

# Meeting Chenjerai Hove in Sweden

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*By Okey Ndibe*



## *Chenjerai Hove*

Chenjerai Hove may not be a familiar name to most Nigerians, but he is one of the most original writers to come out of Africa. Those most attentive to the continent's literature are bound to recognize this Zimbabwean writer whose work, whether fiction or poetry, is as disturbing as it is compelling. Hove's most widely read book is *Bones*, a novel that won the prestigious Noma Award in 1989. He has also published such accomplished novels as *Shadows* and *Ancestors* as well as several poetry and essay collections, among them *Up in Arms*, *Swimming in Floods of Tears*, and *Palaver Finish*.

Part of Hove's power as a writer lies in the freshness of his voice, the suppleness of his language, his facility for limning dramatic vistas in a lyrical language. His poetry, like his fiction, is impregnated by a deep awareness of historical currents and steeped in the lore and elegies of his people. His is a voice that is at once sophisticated and modern and yet in touch with the deepest narrative styles and ethical propositions of African griots.

On December 1, after years of admiring Chenjerai's oeuvre from a distance, I had the opportunity to meet him in flesh and blood. He and I were among several African and Swedish writers invited by the Nordic Africa Institute to Uppsala, Sweden, to participate in a conference that dwelt on "War and Peace in Africa".

We first met at a restaurant where the organizers and participants had dinner. We were almost finished eating when Chenjerai strolled in, sporting a straggly

beard I recognized from his photos, and wearing a gray winter jacket over a slightly embroidered shirt. There was, even in his gait, the impression of a tough, indomitable spirit, a writer beset by the calloused hands of power but determined not to succumb to despair.

As we both acknowledged later, something seemed to pass between us, akin to that intuition we have on first meeting a kindred spirit, a person who shares our deepest values and with whom we feel drawn, inexorably, to become lifelong friends. He was something of a physical surprise to me. From the author photo on the back of his books, I had formed the image of a smallish man, self-effacing and taciturn. In person, his physique was commanding; in fact, he is a bulky, man with an avuncular girth.

My larger surprise was to discover his gregariousness and ebullience as well as

his generosity as a storyteller. Oh, what a raconteur. What great anecdotes he shared with me and a few other writers over several days.

Chenjerai, one of Africa's finest writers, has been in exile since 2001. A thorn in the side of President Robert Mugabe, the former freedom fighter-turned demigod, Chenjerai faced a series of persecutions in his homeland. After years of treating him like a subversive, monitoring his lectures and journalism, the government seemed to come to the conclusion that it had a Hove problem. A despot like Mugabe, whose messianic delusions and repressive machinery have ruined his once-robust nation, does not sleep well when men and women like Hove are about. Absolutist power, as a rule, antagonizes advocates of freedom and justice. A man like Mugabe, who imagines himself coterminous with his nation, is mortified by the message that a man like Chenjerai telegraphs, namely, that the nation is larger, much larger, than the desires of one man. Mugabe's false sense of grandeur was consistently rebuked by Chenjerai's conscientious objection, by the writer's refusal to intone a catechism that proclaims a dictator's fart a magic of floral aroma.

Armed with a vision of a humane society whose citizens enjoy inalienable human rights, Chenjerai Hove wrote opinion pieces that called Mugabe's pernicious policies to question. Hove's idea of a Zimbabwe founded on moral principles and committed to social enlargement was at odds with the ruler's conception of a nation that is solely a personal playground where only the ruler's small circle of lackeys are invited to carouse and sup.

At first, Mugabe tried to use the dictator's logic that all opponents have price tags. Zimbabwean government officials made attempts to seduce the writer. They offered bribes, inviting him, as it were, to partake of their smorgasbord. Hove, who has an infectious sense of humor, rebuffed the bait with the message that he never suspected that he was worth so much. At any rate, he served notice that there was not enough money in the world to buy his silence. A writer who is true to his calling realizes, instinctively, that to mortgage his voice, to settle for silence when speech is imperative, is to die. Tempted with lucre, Chenjerai chose not to slay his voice, not to, in other words, die.

Frustrated, the government began to plot final ways of dealing with their nemesis. If he would not agree to stay his voice, if he would not accept their invitation to join their Fraternal Order of Obscene Gourmands (FOOG), if he would not permit them to gorge in peace, free of his prying, indignant and judging eyes, they were determined to haul him in jail or even dispatch him to an early grave. On learning that the government was mulling such desperate measures, Hove fled into exile. He now makes his temporary home in Norway, thanks to a Norwegian initiative to support writers facing the threat of persecution in their homelands.

