

# Empowerment through indigenous literature: The case of Shona novels

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Languages express the needs of their users, opening windows to information and knowledge. A language of excellence and empowerment is seen through the quantity of literature and thought it can express. In the information age, literature forms a reliable and consistent reservoir of a people's life experiences, aspirations and endeavours. It is the main means by which language transfers the images of the world embodied in the culture it carries. Literature that is empowering broadens its readership and equips its readers to deal with their social and physical environment while opening avenues for artists to exhibit their creative genius.

## Introduction

A significant number of scholars have taken a keen interest in the debate on the use of African languages as languages of power and educational instruction. Few have focused on the empowerment role of indigenous literatures. Since language, literature and culture are thinly separated, it is the motive of this article to examine whether or not indigenous literature empowers its writers and readers and how language policies affect literature development.

In this article, the focus is on selected Shona novels for the reasons that Shona has the largest number of publications as compared to other indigenous languages and that Shona is the authors' home language. Novels have been selected because most readers prefer to read novels to poetry and plays; however this does not mean that the other genres are less important. The discussion first establishes what African literature is, how it can be used as an instrument of empowerment for its writers and readers to confidently participate in socio-economic transformation and finally focuses on the development of literature in Zimbabwe. In the discussion, empowerment or how the use of indigenous literature can give confidence and the radiance that a people deserve, takes the centre stage.

## Background

According to Anyidoho (1992:55), language was used during the slave trade to alienate the Africans, thus causing them to lose touch with their roots. Anyidoho (1992:55) cites Madhubuti (1984:123) who asserts that 'without language, one cannot express the indigenous self and therefore [one] has nothing to express other than the selves of others in their languages'. Literature is an expression of culture in a particular language. It is a transcribed record of a people's experiences. Consequently one can argue that without indigenous literature, one cannot express one's indigenous self, hence one is unable to record one's deep-seated life experiences. Indeed, without their literature, speakers are not empowered to record their cultural experiences with the originality they deserve.

In Zimbabwe, like in Anglophone Africa, English has been accepted as the language of literary and educational expression. English, the language of education, was the language of both political and economic empowerment

(Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1994 and Mansoor, 1993). In colonial Zimbabwe, the regimes encouraged multi-lingualism so that whites could gain control of the Africans. On the other hand, English was rationed to a few Africans who survived the bottle-neck education policies.

Language policies were articulated through education acts such as the Judges Commission (1963) that recommended a language policy which required 'English to be compulsorily and idiomatically employed in the teaching of other subjects'. This policy downgraded and marginalized indigenous languages. The roles assigned to the indigenous languages seriously undermined literature development in indigenous languages. Shona and Ndebele were only important as school subjects and as the media of instruction up to fourth grade. As a result, Shona/Ndebele literature was not given the same importance as English literature. This was further reflected in the teaching/learning periods given to the indigenous languages, which were allocated four periods per week at secondary level for both literature and language lessons, as opposed to English, which was allocated six to seven periods per week; English literature was also taught as a separate subject. The media reinforced these perceptions by publishing daily papers in the English language.

### Literature and socio-cultural development

Language is the bedrock of socio-cultural and economic development. Anyidoho (1992), Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1994) and Uju (2008) concur that language is a liberating force to be reckoned with in terms of empowering its speakers. Uju (2008:25) argues that 'in the era of globalization, coupled with the privatization programme ... those who lack the power of language and effective use of the *lingua franca* may not find their feet in any of the competitive sectors of the economy'.

In the information age, literature forms a reliable and consistent reservoir of a people's life experiences, which provides vital information and knowledge from one generation to the next. Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1997) maintains that literature gives more and sharper insights into the moving spirit of an era than all the historical and political documents treating the same period. Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1994) argues that the suppression of a language results in the suppression of its literature. It is maintained that literature is the main means by which a particular language reflects the images of the world embodied in the culture it carries. Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1994) attests that African languages were given a negative portrayal through the literature written either in foreign languages or by people alien to African experiences. The African child was exposed to literature that reflected backwardness, underdevelopment, humiliation and punishment. All that they could do was graduate with a hatred of their people and their culture; hence even the African writers who wrote about African people, did so from the viewpoint of the colonialists (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1994). This cultural garbage conditioned the African artists not only in Kenya, but also in Zimbabwe, if not the whole of the African continent.

