as a calibrating tool for the pace of national development under the post-independence ruling elite where “stale overdue projects/... crawl now/ when they should have run yesterday” (p. 44). The emotionally charged state of the persona and the unrelieved sense of suffering of the subalterns are captured in the long poem’s form which consists of a single stanza dominated by short verses and run-on lines.

2 Existential Crisis, Existential Dystopia

Hove’s poetry in *Red Hills of Home* largely addresses the sensations of alienation, hopelessness, betrayal, bewilderment, and pain of individual, mainly subaltern, subjects, and so it lends itself to an existentialist reading. This is encapsulated by the verse: “In this wound of life?” from the poem “Things to Contend With” (p. 9), which captures the existential ennui of the persona as highlighted by his/her despairing tone. Inhabiting only the marginalised spaces especially reserved for the weak, many of the subaltern personas find futility in existence. This signifies, inter alia, the dearth of a coherent system of signs with which to interpret the world as provided in the epistemological semiotics of *ubuntu*. Unlike most Western dystopias in which the individual is in conflict with the collective (Booker 1995), the existential dystopias in *Red Hills of Home* are a consequence of the very disruption of this collective as Booker (1995) notes with most African dystopian fiction. Notable exceptions to this trend in Zimbabwean fiction is the cosmopolitan Marechera who depicts the individual in conflict with the collective, notably in *Mindblast and Other Stories* (1984). Hove’s autochthonous inclinations mean that his poetic sensibilities and vision are informed by indigenous philosophies like *ubuntu* as in *Red Hills of Home* where the breakdown of the collective as symbolised by the family results in anomie. Hove’s focus on existential dystopia in this volume seems to run counter to Kortenaar’s (2000) claim (quoted in Afolayan 2011: 10) that “[t]hird world texts are national allegories where there is no room for private dramas”. However, the private dramas in Hove’s poems in this volume are entangled in the collective, the national, and the global. In fact, the social dislocation of the alienated character is symptomatic of the dislocated postcolonial society.

In the poem “Is This All?” (Hove 1985: 11), the persona interrogates the meaning of his existence which to him amounts to very little. In the twilight years of his life, he realises that the metaphors of his existence have been suffering, forlornness, hopelessness, and meaninglessness. In short, it has been dystopian. This realisation resonates with Camus’s (1955) discussion on how the [Western] individual subject’s consciousness longs for order, but only encounters a lack of order, giving rise to the absurd. This links up well with

the notions of utopia and dystopia. The individual's utopian impulse comes up against a dystopian reality, and the absurd is born. This is what the persona in this poem, looking for order in his life, finally arrives at, and it only breeds angst and despair. His lament: "Terms! Terms! Terms!// the terms of my engagement" (Hove 1985: 11), sums up his bewilderment, as well as his rhetorical question: "Is this all I sought [in life]?" (p. 12). This despair and the absurd that Camus refers to have no place in *ubuntu*, where "dignity and identity are achieved through mutualism, empathy, generosity and community commitment" (Swanson 2007: 56).

There are many other poems that generally capture the lack of order and chaos that characterises the subaltern persona's existence. For example, the poem "Sights" (p. 25) captures the chaos in the way Christmas has been perverted from being sacred and holy to become an occasion and site for the display of human licentiousness, lust, and greed. As a result of the secularisation of Christmas, the celebration of the day becomes a "theatre of the absurd", as made visible in the refrain: "That was at Christmas/ when Christ was mashed" (p. 25). This image of a Christmas that has been secularised and purged of its religious significance is a metaphor of an absurd and dystopian world. The poem enacts the subversion of a religious discourse by a secular one, and resonates with Sartre's (1966) existentialist conviction of the non-existence of God that leaves man to create his own meanings in a rather meaningless world. In *ubuntu* and motherism, humans know their place in the scheme of things which consists of humans, the spiritual, and the material world, and there is no room for meaninglessness and a lack of order.

