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Turning a Savage Eye/I: Writing Survival and Empowerment in Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins*

By Andrew Armstrong¹

Abstract

Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins* (2002), both thematically and stylistically, dramatizes a pathological patriarchal system that engages in the oppression of women and their right to normal, happy and productive lives. I argue that, in this novel, she employs the creative imagination and skill of the female I/eye to interrogate a deformed masculinist ideology that has colluded with religion, politics and the class system in the oppression of women, often excluding them from historiography and from public life. In *The Stone Virgins*, Vera represents a historiography that has marginalized and erased women's histories from the patriarchal grand narratives of their national liberation history; her narrative points towards women's future involvement in the whole process of citizenship and nation-building in a 'reformed' nation as is evidenced in the closing lines of the novel where the focus is on restoration, recreation and deliverance as essential to the future of the new nation. Writing within the context of a political and economic crisis in 1990s Zimbabwe, with the country showing signs of increasing political decay and growing economic despair, Vera fictionalizes not only the general malaise but specifically the suffering of women under masculinist repression at both the domestic (household) and national levels. In this manner, it parts company with a more celebratory interpretation of history found in conventional liberationist historiography. Vera's writing in this novel, in her construction of African female subjectivity, critically reassesses the interconnections between masculinist violence as a vital component of liberationist ideology in Zimbabwe both during the liberation struggle and the post-independence years. The corrective narrative of *The Stone Virgins* resists the masculinist realism of Zimbabwean liberationist narratives that seek to impose a censorship on interrogations of the 'official' account. Vera's writing underscores the importance of counter-narratives (counter-memories) to falsified accounts of history.

Key Words: Zimbabwe, Liberationist Historiography, Masculinist Violence, Counter-Narratives

Introduction

My focus in this paper is on a novel that both thematically and stylistically dramatizes a pathological patriarchal system that engages in the oppression of women and their right to normal, happy and productive lives. I am analyzing the ways that Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins* (2002) employs the creative imagination and skill of the female I/eye to interrogate a deformed masculinist ideology that has colluded with religion, politics and the class system in the oppression of women, often excluding them from historiography and from public life.

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Writing within the context of a political and economic crisis in 1990s Zimbabwe, with the country showing signs of increasing political decay and growing economic despair, Vera fictionalizes not only the general malaise but specifically the suffering of women under masculinist repression at both the domestic (household) and national levels. She does this in much the same manner that Nawal El Saadawi does in *God Dies by the Nile* (1974) where Saadawi dramatizes how the Egyptian patriarchal system colludes with religion and the use of brutal force in making women its victims. Saadawi's novel, by focusing so heavily on the female body and consciousness, may also be seen as opening a way for an interrogation of patriarchal domination and the victimhood of women. Likewise, in *The Stone Virgins*, Vera represents a historiography that has marginalized and erased women's histories from the patriarchal grand narratives of their national liberation history; her narrative point towards women's future involvement in the whole process of citizenship and nation-building in a 'reformed' nation as is evidenced in the closing lines of the novel where the focus is on restoration, recreation and deliverance as essential to the future of the "new nation" (*Stone Virgins* 165). While the novel is about violence within the nation of Zimbabwe, it specifically dramatizes violence against women. Vera's vision of history is retrospective and profoundly critical of a masculinist history that excludes women's participation in her country's liberation struggles. In this manner, it parts company with a more celebratory interpretation of history found in conventional liberationist historiography.

Writing Female Subjectivity

Vera's writing in this novel, in her construction of African female subjectivity, critically reassesses the interconnections between masculinist violence as a vital component of liberationist ideology in Zimbabwe both during the liberation struggle and the post-independence years. It "emphasizes a new form of nation building, wherein writing defies the loss of memory and the death of hope by providing the very text of survival and empowerment" (Mehta 23). I argue moreover, that her writing is specifically directed toward this. For as Horace Campbell writes, "The principal contradiction of the nationalist struggle was the failure to address patriarchy and masculinity as an integral component of the struggles against oppression and injustice" (13). Hence, as one engaged in the "struggle against male violence and oppression" and the restoration of cultural memory in Zimbabwe, Vera has sought "to repair this weakness and limitation of the nationalist struggle" (Campbell 13) by writing fictions that directly address these issues. In *The Stone Virgins*, she demonstrates that cultural memory is more than an already narrated reality—it evokes and provokes stories told by people (oral transmissions). The corrective narrative of *The Stone Virgins* resists the masculinist realism of Zimbabwean liberationist narratives that seek to impose a censorship on interrogations of the 'official' account. Vera's writing underscores the importance of counter-narratives (counter-memories) to falsified accounts of history. Consequently, in this novel, she subjects history to irony.