To appreciate the role of literature in development, one would need to first appreciate the interface between language, literature and culture. Language is a system of words used in a speech community by people in naming the world around them, their interaction with nature and with each other, in the process of producing the goods and services necessary for their survival. 'Literature' is a recording of a people's life experiences and their activities, influenced by environment and time. 'Culture' on the other hand can be defined as the world around a people and includes language. Culture is a way of viewing social reality, which is influenced by environment and time. The three are closely related and affect each other; language names social reality (culture) while literature records that social reality in a language specific to a speech community. This article focuses on creative literature and the Shona novel, in particular, that will be discussed fully below.

According to Perez de Cuellar (1994:179):

A people's spoken and written language is perhaps the most important cultural attribute ... Language policy, like other policies, has been used as an instrument of domination, fragmentation and reintegration into the ruling political structure.

Based on Perez de Cuellar's views about language and the relationship between language, culture and literature, it can be argued that literature, especially creative literature, does have the potential to empower its authors and readers. Incidentally, the empowerment role can fully be understood depending on the cultural environment in which it is natured and nurtured. It becomes imperative to explore what African literature is or what it should be, whom it should serve and the language of that African literature.

### Definition of African literature

There is a need to establish what African literature is. Is it literature written about Africa or about the African experience? 'Is it literature written by Africans? Is it literature written in African languages?' (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1994:6). Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1994) poses: 'What about a non-African who wrote about Africa: did his work qualify as African literature?' In his argument Ngugi wa Thiong'o concludes that an African literary work should be able to carry the weight of our African experience. It should reflect African culture which cannot be separated from the language that transmits it.

This article observes that for a literary work to qualify as African literature, it should have certain basic tenets of being written in African indigenous languages, carry the cultural experiences of the Africans and be written by the indigenous people of Africa. Mazrui (1986:69) proposes that writers should be able to communicate in their ethnic language, which broadens their reservoir of content and form.

Ruhumbika (1992:80) illustrates that the Latin-language literatures of England, Spain and France did not thrive. The literatures that thrived in these countries were those of the greatest writers, such as Shakespeare and Milton, who wrote in the European national languages about European literature. It is argued that African literature should be written by African people in African languages for a large majority of African readership; the 'African-ness' of literature should not be about the geographical setting of stories but about the language that expresses the African culture and the writers' African background.

Mazrui (1986:69) argues that literature that is written in African languages could legitimately be regarded as 'African literature'. To support his argument, Mazrui comes up with what he calls the 'relativist hypothesis', which proposes that in conception, language is culture-bound, hence even when a literary work is based on an African source, a non-African language cannot retain its African mould in content. Earlier on Maduka (1980:183–197, as cited by Mazrui, 1986:69) maintained that even though the sources of Achebe, Awoonor and Soyinka, for example, are from Igbo, Ewe and Yoruba respectively 'they are recast in a language that captures the spirit of the worldview of this group of writers who are by-products of European linguistic imperialism'. Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1994:6) relegates these writers as belonging to what he calls 'Afro-European literary tradition'.

While the article makes a strong proposition that African literature must be written in African languages by African writers, there should be reasonable flexibility in allowing the non-African writers, who are well versed in African culture, to also make a contribution to African literature. However, caution must be taken so that these writers do not end up writing what might be termed Euro-African literature.

The article observes the diversity of global cultures and appreciates that writers must take cognisance of the rich tapestry exuded by cultural contact. African writers can accommodate cultural dynamism, while maintaining their African languages. English writers, for example, have written about Africa in a style that has left an English flavour. African writers should not uproot themselves from their indigenous linguistic and cultural environment. By writing about their world experiences in African languages, writers will, in a way, expose their readers to the global village. That way literature would empower its writers and readers to respond positively to modernity. The idea is to empower African languages and culture through literature. The concern is to have as much African literature as possible to fill the gap of centuries of marginalization.

## African literature as an instrument of empowerment

Any literature, worth its purpose, should be able to be used by the community that produces it first. It is more relevant in the environment that has created it, hence Adams and Mayes (1998), Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1994) and Ruhumbika (1992) acquiesce that mother-tongue literature is a potent factor in African social transformation. Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1994) argues that by writing in English, literary creativity serves more to enrich the colonial tradition than promote the development of an African society. African literature can only be written in the languages of the African peasantry and working classes if it has to contribute to meaningful development.