The discourse of a disorderly world is furthered by the poem "Entrance Next Door" (Hove 1985: 62-63), where images of a perverted world predominate. The persona's existential despair runs through the poem, as expressed through the inventory of images of a world of subverted standards, for example: "but the magistrate is in jail/ for having raped a witness in a rape case" (p. 62). In this poem, the persona also gives some contextual clues of the dystopian world in which he is despairing. Images of "Alloys Zimbabwe Ltd" (p. 62), a ferrochrome industrial concern in the town of Gweru in Zimbabwe, and the "Sunday Mail" (p. 62), a well-established Zimbabwean weekly newspaper, give some contextual pointers to particular settings. However, the horizons of the settings are extended to include the wider world, with the reference to Ronald Reagan, then American president, and also the reference to heaven and the devil. The poem's form, in its movement from one unconnected dystopian metaphor to another, imitates a disorderly world in which humans grope for meaning and ultimately have to create their own meanings in the postmodern world of late capitalism. In fact, Hove locates the despair of his personas and the dystopias in this poetry volume in what Wallerstein (quoted in Booker 1995) calls the "World System". In this way, *Red Hills of Home* resonates with other dystopian fictional works by African writers as studied by Booker (1995). The reference to heaven and the devil resonates with notions of utopia

and dystopia respectively. However, the merging of utopia and dystopia is symbolised by the persona's fictional allusion to “Satan's Readmission/ to Heaven, /expulsion was an error” (p. 63). This exposes the constructedness and relativity of these two narratives (utopia and dystopia), and how their interpretation is cultural-specific. For example, the privileging of the collective over the individual is utopian in *ubuntu*, but in Western epistemology it is dystopian.

So, many of the poems in the volume are replete with images of despair, futility, pain, bewilderment, and hopelessness, coupled with those that show the negation of order and rationality. These signify the existential crisis that many of the poems capture. It can be argued that all the dystopias in the poetry volume are sublimated into the anguish and despair of the subaltern subject. Many critics of Hove's poetry such as Flora Veit-Wild, and Musaemura Zimunya have noted the crises that characterise the poetry volume's various personas but have been unable to pinpoint their source or cause. Commenting on some of Hove's poems in this volume, Veit-Wild (1988: 8), a prominent critic of Zimbabwean literature, observes that “often you do not know what the message of the poem should be except for a vague feeling of weariness and despair”. Another prominent Zimbabwean poet and literary critic, Musaemura Zimunya, also wonders:

But you may well ask what is the cause of this crisis? Sometimes a physical reality lurks behind the mystery of the poet's voice, but most of the time Chenjerai Hove is content to leave the cause of the wound or anguish out of his poem entirely.

(Zimunya quoted in Veit-Wild 1988: 8)

This can best be understood through recourse to the technique of defamiliarisation, which Booker (1994b) identifies as one of the characteristics of dystopian fiction. Hove is not primarily concerned to use his poetry to explicitly analyse Zimbabwe's political and social condition. Instead, he addresses the sensations of betrayal, bewilderment and alienation, aspects that are not hallmarks of a utopia but that, instead, refract on a dystopian society. The individual's existential dystopia is therefore a metaphor for a dystopian society which encompasses not only the Zimbabwean post-independence context, but also the larger realities of capitalist modernity. In the context of the Zimbabwean post-independence dispensation, what is captured by the despairing individual is the sense of disillusionment and malaise that was creeping into the national body politic due to the faltering promises of independence.

In fact, defamiliarisation as employed by Hove enhances the literariness of his poetry volume, negating the general conception of dystopias as devoid of aesthetic qualities that make for a work of art. In the words of Booker (1994b: 173), “there has long been a critical tendency to see utopian and dystopian fiction as sacrificing artistic merit in the interest of content”. *Red Hills of*

Home shows that it can be the other way round. Actually, defamiliarisation is a marker of post-realist fiction, to which Hove's art belongs, and so in a way it runs counter to the realist narratives that were in the service of the monologic nationalist project. His autochthonous inclinations readily lend him to non-realist inclinations as is the case in much of African orature where realism is negated through magical realism, in particular.