Vera selects issues that, though specific to her country and its cultures, at the same time are not isolated or merely parochial. She gives a 'feminist' rereading of the received history of the Zimbabwean liberation struggles of the late nineteenth century and the second Chimurenga of the 1970s and 1980s. Her writing during the 1990s and into the early years of the twenty-first century has provided one of the more effective voices in questioning the "masculinist aura of the nationalist movement" within Zimbabwe and by extension, within Africa in general. Her work in this regard within Anglophone writing is comparable not only with Saadawi, mentioned earlier,

but also with that of the Cameroonian (diasporic) writer Calixthe Beyala and the Ivorian writer Werewere Liking, in the Francophone context, the African-American novelist Toni Morrison and the West Indian, Erna Brodber.

Vera's insertion of women's narratives into the dominant masculinist discourse of liberation bears some relation to the work of these writers and is part of what Paul Ricoeur refers to as "re-thinking." She inserts her narrative trajectory as an interruption of the "patriarchal model of liberation," as a personal re-writing of its historiographic tradition, which has written Zimbabwe's liberation history as an exclusively male enterprise. Vera's feminist or womanist view of history is one of disruption, an insertion into ongoing 'debates' on various areas of historical enquiry; and in this regard, she interrogates the patriarchal militarist view of Zimbabwean liberation history, with resulting implications for the present-day governance of the country. For, as Cheryl McEwan (2003) remarks: "Coming to terms with the past has emerged as the grand narrative of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Individuals and nations are seeking to overcome their traumatic legacies through the establishment of historical truth and the creation of collective memory" (740). Consequently, Vera's narratives interrogate the truth claims of a patriarchal "patriotic history" of liberationist politics masquerading as absolute truth. Her work is ultimately about citizenship, what it is like to belong to a polity where one is fully empowered to realise the state of being a citizen, and "relates to a broader set of issues about the gendered spaces of citizenship and its meaning," necessitating a more comprehensive view of citizenship to include "relationships between social groups and structures of power that mediate the standing of individuals in the polity" (McEwan 740). Moreover, Vera's novels do not make historical-realist claims to a single absolute truth in the name of feminist interrogation, as she recognizes other contingent, perspectival truths that are relevant to the community of women within Zimbabwe's liberationist history. Vera's fictions do not simply confront a 'real' situation within the extratextual world, but the whole patriarchal discursive structure that gives rise to the masculinist liberationist ideology which she contests in her examination of the past.

Re-staging the Past in *The Stone Virgins*

I will begin my analysis of the novel by citing the useful summary of her work by Meg Samuelson (2002a), to the effect that her "writing offers a critique of colonialism, oppositional nationalism and patriarchal structures, and their customary ideas of land ownership and control over the female body and its fertility" ("River" 15). From this view, I examine how Vera negotiates the mixed histories and cultures of her country to (re)present an 'African' past in *The Stone Virgins*, especially her (re)writing of the history of the struggles of Zimbabwe for nationhood and autonomy in the lives of her various characters.

Vera brings women and their concerns to the centre of her narratives, contesting their marginalization and erasure from the patriarchal grand narratives of Zimbabwean liberationist history while at the same time examining the continual violence and social dislocation within her society. I am particularly interested in the ways that she investigates the roles of women in the liberation struggle and subsequent nation-building of Zimbabwe and I see her novels as sites for the consideration and contestation of larger issues that have to do with the operation of gender in the writing of nationalist history in Zimbabwe. Subsequently, her novels all deal with characters who suffer forms of dispossession and her narrative strategies demonstrate an attempt to re-cover and repossess that which has been lost as the result of disabling pasts. This is demonstrated in my discussion of *The Stone Virgins*.