Chenjerai exuded charm, but one could glimpse the scars of exile. In Norway, he said, he sometimes goes for six months without anybody saying, "How are you?" Of all the deprivations of exile, this sense of isolation, this experience of utter physical aloneness, must be one of the most shattering. For a man who thrives in communicating, whose primary pleasure

is communion with others, how unbearable it must be to live in the arctic wilderness of exile, drawing on the stamina of your memories for survival, able to interact only with the flux of dreams and visions that populate your fecund mind. How sad that, again and again, Africa casts its best sons and daughters into exile.

Hunched over glasses of beer or wine, Chenjerai and I as well as the Nigerian poet, Hope Eghagha, stayed up late into the night. We listened to Chenjerai for the most part, for we understood his greater urgency to tell stories, but we also shared stories of our own encounters with those who abort dreams and subvert lives in Nigeria. Together we bemoaned the misbegotten lot who abbreviate human rights on our continent. We reached down and teased out narratives of hope. We saw hope in the resilience of the African people, their undying sense of optimism, their inner strength and irrepressible spirit, and the tide and lessons of history. When Eghagha, who teaches at the University of Lagos, expressed sorrow that a man like Chenjerai should be compelled to wander in exile, Hove answered: "Two of you are like brothers sent to me from home." That was the man's signature, a sunny disposition and cheery spirit unsullied by the scourges of exile.

My last night in Uppsala, I excused myself from Chenjerai and Hope Eghagha and retired late to my room to park and get ready for my early morning cab ride to Arlanda Airport in Stockholm. I had just come out of the shower when my phone rang at 1:50 a.m. Chenjerai was on the other side. Delighted that he found me still awake, he asked me to meet him down at the hotel lobby. Dressed in my

pajamas and shirt, my hair uncombed, and sporting a pair of slippers, I took the elevator down. Chenjerai looked at me in amazement, then he said, "Okay, you have to wear my (winter) jacket." He threw the thick, bulky jacket over me and said, "We're going out to get a drink." I protested that I needed to change my clothes and put on a pair of shoes, but he won't have any of it. "The bar has no dress code," he said, dragging me off.

The bar, around the corner from our hotel, doubled as a nightclub. We sipped wine and exchanged stories amid strobe lights, the din of music and Swedish teenagers twisting and wriggling on the dance floor. We were there when the bar closed at 3 a.m. We arrived back at the hotel with just an hour and a half left before a cab was scheduled to pick me for the airport. "There's no point going to go to sleep now," Chenjerai said. "Let's sit here in the lobby and talk." Though droopy with sleep, I was delighted that this extraordinary writer and profound warrior for human freedom had chosen me to receive the gift of his amazing stories. I had a sleepless night, but I gained an inestimable friend and brother. I salute his courage, I hail his faithfulness to the cause of freedom, and I hope he will continue to bear witness for the (often) voiceless victims of repression. Mugabe and his league of tyrants, in Africa and elsewhere, should be ashamed of themselves.

## Readers' Favorites

1. Nigeria's savaged children
2. The war we ordered is here
3. What I saw in Nigeria
4. Murder Incorporated
5. No Longer at Ease
6. My Vote for Andy Uba
7. Achebe, Soyinka, and the Nigerian Mess
8. My Biafran Eyes
9. My Father's English Friend
10. A female speaker's manly vices
11. The education of Umar Yar'Adua
12. The triumph of barbarism
13. Achebe's apt censure
14. Andy Uba Goes to War (1)
15. Andy Uba Goes to War (11): What OBJ taught Uba
16. Why I Take It Personally
17. Andy Uba's highest bid
18. The folly of the Nigerian elite
19. Fraud Incorporated
20. Etiaba's father, not mine
21. Our laughing president
22. Fayose and God's response
23. My 419 Call
24. A feud of three bulls
25. More reasons to ignore Soyinka
26. Who does Obasanjo work for?

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### About Okey Ndibe



Okey Ndibe is a novelist, poet, political activist from Yola, Nigeria. He is the author of *Arrows of Rain*, a critically reviewed novel published in 2000. Ndibe relocated to the United States in 1988, where he founded *African Commentary*, a magazine described as "award-winning and widely acclaimed." Ndibe is also a published poet, and a former associate professor of English at Bard College at Simon's Rock. He currently teaches fiction and African literature at Trinity College in Hartford, CT. Okey Ndibe is finishing his second novel titled *Foreign gods, incorporated*.

### Speaking Engagements

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