Writing in African languages will bring a renaissance in African cultures if the literature carries the content of the people's anti-imperialistic struggles to liberate their productive forces from foreign control (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1994:29). For example, in the Zimbabwean situation, a book such as Mutasa's (2005) *Sekai Minda Tave Nayo*, clearly reflects the anti-imperialistic struggles of the third Chimurenga land reform. Incidentally, *Sekai Minda Tave Nayo* coincided with the Zimbabwe Land Reform period. The novel challenges its readers to examine anti-imperialism and national goals that promote development. It questions as well as affirms the necessity of land redistribution, while raising pertinent issues about gender. In a way it beams the people's direction in the process of self-definition or positioning in relation to socio-economic and political developments in their country. Such literature is likely to coincide with the aspirations of the people to fight neocolonialism. Ruhumbika (1992:80) contends that:

A thriving literature is a literature that forms a part of people's living culture. It is literature written for the people reflecting their endeavours and aspirations and reaching for a significant number of them in a way that can influence their society and be influenced by it in turn.

From the arguments presented, it is clear that mother-tongue literature is a crucial factor in African social transformation.

Through literature, the quality of life is enhanced and horizons are widened; hence the brains of the indigenous African people should be able to challenge and expose their indigenous masses to wider horizons. If literary works are presented in non-African languages, they will reach the African elite and wider community without making an impact on the masses. This has a negative effect of continuing to export the brains of Africa for the enrichment of other worlds (Palmer in Adams & Mayes, 1998:43). The article proposes that indigenous African languages be used to produce literary works for the benefit of the African majority. For wider communication, the works can be translated into other languages, which will bring more benefits such as exporting books.

The multi-lingual nature of most African countries and the lack of an African *lingua-franca* (Langa, 1989:68) present a further challenge. Translation will have to be done from one African language to another and to non-African languages as well. This presents a further challenge of economic costs in both human and material resources. It suffices to conclude that it might be a mammoth task for African governments to accomplish. However, writing in non-African languages can be likened to a mother who prepares a delicious meal to feed to her neighbours while her children are starving. Literature should be written to satisfy the needs of the indigenous people, and then it can be shared with the wider community later.

## Language of African literature

The language of any literature should be that which the community that produces and consumes it is proficient in. This dictates that the authors of any literature should be sensitive to the language of the community about and for whom they are writing. When writing to an African readership, the appropriate language would be none other than African languages. This would ensure the effective conveyance of messages and participation of the African communities in developmental programmes the literature targets.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1994:24) cites Obi Wali (1963) who asserts that:

the whole uncritical acceptance of English and French as the inevitable medium of educated African writing is misdirected, has no chance of advancing African literature and culture and that until African writers accepted that true African literature must be written in African languages, they would merely be pursuing a dead end.

Adams and Mayes (1998), Chinweizu (1988) and Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1994) concur that African literature can only be written in the languages of the African people if it has to contribute to meaningful development. Anyidoho (1992:45–63) agrees with Chinweizu and Madubuike (1980:24) that writers concerned with the social, political and economic transformation of African communities must have dialogue with their people instead of being tempted to speak for them to outsiders. Anyidoho (1992:54) stresses that 'language is not only the key to a people's identity; it is the strong room in which the innermost soul of a people can be protected'. African literature can dissect and open the soul of the African people that is preserved in their languages and culture.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1994:29–30) asserts that by writing in English, literary creativity serves to enrich the colonial tradition more than to promote the development of an African. In a nutshell, African languages hold the key to the socio-cultural development of African nations. Lodhi (1993:81) maintains that the maintenance of metropolitan languages has led to what he terms 'linguistic imperialism'. Lodhi (1993:81–82) postulates that:

Africans continue to write in metro-languages, and literatures in African languages suffer disadvantage vis-à-vis African writings in the European tongues – almost all great African writers are therefore not read by a vast majority of Africans not even by speakers of the writers' own language or ethnic group.

Lodhi further argues that the former colonial languages are export commodities from the former colonial metropolis to their former colonies in Africa. This dominance by ex-colonial languages deprives a majority of Africans from accessing knowledge, creating a sense of insecurity and feelings of inferiority.