Unlike her earlier novels, *Nehanda* (1993) and *Butterfly Burning* (1998), *The Stone Virgins* is set in a broader period covering the years 1950 to 1986, (and thus the only one of her novels to specifically address the present political administration) crucial years in Zimbabwe's political and social development. Vera weaves a narrative composed of dream, vision and fantasy, against a backdrop of historical 'reality' and returns to the general theme in *Nehanda*, of women's space/place in a cruel patriarchal order. Her themes: rape, infanticide, self-abortion, incest, murder, extreme violence, decadence and corruption, highlight the need for "forgiveness and belonging" (Shaw 84) as vital to the healing and development of the society. Thus, her novels are not only historical narratives in the conventional sense, but also narratives of development at both the level of the self and that of culture. Vera stresses the need to overcome the cruel past through the challenging work of self-generation and cultural re-building, in a process that involves self-articulation or finding a "tongue," a new language, that can cross the boundaries of time to create a new future (Samuelson, "River").

In both *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins*, landscape, flowers, insects and the choreography of movement (the choreography of the men cutting grass in the opening of *Butterfly Burning* and the movement of the spider in *The Stone Virgins*) become as important as characters and plot, in the sense that they embody or carry historical traces in order to make the present resonate with the past and further to foreshadow the future. In both novels, the author provides a symbiosis of music, orality and writing that points to a poetics that challenges the normative conventions of literature—and in this regard, her work in its restaging of the past is truly revolutionary. More to the point, Vera's work is revolutionary, as she is writing against the grain of a post-independence Zimbabwean nationalism that sought to exclude women from the centre of national development. It is also revolutionary both in its espousal of gender issues and privileging of women and its resolutely humanist view of what it means to be Zimbabwean—that is, its avoidance of ethnic divisions and careful individuation of the oppressor and oppressed alike, as in *The Stone Virgins*.

Vera's restaging of the past in *The Stone Virgins*, as in *Nehanda*, crosses timelines and occupies different temporalities. It is divided into two periods: the first from 1950 to 1980 covers the 'annexation' to South Africa, the Rhodesia years under Ian Smith's stifling and brutal colonialism and the struggles and betrayals that marked the second Chimurenga. The second section of the novel treats the years 1981 to 1986, the immediate post-independence years. In fact, the larger portion of the novel, chapters five to seventeen, narrates the immediate post-independence years when Zimbabwe struggled *with* her newly won freedom. The novel's background is the killing of twenty thousand Ndebele by the Shona soldiers in the Gukurahundi in Matabeleland during the 1980s. This background is essential in 'deciphering' the meaning of the story. Together, both parts of the novel investigate the price of freedom for individuals and groups within the society, and interrogate the romance of independence as part of the national narrative. But *The Stone Virgins*, as the title indicates, also has a much older sub-text 'inscribed' in the stone carvings in the caves of the Gulati Hills of Kezi (the narrative setting). The novel's multi-temporal or transtemporal focus establishes a linkage between a recent history and an ancient one. In addition, Vera highlights this tradition of stone marking to demonstrate the multi-representational nature of constructing histories—the oral/scribal/visual nature of the novel further bears this multi-dimensionality. Through this structuring of her novel, Vera creates the illusion of linearity and continuity so essential to historical narratives. However, the novel is in fact non-linear and discontinuous with contiguous plots and stories. It evokes the trope of memory as an essential device in the construction of narratives, and ruptures mundane time

through the imposition of parallel timescales and paraxial space. In this manner, Vera also shows that the past has layers that defy fixed, monolithic representations. She therefore does not only set out to fictionalize a tragic chapter in the life of the nation (the violence of the 1980s), but also to show how particular ancient traumas affect contemporary lives and how they dismember, disfigure and embitter those in the present. Consequently, the novel moves between past and present, unifying both temporalities in the process. The bi-temporal movement between an ancient violence and a contemporary policy of violence and vengeance, with the latter echoing the former, illuminates the tensions that the past has brought on the present.