However, in spite of the autochthonous sensibilities in the poems, the world-weary persona in the poem "The Journey" (Hove 1985: 32-33), shows his cosmopolitanism by finding a poetry companion in the form of the English poet Blake. After going through the inventory of most English poetry greats that include Wordsworth and Eliot, it is with Blake that he establishes a resonance for his incisive and anti-authoritarian poetry: "I read Blake for a poetry partner" (p. 33). This anti-authoritarian sensibility also helps to show that Hove was engaging with larger forces through the existential despair of his subaltern subjects.

3 The Dystopian Postcolonial Nation

The poetry volume was written in the Zimbabwe of the first decade of independence; a decade of optimism in which the political discourses were marked by a socialist rhetoric, and the dominant critical ideology was socialist realism as espoused, for example by critics like Ngara (1985). A cultural nationalism critiqued in the work of Marechera (1984) was in the ascendancy. By the mid-1980s the early optimism of independence was beginning to fade. However, *Red Hills of Home* makes no overt contextual references to Zimbabwe. No place names, no specific dates are referred to; reference to the post-independence situation, for example, reads "Independence came, but we still had the noose" in the poem "Independence Song" (Hove 1985: 35). It is only in the title, "*Red Hills of Home*", that a reader very familiar with Zimbabwe can deduce any reference to place. The "red hills of home" are a reference to the mining town of Zvishavane in central Zimbabwe, near to Hove's birthplace, Mazvihwa. The name Zvishavane comes from *zvikomo zvishavane*, which translated from the Shona language means "red hills". Except for this, there are a few other contextual cues such as a reference to Alloys Zimbabwe Limited (p. 62), a ferrochrome industrial concern in the town of Gweru in central Zimbabwe. There is also a reference to the Sunday Mail (p. 62), a well-established weekly newspaper in Zimbabwe. Besides these few, rather obscure, contextual allusions, the poems in the text could refer to any part of, or country, in Africa. This absence of contextual clues is evident from Hove's inclination towards the technique of defamiliarisation, so well established in dystopian works of fiction (Booker 1994a). However, it must be understood that there are degrees of defamiliarisation, and so *Red Hills of Home* does not employ the technique in the same way as, for example,

many African folk tales, Mutswairo’s Shona classic novel *Feso* (1956), or a text like Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) in the Western literary canon. Among Hove’s contemporaries in Zimbabwe, defamiliarisation marking the dystopian turn in the literary canon is evident in Marechera’s *Mindblast* (1984), notably the drama sketch entitled “Grimknife Junior and Rix the Giant Cat” in which the post-independence government’s intolerance of the artist who does not tow the official cultural-nationalist line is satirised.

Vambe (2010), referring to Zimbabwe’s post-independence dispensation, refers to the country as being in “the interregnum”, that is a period of crisis; a crisis of transition from the colony to the postcolony. In this way, the postcolonial condition is cast in dystopian terms. Following Vambe’s paradigm, the poetry collection, *Red Hills of Home*, is located within, and can best be understood by reference to this “interregnum”: it is literature of crisis, and dealing with a crisis, and so is essentially dystopian. In the poetry volume Hove collapses the colonial period and the post-independence one and this helps to emphasise the dystopianess. Although there are no explicit time references, the first poem in the volume, “Red Hills of Home” (Hove 1985: 1-2), is a reference to the ruthless exploitation of colonial capitalism and its physical, social, and spiritual dislocation of black Africans. Its use of the trope of the land and invocation of the spiritual highlight Hove’s nativist aesthetics as implicated in the construction of post-independence Zimbabwean identities. Some of the poems echo the recently ended liberation war, but there is no sense of transition, through chronology, in the poetry volume from the colony to the postcolony, only an unrelieved sense of despair, hopelessness, and angst permeate the whole volume. A sense of chronology can, however, be deduced from the arrangement of the poems where those poems that refer explicitly to the post-independence period, such as “Professor” (p. 29), “Independence Song” (p. 35), “Child’s Parliament” (p. 43), and “Inaugural Thoughts” (p. 50), are located much later in the volume. Even so, the sense of chronology is broken by the poem “Nyadzonia” (p. 65), an evocation of the Nyadzonia massacre during the liberation war.