It is argued that for as long as English and other metropolitan languages are used for literary development, African literature will remain overshadowed and cast in the periphery of literature development. The use of indigenous literature brings African languages and cultures to the fore so they can eventually compete with ex-colonial languages as languages worth investing in. Like English for example, African languages could provide income through the exporting of books, general literature and language teachers, as people from abroad would value languages such as Shona, for communicating with the locals and as subjects to be included in school curricula.

Indigenous languages are the voice of socio-cultural identity, the heart and content of an African child's first language. Zimbabweans and all other African countries should bubble with confidence as they produce literary work, which enhances their cultural identity. Indigenous languages are symbols through which a people express concepts, ideas and psychological needs. The language adopted for literary work leaves an indelible mark on the cultural experiences of that people; hence the cliché **the pen is mightier than the sword**.

## Literature in colonial Zimbabwe

The challenges of African literature originate from the challenges of the history and philosophy of colonization. As alluded to above, the colonial governments adopted language policies which matched their motivation for language acquisition. In terms of literature, colonial cultural inhibitions, prescriptions and conventions affected the growth of the novel in colonial Zimbabwe. The politico-economic interests of the period affected literary development. Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1997) argues that history, not fantasy, informs the imagination. This is an accurate observation.

In colonial Zimbabwe, blacks were economically marginalized by the Land Apportionment Act of 1931, and further socially marginalized by the Native Education Act. The colonialists' dual education system, whereby whites received the best education while blacks received inferior, ill-funded education, had a bearing on the development of literature and its role in development. The blacks would naturally emulate and envy the better education and 'better' literature that was a package for the whites. Chiwome (1996:3) cites a Rhodesian (now Zimbabwe) economic historian, remarking that 'education is one of the most intensively used tools of social control in settler-dominated societies'. Zimbabwe was not spared the tools of social control. Education was introduced for various reasons, but the concern of this article is literature.

The Shona writing system was devised by missionaries who wanted to translate the Bible and other religious texts into Shona. For the greater part of the colonial period, mission schools that were obviously grounded in Christian teachings and philosophy, outnumbered government schools.

Early prominent Shona artists such as Zvarevashe, Chakaipa, Rebeiro, Runyowa, Hamutiyinei and Mutswairo, grew up under missionary tutelage to become mission school teachers, lay preachers and fulltime preachers. Chiwome (1996:12) argues that this caused European ideas to be invested in the Shona worldview, a process described by Wamba-dia-Wamba as 'investing in the terrain of the enemy'.

Psychologists and educationists agree that the 'halo effect' influences how people view their world. It is therefore not surprising that the writers mentioned above produced art that skirted around moralization and Christian values in pre-independent Zimbabwe. Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1994) reiterates that the early African novels took their themes and moral preoccupation from the Bible. Art was simply a reaffirmation of established doctrines. Colonial education made Western values an integral part of the minds of African students. Students learnt a lot about Western literature and very little about Shona art. As a result, those who took creative writing had problems finding their own voices and experienced difficulty relating to their readers (Chiwome, 1996:17). They lacked role models who were grounded in African culture and tradition. African writers were in a serious dilemma, as Chiwome (1996:17) clearly expresses:

They wanted to articulate their own consciousness on the one hand while their images were manipulated to pay homage to the new culture on the other. They wanted to speak for their suffering fellowmen yet they were fragmented from them. Their words were Shona while the ideas they conveyed worked against the interests of the Shona. They were recipients of colonialists' education, which made them less sensitive to the forces underlying the reality they depicted. Education created a dissonance between the writers' desire to preserve the Shona culture and the contradictory objectives of its patrons.

The views expressed by Chiwome support the argument of this article that the type of education and the environment they found themselves operating in seriously affected African writers. African writers were at the crossroads of incompatible outlooks. As they tried to cautiously fight the system, they further entangled themselves because they were ill equipped to produce imaginative and analytical work. For some, creative writing generated fear, which resulted in creative timidity in response to the environment in which the artists worked.

In establishing the role of literature in development, it is necessary to have a knowledge of textology. In colonial Zimbabwe, an examination of the role played by the Literature Bureau, a division of the African Education and Native Affairs Department cannot be underestimated. The Literature Bureau, created in 1956, was part of the Ministry of Information and the Native Affairs Department, which created and disseminated propaganda to facilitate the peaceful administration of Africans. The hidden role of the Literature Bureau was to direct the novel along the path of least ideological resistance to the colonial government.



Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1994:69–70) aptly illustrates the role of the Literature Bureau as follows:

In Rhodesia, the Literature Bureau would not publish an African novel, which had any but religious themes and sociological themes, which were free from politics. Retelling old fables and tales, yes. Reconstructions of pre colonial magical and ritual practice, yes. Stories of characters who move from [the] darkness of pre colonial past to the light of the Christian present, yes. But any discussion of or any sign of dissatisfaction with colonialism. No!

Any literature that was considered to be adverse would therefore not be published. Literature that tried to address and provide solutions to pressing social problems, particularly the socio-economic and political status quo, was never published. Mutswairo's (1956) protest chapter in *Feso* had to be deleted before the book could be published. Chiwome (1996:9) quotes Mutswairo, who recalls that:

My first chapter dealt with how we were dispossessed of the land ... I was unconsciously expressing the oppressive nature of the whites ... I was projecting the suffering I had undergone when we were served from windows in shops in towns.

Mutswairo's account reveals that the Bureau was a censorship board that practised the external censorship of filtering and channelling by imposing specific literary requirements for one's work to be considered. In the aim of maintaining law and order, dissenting art was prohibited based on the premise that people could not express different political opinions and remain united.

It was not only the Bureau which enforced censorship, other bodies, bills and acts such as The Law and Order Maintenance Act, the Sedition Bill of 1936 and the Subversive Activities Act of 1950, were tools used to control literary creativity; the fact that the Bureau was headed by bureaucrats who looked at the legal aspects of the book, instead of creative writers and critics, disadvantaged and retarded the development of good literature. The plight of the artist was exacerbated by the engagement of school inspectors and other civil servants as assessors of the worthiness of the literature. The assessors, by virtue of their being civil servants, would serve government interests first. Secondly, their interest was in schools; hence the literature they promoted was based on its relevance to the needs of schools. Owing to the bottleneck type of education, not many people had access to the literature.

Colonial education had an influence on the development of literature and who the literature empowered. As a result, a work regarded as unsuitable for schools was condemned to oblivion. Publishers, printers and booksellers reinforced censorship, as they could not publish material that risked being banned. This scenario induced internal censorship, which is a psychological state whereby the author practised self-censorship in order to produce printable literature. Victims of such a scenario include Tsodzo (1972) in his publication *Pafunge* and Mutswairo (1956) in *Feso*. As alluded to earlier, Mutswairo had to remove the controversial chapter before his work could be published. As a way of protesting the arrangement, Tsodzo, in *Pafunge*, had to adopt a salient way of dealing with the socio-economic arrangements by using cacophemistic humour, understatements, parody and malapropism (Chiwome, 1996:29). As writers adopted these advanced methods of dealing with their situation, they may have missed the majority of ordinary readers. Novelists of this kind will be both analytical and syncretical, as they pull apart and put together (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1997). To this extent, both the readers and the artists were disempowered. Empowered writers are able to give sharper insights into the moving spirit of an era.

While censorship helped African writers to hide sensitive parts of their message in symbolism, satire, allegory and many other devices, censorship created the post-independence problem of reading too much into the text to get hidden messages. The environment, under which pre-independent literature was produced, did not empower the artists. Looking at it from another angle, the restrictive environment empowered artists to seek for new forms of languages less easy to detect than would have happened if there was no censorship. For example, *Feso*'s famous song that appeals to Nehanda, is an attack on colonialism. Some frustrated artists turned to external publishers,

thereby allowing literature to grow in exile (Chiwome, 1996). To the readers, censorship denied a majority of them access to literature produced in their mother tongue, as good authors ended up writing in English for a small coterie back home. Those who turned to external publishers include:

Samkange (1966) *On trial for my country*. London: Heinemann  
 Samkange (1975) *The mourned one*. London: Oxford University Press  
 Samkange (1978) *Year of uprising*. London: Heinemann  
 Mungoshi (1975) *Waiting for the rain*. London: Heinemann  
 Katiyo (1976) *A son of the soil*. Harlow: Longman  
 Marechera (1978) *House of hunger*. New York: Panteon Books.

