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The Elusive Truth: Literary Development in Zimbabwe since 1980

With the establishment of an independent Zimbabwean state in April 1980, the conditions for black writing in this country changed decisively. New publishing houses emerged, existing ones opened up to black writers. A vast expansion of secondary and higher education facilitated the acquisition of writing skills, which also meant more language competence and a freer choice of language for writing. Access became possible to the international book market,1 to international writers' conferences and various other forms of information and discussion. The Zimbabwe International Book Fair in Harare combined with international writers' workshops, have been held there since 1983 (initially annually, then biennially), and have turned the Zimbabwean capital into a regional centre for literary exchange and debate.

Towards the end of the first decade, broad movements of new aspiring writers emerged, especially among very young Zimbabweans, high school and university students, and among groups so far underprivileged, such as women. As they did not want to rely on publishing houses which worked slowly and government agencies which imposed restraints (such as the Literature Bureau), they founded their own writers' organizations: the "Budding Writers' Association of Zimbabwe" (BWAZ) and the "Zimbabwe Women Writers" (ZWW), both in 1990. These organizations have involved a large number of people in writing workshops, readings and discussions and have attracted much public attention. They are affiliated to the Zimbabwe Writers' Union (ZIWU), founded in 1984, and provide a forum for public presentations and discussion of literary ventures.

1 However, the 20 per cent extra import tax on imported books has proved almost as prohibitive as political censorship was.
While political power changed hands, political restrictions remained. The new government did not change or abolish the censorship laws, and hence Zimbabwean writers (and imported publications) are still subject to the approval of the Censorship Board, only under different auspices. This and other interventions by government officials (see below) have led to new frictions between government and writers.

Changed conditions did not mean an abrupt change in writers' preoccupations either. Solomon Mutswairo, one of the early cultural nationalists, became more deeply involved in studies of the cultural and ethnological history of his people; the writer-historian Stanlake Samkange wrote more semi-fictional historical novels; Charles Mungoshi explored, in new ways, his old theme of alienation; Chenjerai Hove, the poetic observer of the war of liberation, came forward with more poetry of "blood and tears"; Dambudzo Marechera now directed the full force of his scorn of authority against the Zimbabwean leadership; and Stanley Nyamfukudza, who in *The Non-Believer's Journey* had created the anti-hero of the

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2 Marechera's *Black Sunlight* (London: Heinemann, 1980) was banned in Zimbabwe in 1981, mainly for reasons of obscenity and blasphemy; the ban was lifted after an appeal led by university lecturer and poet M. Zimunya.

3 His latest Shona novel recounts the story of the famous spirit medium and leader of the 1896/97 uprisings, Mbuya Nehanda: *Mweya waNehanda*. (Harare: College Press, 1988); recent unpublished research papers are on "The Mbire People: An Ethno-Totemic Approach in Search of the Mbire Identity" and a "Critical Study of Traditional and Modern Shona Poetry."


7 *Mindblast or The Definitive Buddy*. (Harare: College Press, 1984).

8 (Heinemann: London, 1980).