The poem “Independence Song” (p. 35) shows that independence was accompanied by utopian expectations: “The coming was gold-ridden” (p. 35), but its dystopianess becomes apparent in the very next line through the oxymoronic “Wealth that rinsed blood out of us” (p. 35). The one-stanza poem shows that the song is a very dour, dreary, and sad one, while its tone is contemplative. The image of the noose, “Independence came, but we still had the noose” (p. 35), is a reference to disturbing continuities between the colony and the postcolonial nation, quintessentially summing up the guillotine-like grip that neocolonialism has on the newly independent country. Colonialism, as represented by the images of the “decaying abbeys and castles” (p. 35), has simply mutated to another form. The persona apportions some of the blame on the postcolonised subjects themselves for looking up to their former dominators for models and salvation: “still we smell greatness out there/ in the

decaying abbeys and castles./ So we carry the noose/ and beg to be dragged again/ in the name of development” (p. 35). Reference is made here to the power of language in the form of discourse, in this case the Western discourse on development to which the formerly colonised are enslaved, and the one that largely mediates the new neocolonial relations. The poem itself is a counter-discourse to both the neocolonial discourse and the postcolonial one of the postcolonial government which exists in a love-hate relationship. The image of the noose can also be said to refer to the asphyxiating grip that poverty still has on the common people, which is contained in the image of their “bare feet [which] maul the dry earth/ till freedom come” (p. 35), and it sums up the dystopian postcolonial dispensation. In this way, the poem deconstructs any utopian sense of the postcolonial nation state as underpinned by the cultural nationalist narrative that tried to portray the process of liberation as having gone full circle with the attainment of independence, and tried to foreclose any alternative or competing narratives. In this way, the poem attempts to open up discursive spaces in the process of constructing postcolonial identities which do not fossilise or ossify but are always in the process of becoming. It follows, therefore, that Hove’s nativism is a critical one; one that negates crystallisation or slippage into essentialism.

The paucity of *ubuntu* in the postcolonial leadership is further revealed through their egocentrism and narcissism encapsulated in the poem “Inaugural Thoughts” (p. 50) in which the persona explores what goes on in the minds of the leaders. The poem is in the form of an internal monologue and bears the sense of a stream-of-consciousness dominated by prognostications regarding the fate or legacy the leader would meet or leave behind. The mood is sombre, and this is accentuated by the poem’s well-defined stanzas which, unlike most of the poems in the volume, convey a sense of systematicness and formality congruent with the poem’s persona. Salient in these meditations is the insidious insecurity, anxiety, and uncertainty concerning the leader’s own fate which results in the sacrifice of the interests of the masses on the narcissistic and egocentric altar of self-preservation. The poem unmasks the mystique behind the postcolonial leader who often is so distant from the people he rules, yet is wont to project the image of a caring “father” of the nation. The poem exposes him to be an egocentric “father” of the kind disparaged in orature, particularly traditional folk tales. In *ubuntu* philosophy, as Samkange and Samkange (1980) note, a king or leader owes his status and power to the will of people to whom he is accountable. The president’s inner monologue exposes the vulnerability and frailty of the ruler’s power. His power gravitates towards the vulgar, summarised by his comment at the end of the poem: “Since when bad air is released/ the owner hardly accepts his job/ Only the flies thank him” (p. 51).