Because some of the good authors turned to publishing in English and using international book publishers such as Longman and College Press, censorship produced an unintended effect. The artists were able to express the Zimbabwean situation to a wider international community. In a way, it assisted in articulating the problems to an international community that empathized with and assisted Zimbabweans in the war of liberation.

The fact that the majority of the Zimbabwean population to whom the messages were targeted, could not consume the works, proves that the literature was not empowering. That literature in indigenous languages has a greater and wider influence on the socio-cultural and economic development of a people cannot be over emphasized. Writers articulate issues clearly and readers appreciate the messages better than when they are presented in a second language, hence the need for literature to be accessible to everyone linguistically.

There is also a group of artists who continued to be nurtured by the Bureau. Such writers had to avoid themes that were politically or racially motivated. The writers blamed the social problems on the Africans' laziness, drunkenness and improvidence to an extent that art failed to unveil the world-historical forces, which cause suffering (Chiwome, 1996; Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1994). The art that was produced in pre-independent Zimbabwe reflected that artists of this second group ended up being colonial praise-singers. The novelist should identify with the people so as to articulate their deepest aspirations for freedom and for a higher quality of life. For these reasons, such literature was not empowering to both its authors and readers as it failed to capture the spirit of the African worldview.

Over and above the external and internalized censorship, the Bureau exercised patronage as censorship. The Bureau fixed the length of manuscripts at 15000 words. Except for Mungoshi's (1978) *Ndiko Kupindana Kwamazuva*, Moyo's (1976) *Uchandifungawo* and Kuimba's (1976) *Rurimi Inyoka*, the novels of the era are less than 100 pages. Artists ended up being guided by stipulated lengths instead of exercising their creative genius. Interference with creative genius delayed the African's understanding of their social history.

Financial resources of the Bureau were limited and the assessors lacked the relevant training, which limited their expertise. As a result, the preoccupation of the Bureau was with language, which detracted the editors from focusing on fiction. The Bureau lacked the necessary financial and human resources to produce and distribute literature of good quality. Although it is observed that literature development in preindependent Zimbabwe faced a lot of challenges, it is acknowledged that the Bureau served as a beacon for encouraging the publication and circulation of literature published in indigenous languages. The African artists were able to produce creative art, albeit in a guided manner. Note should be taken that censorship had a negative impact in that African writers failed to understand their place in the changing society. This produced ripple effects even in some post-independence artists.

While the efforts of the colonialists seemed to reflect that England should be the centre of development, paradoxically, development did not radiate from England to Rhodesia in a diffusionist sense (Chiwome, 1996:53). Incidentally, when the cultures met, those who were 'developed' got more 'developed', while the relatively undeveloped got more underdeveloped, thereby disempowering the indigenous people. The aim may have been to produce a harmonious society, however the literature that was produced was found wanting in this respect.



According to Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1980:123), good art should encourage people to 'bolder and higher resolves in all their struggles to free the human spirit from the twin manacles of oppressive nature and oppressive man'. The writer and the politician were often the same person, for example Leopold Senghor of Senegal, 'for people like him, the gun, the pen and the platform have served the same purpose of bringing total liberation' (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1997:69). For pre-independent Zimbabwe, it was not always the case due to the censorship laws. A few courageous writers attempted to link art with politics, but they did so in a disguised manner; their works reflect colonial praise singing and satire about the African people, for example Chidzero's (1957) *Nzvengamutsvairo*. Eagleton (1976:19) asserts that 'because the writer is an individual who is committed to humanity, he is likely to use his intellect and ability to question the direction of government and remind it of its goals'. This is lacking in most pre-independent Zimbabwean creative writing due to the repressive censorship laws. From the above discussion, it can be concluded that to a large extent pre-independent Zimbabwean art did not quite rise to the level described by Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Zimbabwean pre-independent literature lacked historical and humanistic fiction; therefore it did not fulfil its empowerment role. However, Mutswairo's commitment resembles Ngugi wa Thiong'o's views on the role of the African artist in the colonial and neo-colonial periods.

### Literature in post-independence Zimbabwe

The above discussion has placed socio-political and economic environmental factors as key factors that influenced the role and development of literature in colonial Zimbabwe. It is an undisputed fact that repressive censorship laws slowed down the pace at which books were published. Limited financial as well as human resources also militated against the development of literature in colonial Zimbabwe. The attainment of political independence in 1980 meant that more writers would emerge as restrictive censorship laws were repealed.