The Stone Virgins tells the story of two sisters, Thenjiwe and Nonceba, who grow up in the rural enclave of Kezi through the liberation war and into independence in 1980. It is also the story of two men, Sibaso and Cephas, and their involvement, in differing ways with the two sisters. Thenjiwe is brutally murdered by Sibaso (she is decapitated), while Nonceba is disfigured. The story is about Nonceba's recovery under the caring hands of Cephas, but simultaneously it is about the young nation trying to cope with the scars of the liberation struggle. Thus Nonceba's broken life and subsequent healing is not only symbolic of, but simultaneous with her country's broken independence; her future is linked to the future of Zimbabwe and its people. Her growth, through pain and painful remembering (re-remembering) from the horrors of her sister's brutal decapitation and her own defacement, mirrors the violent and tortuous path of post-independence Zimbabwe. Vera, in this carefully crafted novel, sometimes in a "staccato narration...inflicted as by a sharp [prose]" (165), through a series of flashbacks, tells of Thenjiwe's and Cephas's passionate love for each other and the ways that the new relationship between Nonceba and Cephas is affected by and reflected in the former relationship. Through their stories, Vera records the "different melodies to the single theme of love" (159), which eventually and inevitably cascade into love of country or nationalism. But this is not the old nationalism championed by the masculinist narrative of ZANU-PF and partisan politics, but a new or restored nationalism that includes "the different melodies" of national belonging. The story thus moves between present and past, and at times, ancient past, in the story of the rock carvings of the stone virgins in the Mbelele cave, in retelling Vera's account of women's involvement in her country's liberation struggles and quest for (inter)national identity. Thus the novel looks toward the mortal future by articulating what may be termed retrospection, introspection and prospection. The closing pages of the novel, focalized through the consciousness of Cephas Dube, the restorer of documents, look back at the horrors of Matabeleland in the rural enclave of Kezi (retrospection), look into the psychology of violence and survival (introspection) and look forward to a renewed and restored nation based on concepts of true freedom (prospection).

As with her other novels, Vera marks time only to diffuse it through her tremulous narrative across fluid timescales and spatio-temporal boundaries. She employs the trope of memory as an effective psychological device to unearth hidden stories, buried her/stories and histories within the narrative. In this regard, she constructs a powerful psychological 'realism' that interrogates the whole psychosocial underpinnings of the liberation struggle, independence and the immediate post-independence years. Vera again, as in her previous novels, structures *The Stone Virgins* to accommodate this psychological movement through its narrative.

She begins with a cinematic view/topographical survey of Selborne Avenue in Bulawayo, in the context of a journey through the streets and avenues of the 1950s cityscape:

Selborne Avenue in Bulawayo cuts from Fort Street (at Charter House), across to Jameson Road (of the Jameson Raid), through to Main Street, to Grey Street, to Abercorn Street, to Borrow Street, out into the lush Centenary Gardens with their fusion of dahlias, petunias, asters, red salvia and mauve petrea bushes, onward to the National Museum, on the left side. On the right side, and directly opposite the museum, is a fountain cooling the air; water flows out over the arms of two large mermaids. A plaque rests in front of the fountain on a raised platform, recalling those who died in the Wilson Patrol. Wilson Street. Further down the road is a host of Eucalyptus trees redolent; their aroma euphoric. Selborne Avenue is a straight unwavering road, proud of its magnificence. (*Stone Virgins* 3)

The narrative movement of these early chapters is not one of linear progression through space or time, although events do unfold in a temporal sequence; the organizing structure is that of a panorama or cinematic pan, revolving around the fixed point of the reader as observer or witness. Vera's movement from image to image is determined both by a desire to impart the significant events of the setting of the novel and by the apparently arbitrary position of the implied reader/viewer. In these early passages, images feed one another, overlap and interact, in a process that autonomizes visuality, casting its figural rendering as a vital part of the cinematic process. Through these narrative manoeuvres, Vera seeks to control space by setting her spatial movement along clearly demarcated lines and in so doing establishing a definitive spatio-temporal setting for her story—the area around Kezi in Zimbabwe in the years 1950 to 1986; and it is within this time-space configuration that Vera 'controls' her narrative.

