

The *Sunday Nation*: Books & Culture  
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### **Author's Hope For Zimbabwe**

*Chinodya delves into country's historical past in order to reconstruct it*  
By Lennox Odiemo-Munara

The winning of the 2007 NOMA Award For Publishing in Africa by the Zimbabwean author Shimmer Chinodya for his novel *Strife* (2006) is significant. For the author, it shows his steady progress into a master craftsman and, broadly, it exhibits the coming to flower of the Zimbabwean literary process.

### **Communion**

Chinodya enters the communion of two other Zimbabwean writers who have won the prize: Chenjerai Hove and Charles Mungoshi. (Hove won for his seminal novel *Bones* in 1989, and Mungoshi with *One Day Long Ago: More Stories from a Shona Childhood* in 1992).

First awarded in 1979 to Mariama Ba for her *Une si Longue Lettre (So long a letter, 1980)*, the Noma recognizes outstanding literature published in Africa by indigenous publishing firms.

Kenyan writers have won the prize twice: Gakaara wa Wanjau (who co-won with the South African scholar-writer Njabulo Ndebele for his *Fools and Other Stories*, 1983) for his Gikuyu prison memoirs, *Mwandiki wa Mau Mau Ithaamirioini* (1983) (*Mau Mau writer in Detention*, 1986) in 1984; and Kimani Njogu and Rocha Chimera for their co-authored *Ufundishaji wa Fasihi: Nadharia na Mbinu* (1999) in 2000.

### **Acclaimed**

Born in 1957 in Gweru, Zimbabwe, Chinodya studied for a degree in literature and education at the University of Zimbabwe. He later obtained an MA in creative writing in 1985 from the University of Iowa, USA, where he attended the acclaimed Iowa Writers' Workshop in 1984. Chinodya has lectured widely both at home and abroad and has been on various fellowships, including Distinguished Visiting Professor in Creative Writing and African Literature at the University of St Lawrence, USA, 1995 – 1997. He currently works as a consultant and freelance writer.

Shimmer Chinodya is an author across literary genres. His literary works comprise the novels *Dew in the Morning* (1982), *Farai's Girls* (1984), *Harvest of Thorns* (1989), *Chairman of Fools* (2005), and *Strife*; short story collection *Can We Talk and Other Stories* (1998). His short stories have also been widely anthologized; several children's books as well as educational textbooks and radio/film scripts.

In his major works, Chinodya delves deep into the Zimbabwean historical past in order to (re)construct it and insightfully create spaces for reflection on the present.

### **Intricacies**

Chinodya's first work, *Dew in the Morning* (written when he was only 18 years old), explores the intricacies of growing up in colonial Rhodesia. Family disintegration caused by migration to the urban centers by family members to seek employment opportunities is shown to result in emotional and psychological instabilities in both children and their parents.

The theme of growing up in colonial Rhodesia is further explored in *Farai's Girls*. In this text, Chinodya investigates sexual relationships among teenagers, showing the resultant value collision and moral degeneration in society.

In *Harvest of Thorns*, Chinodya fully constructs a narrative that adequately reads (post)colonial Zimbabwe. *Harvest* won the Commonwealth Writers Prize (African Region) in 1990, and also received a Noma Honourable Mention. It specifically examines human existence in the Rhodesia of the liberation struggle, 1950 throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

Interwoven with the narrative of the struggle is the (hi)story of the protagonist, Benjamin Tichafa, who participates in the guerilla war for the liberation of his country, only to find himself completely socio-politically deprived with the coming of independence.

*Harvest* thus shows the collapse of the dream of the people who participated in freeing the Zimbabwean nation from colonialism. (It is useful to draw parallels here with the current Zimbabwe and how the hope for a free post-colonial state has been trampled on by the Robert Mugabe state in its opportunistic and insidious conceptualisations of the so-called third revolution.)

Chinodya, like his contemporary Chenjerai Hove, refuses to see the history of post-independent Zimbabwe as “one whole brave patriotic phenomenon” (in the manner that the Mugabe state is ideologising it). He searchingly examines the traumatic memories of the war of liberation, and the utter state of nothingness that the true war veterans find themselves in.

### **Expectations**

Indeed, *Harvest of Thorns* is a striking metaphor of the failure of the post-colony to live to live to the expectations of its people.

The marriage institution is examined in *Chairman of Fools*. In it, Chinodya presents an educated African man's attempt at understanding the concept of marriage with its myriad challenges but, in the process, degenerates into excessive drinking and finally ends up in a psychiatric ward.

Chinodya, with hindsight, interrogates the pretences that most marriages rest on. The text demonstrates that in the long run, the pretences crumple with horrifying psychological conditions on individuals.

*Strife*, the novel that has won Chinodya the Noma award, 2007, in a stylistically and thematically dense manner, revisits the history of the Zimbabwean nation through the microcosm of one family, the Gwanagaras. The narrative shifts from the past to the present in re/decoding the history of both the nation and individuals involved in the making of the nation. In the interweaving of the past and the present, the juxtaposition of (post)modernity and tradition, Chinodya underlines the need to thoroughly re-study the various epochs of the Zimbabwean socio-historical culture in order to understand the country's present “ailment” and strive to cure it. (In the text, the family's children have been successfully guided through early life, but in adult life they are struck by a seemingly incurable ailment – just as the Mugabe state currently is.)

The Noma Award jury, chaired by the renowned Tanzanian publisher, Walter Bgoya, and whose 2007 members included the distinguished Kenyan critic-theorist, Simon Gikandi – Professor of English at Princeton – aptly noted that Chinodya's “psychological sensitivity illuminates the dominant themes of disease and death; and the constant tension between the pull of the past and the aspiration of modernity.

These are expressed in a prose that makes everything original and new, recasting old themes.”

Indeed, with *Strife* Chinodya has added something new to African literature. And in times of such great despair in Zimbabwe, perhaps the hope lies in Zimbabweans single-mindedly refocusing their “memory” to defeat the national ailment that has been caused by the liberators turned insensitive despots.

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[www.weaverpresszimbabwe.com](http://www.weaverpresszimbabwe.com)

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