The new political arrangement gave birth to fresh thoughts and excitement as well as being an outlet to narrate the historical experiences that heralded the independence of Zimbabwe. Kurasha (2004) maintains that the emerging voices were writing to celebrate the birth of a new nation and awaken society to new demands and challenges of independence. A written literature is integral to cultural assertion. For the Zimbabwean writer, the act of putting words on paper was testimony of creative capacity. It was the first step towards self-definition and the acceptance of the new environment. To an extent, the development of literature ushered in a new way of dealing with societal ills. Themes of solidarity, reconciliation, socialism and reconstruction characterized every genre of creative art in the 1980s. The excitement and development can best be described by looking at an historical development of literature in tabular form.

**Table 1:** Number of books published by the Southern Rhodesia Literature Bureau from 1956 to 1996:

Period	Number of books published
1956 – 1960	5
1961 – 1970	14
1971 – 1980	42
1981 – 1990	61
1991 – 1996	18

(Kahari, 1997:1)

The number of books published in the first decade after independence is equal to the total number of books published during the 24 years between 1956 and 1980. It is the largest number of books published during the period under review. Indeed the new era unleashed vigour and inspiration to produce literature in indigenous languages. The literature produced in indigenous languages grew as a result of the demands of the high school and college market where prescribed books are periodically changed. For this reason, the market forces which guided creative work before independence continued to influence literature production after independence.

There was also a need to change societal attitudes and views about the changes in their socio-economic and political environment. The change in the philosophy of the political leadership meant that new themes such as solidarity, socialism, unity among people of different races, ethnic backgrounds and the promotion of human rights, inspired artists such as Wamba-dia-Wamba to focus 'on questions of colonialism, neo-colonialism, imperialism, postcolonial underdevelopment and academic development in Africa' (Osha, 2005:28). In Zimbabwe, historical fiction was rehabilitated after independence, unfortunately after the situation it dealt with, was changing.

It is observed that the largest publications were achieved during the first decade of independence. The rise in publications was synonymous with the rise in school and college enrolments, which created a market for the books. At this juncture, it might be necessary to probe further into whether the situation improved after 1996. If not, what could be the reason? Questions such as whether or not writers play their critical role as a watchdog of societal ills will preoccupy the article. As Kahari, cited by Kurasha (2004:7), asserts, the role of literature throughout the ages is to be critical of the government and the other sectors of society if writers are to remain torchbearers of society. Zimbabwe is currently facing serious economic, political and social challenges and it tickles the mind to want to establish whether these socio-economic and political anxieties have an influence on the literature of the day. Njau in James (1990:106) affirms that:

writing that is mere intellectualism is not for a country that is full of social ills and miserable poverty. And when we consider that most African writing ends up in schools where it is consumed for examinations, African writers must make sure [that] they know their audience before they take up a pen to write.

African literature should address the socio-cultural and politico-historical problems, but is the environment conducive for that? Most African governments provide creative space, which is confined to the philosophies of the state. Like their former colonial regimes, dissenting art is thwarted. While, during colonialism, literacy was used to support imperialism, in post colonial states, literature is used as a vehicle to transport the philosophies of the new governments – justifiably so, because many African states exist merely to ensure that their populations do not rise against the new order.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o maintains that every writer is a writer in politics. His claims are very correct; the only consideration is the quality and social direction of the politics. Post independence works such as Mutasa's (2005) *Sekai Minda Tave Nayo*, clearly confirm that ideas do not develop in a vacuum. Such works have demonstrated that through the use of African languages and literature, we can overcome the habit of viewing development through Western eyes (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1997:4). Since literature is partisan, it is influenced by social, political and historical factors that condition it. In that respect, any literature is empowering to the extent that it is defined by the environment that nurtures it. It is argued that Zimbabwean national literature can only get its stamina and lifeblood (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1997:4) by utilizing the rich traditions of culture and history deposited in its environment.

In post-independent Zimbabwe, some of the Shona novelists have distinguished themselves in that they have liberated themselves from sticking to the monotonous stereotypical and banal techniques of most of the literary works published before independence. Artists such as Mungoshi (1983) in *Kunyarara Hakusi Kutaura*, Mabasa (1999) in *Mapenzi*, Mavesera (2008) in *Makaitei?* and Mutasa (2005) in *Sekai Minda Tave Nayo* have injected new excitement by presenting their creative works in modern devices such as the letter form or epistolary in Mutasa. The epistolary method, adopted by Mutasa, resembles the letters of St. Paul in the New Testament. This is symbolic of ushering in a new era, as is the case in the Bible.