In the first two chapters of the novel, the panoramic narrative with its collage of impressions grows out of a visual traversal of landscape beginning at the Selborne Road going all the way to the rural area of Kezi. These impressionistic images, narrated in incantatory prose, are conveyed through a combination of the rhythms of the landscape and the play of the imagination. This cinematic prose, in the opening chapters, creates an establishing sequence, caught by what can be described as her panoramic camera inviting and welcoming the reader, from the outset, to the settings against which the events and experiences in the text will be 'played' out. Through her narrator, Vera dedicates these two chapters of *The Stone Virgins* to a vivid, visual (sensuous) portrayal of place, social environment and bodies and faces within this environment. Through a "you" narrative of observation, she gives a panoramic view of the city, the hills and rivers, observing lovers, children, people in motion: all this at a distance, as if in a long shot, inviting the reader into the text. The city as she describes it is two-faced, with its 'open' avenues and closed, dark alleyways. She introduces the reader to the other side of Bulawayo, a side connected by the Selborne Avenue that "carries you straight out of the city limits and heads all the way to Johannesburg like an umbilical cord, therefore, part of that city is here, its joy and notorious radiance is measured in the sleek gestures of city labourers, black, who voyage back and forth between Bulawayo and Johannesburg" (5). The Bulawayo/Johannesburg connection here speaks to larger transcontinental issues having to do with the movement of labour between Bulawayo and the apartheid city. As in *Butterfly Burning*, Vera's spatial movement here includes the journeys of migrant labour to Johannesburg in search of work, emphasizing the ways in which the black and downtrodden Zimbabwean labourers seek opportunity in neighbouring South Africa, in many ways prefiguring the *malayisha* system of the

1990s and onwards seen in the movement of people, goods and financial services between the two countries.²

A 'Poetics' of Space

Vera's construction of space then, reveals the cross continental connections that are literally embodied in the topography and the plan of the city. The Selborne road serves as a chronotope in the novel, a time/space device that marks distance in relation, not only to space (Bulawayo and Johannesburg) but also to the notion of the time the journey takes. Similarly, "the Bulawayo-Kezi road [that] leads finally to Thandabantu Store" (15). Kezi here, as rural enclave, serves as a counter-point to Johannesburg; for whereas the city of Johannesburg is the restless place the labourers visit in search of work, Kezi is the place that represents 'home'. It is here at the Thandabantu Store that we meet many of the characters, voices, faces and gestures of the novel; it is at Thandabantu that stories are told and history re-enacted. Just beyond the Thandabantu Store are the huts and homes of the people who are Vera's major actors. In these opening chapters then, Vera constructs the city, its two sides, its characters, with her long-distance shots, occasionally taking brief close-ups of its faces and spaces. She paints vivid pictures of the Matopos, the Gulati Hills, the Kwakhe and Nyandu Rivers and the general physical and social environment on the other side of Selborne Road. In this manner she builds the scaffolding for the presentation of her characters and the events that will be played out against and within this backdrop. The main story takes place in Kezi, the rural enclave that is reached via the Selborne Road. The Selborne Road thus leads to history and memory. When we enter Kezi, we enter into history. Thus, Vera not only creates physical space in these early chapters, but also memory space, which both characters and readers will negotiate in an attempt to generate meaning in the narrative. It is in Kezi and its environs that Vera creates space for the "rememory" of the crucial events of the period 1950 to 1986.

In this regard, citing Jane Bryce on cinematic techniques in Vera's writing, the technique demonstrated above in the construction of the setting leads me to a reformulation of Bryce's assessment by stating that these early chapters in the novel "may be taken as equivalent to *mise-en-scène*, the *putting into the picture* of the object under scrutiny". As a *mise-en-scène*, continuing with Bryce, "it emphasizes composition and contextualization [and] [...] is closer to montage [...] 'the technique of producing a new whole from composite fragments'" (Bryce "Imaginary Snapshots" 47). In this manner, Vera draws the reader's attention not only to his/her own position as reader/viewer, but also to his/her role as 'actor' or both implied spectator and focalizer in the unfolding of the narrative. Vera thus 'pulls' the reader into a novel that recasts a particularly horrific episode in post-liberation Zimbabwean history—the brutal slaughter of the 1980s killings, epitomized in "a photograph' of a woman being decapitated" (Bryce "Imaginary Snapshots" 47). In *The Stone Virgins*, she recasts this scene in the decapitation of Thenjiwe by Sibaso, as the paradigm of the extreme violence. In a sense Thenjiwe's death at the hands of Sibaso, restages the historical execution of Nehanda by the colonialists, thereby framing the slaughter and dispossession of Matabeleland by Zanu PF masculinist nationalists within the earlier patriarchal colonialist order. However, as an episode, the deliberate wiping out of a