The poem “You Will Forget” (p. 3) undermines the utopian conceptions that the common people often had of their leaders on the attainment of independence in regarding them as selflessly dedicated to serving them. The

persona warns all and sundry: “If you stay in comfort too long/ .../ You will forget” (pp. 3-4), and goes on to list a whole inventory of the sufferings associated with the wretched of the earth. The persona refers to this amnesia as a human failing that is not peculiar to the postcolonial elite, but is a failing that essentially results from those class differences that emerged between the ruling elite and the common masses at independence. The poem, whose tone is admonitory, highlights this insidious and pervasive form of amnesia of the fortunate for the less fortunate, highlighted by the refrain “You will forget” (pp. 3-4). The poem is in the form of an address whose evocative power is in its use of the above refrain and in the short verses and stanzas that help to accentuate its urgency and directness of address.

Regarding the efficacy and appropriateness of poetry as a tool for engaging with power and its abuses in the above-discussed poems, a quotation from a speech by John F. Kennedy, a former president of the United States of America, is not out of place here:

When power leads man towards arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitations. When power narrows the areas of man’s concern, poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of his existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses, for art establishes the basic human truths which must serve as the touchstone of our judgment.

(John F. Kennedy quoted in Booker 1994a: 1)

This is what this poetry volume does through poems such as “Inaugural Thoughts”, “Professor”, and “Child’s Parliament”. In *ubuntu*, poetry such as *imbongi* and *bembera* served the same functions in precolonial Zimbabwean societies. So, through dystopian poetry, Hove, in this poetry volume in particular, is able to forge a metalanguage to articulate the Zimbabwean crisis, something which Vambe (2010) accuses him (and most other Zimbabwean writers), of failing to do, particularly in his later works like *Blind Moon* (2003).

4 Dystopian Civilisation

Hove’s dystopias are not limited to postcolonial¹ Zimbabwe but are framed within the larger global context, that is, the world system. In this way it resonates with many other postcolonial dystopian literary texts that also locate the dystopian postcolonial reality in the same world system (Booker 1995). So, framing the other dystopias in the poetry volume is a dystopian civilisation. To start with, it is essential to refer to an earlier poem by Hove

1. Postcoloniality is here used in a temporal sense to refer to the period after the attainment of political independence, and should therefore not be confused with other uses of the term.

entitled “Uprising”, in the poetry collection *Up in Arms* (1982: 45), which begins thus: “I have been up in arms/ with this rinsed civilization,/ civilization that walks naked/ and roasts brother for sister’s lunch”. In short, the picture depicted here is of a dystopian world system, whose vulgarity is portrayed through the image of nakedness and a cannibalistic metaphor, and accentuated through the use of the family trope.

The same trope of a dystopian civilisation is reproduced in *Red Hills of Home*, beginning with the very eponymous poem “Red Hills of Home” (Hove 1985: 1-2). The red hills are a metaphor of humanity’s greed and over-exploitation of fellow beings as well as the natural environment: “The green hills of home died,/ Red hills cut the sky/ and the nearby sooty homes of peasants/ live under the teeth of a roaring bulldozer” (p. 1). The red hills and the bulldozer are symbols of ruthless capitalist exploitation that saps the essence of life out of those who help to sustain the system through their sweat and toil. This strikes right at the heart of human life as represented by the recurrent trope of the broken family. Suffering, a social malaise, and angst are engendered and they blend with the existential ennui of the persona, which serves to show the powerlessness of the marginalised. This resonates with Zhuwarara’s observation regarding Hove’s literary works:

In almost all these writings, he seems to be haunted by the plight of the weak and vulnerable members of society, those who find themselves pitted against more dominant historical and social forces but are powerless to define and defend their own interests.

(Zhuwarara 2001: 215)

This is the experiential reality of the wretched of the earth in the poem. The poem, like many of the poems in the volume, is emotionally charged as evidenced by the short, run-on lines, and also the interspersing of long and short lines. There is a semblance of the persona addressing his poetry or lamentations to an audience in many of the poems, hence the emotional involvement. This makes most of the poems evocative, for example, this titular poem, “Red Hills of Home” (p. 1) begins thus: “Father grew up here/...” (p. 1).