Mungoshi, by brilliantly employing psychological realism, touches on even untouchable thoughts. Mabasa cleverly and dramatically adopts a satirical look at corruption in post-independent life in Zimbabwe. Mavesera develops the Shona novel further by presenting her novel in psychological realism via e-mail, to capture the most modern views on socio-economic arrangements in Zimbabwe and the world at large. On the other hand, Mutasa departs from the traditional narratives. He presents his historical perspective of the land issue in Zimbabwe in the form of letters.

In terms of style, there has not only been significant development among several artists, since their liberation, to express even their most private thoughts through characters captured in their psychological realm, but also in the production of novels in Zimbabwe. To an extent, we can conclude that artists are now able to expose certain ills of the Zimbabwean society, as demonstrated by Mabasa (1999) in *Mapenzi*.

It remains the interest of this article to further explore how the publishers and the government have influenced creative art. The form of works such as Mungoshi's (1983) *Kunyarara Hakusi Kutaura*, Mabasa's (1999) *Mapenzi*, Mavesera's (2008) *Makaitei?* and Mutasa's (2005) *Sekai Minda Tave Nayo*, require readers who have reached a certain level of understanding and appreciation, such as those at a university level of academic exposure. To empower and propel the active participation of all members of the Zimbabwean society, it is necessary to consider providing literature that is accessible in terms of language, form, cost and complexity of themes. While the article appreciates the development in literature production, the level of empowerment still remains questionable.

Leisure reading is not a common practice in Zimbabwe, especially where it concerns indigenous literature. The book buying public is not growing due to unemployment, economic hardships and the under developed reading habits of the majority of Zimbabweans. Electronic media is another exacerbating fact, as most people now prefer to watch movies to leisure reading. The majority of those who read books prefer to read in English. The Literature Bureau was unfortunately abolished. In view of this, it would be prudent to consider language policies that lift indigenous languages to levels that would include their publishing in daily newspapers. This initiative would broaden coverage of themes and focus on developmental issues. If indigenous languages were used in publishing daily newspapers and the publications could carry socio-economic and political development themes, as do those papers published in English, the status of indigenous languages would be raised.

Once the readership attains an interest in reading the daily publications in indigenous languages, it is hoped that an interest would have been cultivated in reading Shona novels, such as *Mapenzi*, which might be more complex. Efforts have to be made to convince the leadership that development initiatives are grounded in the languages of the majority and in literature that promotes societal development by capturing ideas from the oral to the written form. One way would be to have language policies that promote the use of indigenous languages as the media of educational instruction. Separation of the teaching of Shona language from Shona literature would excite students. The paper proposes that there be Shona readers' series as in English where literary appreciation is cultivated through readers such as The Sunrise Series. Readers would cultivate interest in indigenous literature from an early age. Artists have to be liberated as well to be able to create and critique society.

## Conclusion

While the African continent has been politically liberated, it remains under the bondage of linguistic imperialism. From the above, one deciphers that language policies and literature are crucial in socio-economic development on the continent and in Zimbabwe in particular. This is the mainstay of this article, owing to the fact that language and literature are inextricably linked to socio-cultural and economic development. In other words, language and literature play a major role in empowerment. African literature captures the African spirit and worldview in a way that promotes socio-economic and cultural transformation.

It was argued that indigenous literature is an expression and distillation of indigenous culture, which forms a consistent reservoir of a people's life experiences. It has been established that indigenous languages should be used to produce literature so as to liberate and empower both its readers and writers from centuries of marginalization as a result of exposure to literature produced in ex-colonial languages and or literature written by people alien to African cultures. The censorship role of the Literature Bureau and how it affected the development of the Shona novel has been critically examined. Challenges that militate against the smooth empowerment of readers and writers have been highlighted and suggestions to curb them were offered. To achieve this, there is a need

for a socio-political environment that allows writers to showcase their talents and an economic environment that supports publishers and printers in producing indigenous literature as well as a readership that takes pride in the mother-tongue literature.

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