² The malayisha system is an informal channel of remittances into Ndebele society, often facilitating the movement of goods and people between Matabeleland and South Africa. See Vusilizwe Thebe, "From South Africa with love: the malayisha system and Ndebele households' quest for livelihood reconstruction in south-western Zimbabwe," *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 49. 4 (2011), 647 – 670.

legitimate opposition (the slaughter of 1980) was followed by other episodes, together constructing a coherent policy of disempowerment and disenfranchisement leading to the failed Zimbabwean society today. This, I argue, is the main focal point and theme of Vera's writing.

The novel focalizes the story of the two sisters, Thenjiwe and Nonceba, within the larger narrative of what it means to be victims of extreme violence and "executive lawlessness" within one's own borders. As one commentator observes:

The Stone Virgins concerns the recent history of Zimbabwe, particularly the period after 1980 when white-minority rule ended following the prolonged Chimurenga liberation struggle. Historically this was a time of uncertainty and political violence between competing African parties. Despite the potential richness of this material for a social novel in the mode of Ousmane Sembene or Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Vera chooses instead to center the meaning of this period on the lives of two sisters, Thenjiwe and Nonceba, and through their experiences she underscores the psychological impact this period of transition had on common lives. This is a risky choice, in so far that some readers may be discouraged by the lack of contextual detail to situate the story. But this move also constitutes one of Vera's main contributions as an African writer: to explore the emotional experience accumulated by people and its personal meaning, beyond what surrounding facts of history might tell. In her words, "It is an intimate quest."
(Lee)

Vera's "risky choice" in opting for a psychological novel instead of a "social [realist] novel in the mode of [Sembene] or [Ngugi]," or previous treatments of violence in Zimbabwe as in Shimmer Chinodya's *Harvest of Thorns* (1989), and the writing of Dambudzo Marechera, has proven to be an effective one in the sense that she underscores the 'psychology' behind the violence depicted in the novel. She revisits the violent immediate post-independence years of the early 1980s and writes their extreme atrocities by recalling and recasting what Terence Ranger calls:

[...] the appalling events of the 1980s, which all other Zimbabwean novelists have so far avoided. [...] She brings home the tragedy of the 1980s in the most intense and personal way. And she is not content merely to consign the perpetrator Sibaso to motiveless wickedness. Instead she enters into his innermost thoughts. ("Ceiling" 209)

These "appalling events" have to do with the violence visited on Zimbabwe by President Mugabe's ZANU-PF in the post-independence period. Horace Campbell notes, that while "on the eve of independence, ZANU-PF was on the defensive in the face of state violence [...] after 1980, this same party used violence with disastrous consequences, as in the case of the Matabeleland repression" (80). Campbell in his text, outlines and examines a series of violent acts, among them mass slaughter, land deprivation and the widespread suppression of legitimate opposition as methods of disempowerment and disenfranchisement and links it to, what he terms the violence of a "deformed masculinity" (1). Vera writes against this deformed masculinity in all of her novels.

By opting for a more personal, psychological approach in *The Stone Virgins*, Vera does more than merely chronicle the events with a social commentary on them. She individualizes the trauma and suffering of her characters. It is not only what affected society, but also what affected individuals within the society, the ways in which this kind of violence produces the “wickedness” perpetrated by Sibaso and others. By entering Sibaso’s mind, Vera paints a personal psychology of the perpetrator of extreme violence. He is an instrument and agent of death who lives within the “landscape of death” (Ranger, “Ceiling” 214). His mind is a place of death and violence:

Sibaso had eaten handfuls of spider legs throughout the war. He knew their alcove of death. Is this not a great secret to know, he asks. There is a tragic innocence which knows nothing but death, which survives on nothing but death. [...] My name is Sibaso. I have crossed many rivers with that name no longer on my lips, forgotten. It is an easy task to forget a name. Other names are assumed, temporary like grief; in a war you discard names like old resemblances, like handkerchiefs torn, leave them behind like tributaries dried. During a war we are lifeless beings. We are envoys, our lives intervals of despair [...]. (*Stone Virgins* 74)