The brutality of capitalist exploitation of the natural environment is accentuated by the persona’s personification and feminisation of nature: “Here, on this bit of ground/ earth once lay pregnant/ but now/ the sacred hill bleeds/ robbed even of her decent name/ her holy cows milked/ by hunger laden hands/ whose mouths eat man” (p. 2). The reference to “sacred hill” and “holy cows” echo the sort of world view contained in motherism philosophy as well as *ubuntu* in terms of indigenous cosmologies on the relationship between humans and the environment. It makes visible some of the checks and balances relating to the exploitation of the natural environment by humans in indigenous cosmologies, in which the spiritual is an integral part of human existence, and which were basically environmentally friendly (Mutekwa and

Musanga, 2013). This is opposed to the secular, instrumentalist world view inherent in the world system in which ruthless environmental exploitation is foregrounded and ecocentric concerns are marginalised.

The dystopian nature of the world system and its attendant discourses such as development and progress are further explored in the poem “Wealthy Nations” (p. 61). The poem makes reference to Adam Smith’s well-known text, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1869). The persona, however, oxymoronically extends the title to read “Wealth of Nations/Poverty of Peoples”, to subvert its utopian underpinnings. The poem through its imagery, such as that of darkness and death, captures a sense of gloom that is in line with the theme of the poem. According to Bowden (2011: 127), humans are now in the fourth and most advanced stage of their evolutionary development which is that of “civilised, [industrialised], urbanised, commercial society, an efficient and effective exploitation of nature and all the fruits she has to offer”. The persona, however, shows that the common people are reduced to a mere “factor in production” (p. 61) in this capitalist cog; the quintessence of their dehumanisation. The tragedy of the system is its subtraction of the human factor in favour of the labour and profit factors, something which is the antithesis of both *ubuntu* and motherism world views. *Ubuntu* and motherism foreground the human over the material, and the collective over the individual.

5 Conclusion

Red Hills of Home is protest poetry, hence its ready association with dystopia. Its dystopianess is best understood in terms of the negation of the African philosophy of *ubuntu* and motherism. However, unlike much protest poetry it is not “one dimensional, crude or dull” (Veit-Wild 1988: 27). The poetry in this volume is so stylistically composed that it never *loses* that sublime touch that makes for good poetry. The form and images capture the sombre mood that is evoked by the subject of the various poems from the “Meditations of a State President” (p. 50), to the lament of the downtrodden members of the subaltern groups. The largely haphazard arrangement of the stanzas and verses of the poems is evocative of a world without form or order, a dystopian world, and this is furthered by the images which range from the distinct to the indistinct, as exemplified by the poem “The Mosquito” (p. 14) in which the persona equates capitalists’ exploitation to the blood-sucking mosquitoes and the indistinctness of the images of a poem like “Skyscraper” (p. 22).

The poetry volume, at a glance, seems to be a collection of poems on various subjects, but they, through their thematic concerns, fit like a jigsaw puzzle to tell a single tale. Each of the dystopias as depicted in the poems is entangled in the other, such that the postcolonial dystopia cannot be read separately from other global discourses such as neocolonialism, development, progress, and

civilisation. These frame the existential crises of most of the personas in the poetry volume. The poems, like most dystopias, can be taken as warnings not only concerning civilisation and related discourses but also about the postcolonial condition in Zimbabwe. So, through dystopia, Hove is able to come up with a metalanguage to articulate the Zimbabwean postcolonial condition of the 1980s, containing the seeds that were to germinate into a full-blown economic and political crisis at the turn of the twenty-first century to date, which Hove explicitly deals with in his later literary works, *Blind Moon* (2003), and *Palaver Finish* (2002).

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