Vera makes Sibaso an eye-witness to his own horror and implicates the reader also as ‘witness’ to the horrors that occurred in Matabeleland during the 1980s. In his assessment of Sibaso and the other male character Cephas, Ranger argues that in showing how both men “conceive of and relate to History,” particularly the violent history that forms the novel’s sub-text, Vera constructs Sibaso as a man “shaped by History for murderous violence” and Cephas as a character “draw[ing] on History for healing” (Ranger, “Ceiling” 212). In the Zimbabwe of the 1980s, Sibaso cannot reconcile the violence of the past in a narrative that would make it useful for both the present and the future. He destroys the future through his violence and, unable to reconcile the violence of an ancient past he witnesses in the cave paintings in the Mbebele cave, can only represent it by repeating it. Cephas, on the other hand, learns to draw on history for healing. For him the lessons of the past are beneficial for the future—he is a historian involved in the preservation of historic documents. Cephas, as a keeper of documents of the past, reconciles the past by incorporating it into the present by seeking to understand and (re)interpret it. By memorializing the past, even the violent past, cultures come into the possession of a self-knowledge that is vital to the work of restoration. The work of restoration is a futuristic endeavour. For whom do we restore, if not for future generations? In addition, by moving beyond the social into the psychological, by “explor[ing] the emotional experience” of her characters while moving “beyond [the] surrounding facts of history”, Vera draws the reader closer to an understanding of this violent period in recent Zimbabwean history and the continuing violence within the country, by articulating the silences ‘imposed’ on the history of the Matabeleland atrocities.

Representation and Gender Relations

One of the other major concerns in *The Stone Virgins* is the contest over representation having to do with gender relations. A pertinent example of this in recent Zimbabwean cultural history is the fierce opposition faced by the filmmaker Ingrid Sinclair in her representation of female ex-combatants and the difficulties they encountered during the 1970s Chimurenga in her

film *Flame* (1996). The furore over *Flame* highlighted the way that the dichotomy between the material referentiality of the fictional and non-fictional representation and an external reality is often broken in practice. In other words, the reaction to *Flame* recognized it as more than merely a film, a construct of the imagination. Sinclair had, in a sense, entered the events as commentator and was in effect revising and re-organizing the received and 'official' version of Zimbabwean liberationist history. Like Sinclair's film, Vera's novels are an intervention into and a disruption of this masculinist history. Pius Adesanmi makes the point in a more general way that:

It is now generally agreed in African studies that colonialism combined with Africa's traditional patriarchal ethos to effect a systematic subalternization of African women. Consequently, the African state that emerged from this historical crisis was sexist and patriarchal. The entirely masculinist aura of the nationalist movements that gave birth to the African state, coupled with the sexist dictatorships that followed it, ensured a phallogocentric continuum from which the question of women's voice and agency were occluded. ("Entanglement")

Both Horace Campbell and Mojubaolu Olufunke Okome make similar observations on Zimbabwe and Nigeria respectively. Campbell states:

During the struggle for independence, the political leadership sought to reconstruct the symbols of the community as symbols of masculine power. The celebration of the role of guerrillas in the struggle was reconstructed to become the celebration of masculine power and virility. The war of independence became associated with being elevated from boyhood. [...] This was in spite of the fact that there were women in the ranks of the guerrillas. The rituals of community solidarity that were part of the village community were repackaged as a component of growing to be 'real men.' (165)

Okome, speaking on the involvement of women in the Nigerian political systems in the post-colonial period, opines that: "Increasingly, women were incorporated into the political systems as subordinate, ineffectual adjuncts to men. Thus, the nature of their incorporation reveals the persistence of male dominance and gender bias over time" ("Women & State" Sec. 5).

In 'combatting' this occlusion and exclusion in *The Stone Virgins*, Vera articulates the silence of the women who fought in Zimbabwe's liberation struggles. Chapter four of the novel in the first section 1950-1980 reads like an ode to the memory of Zimbabwe's 'fighting' women. The narrator begins with a tribute to those women who remained behind during the Chimurenga; wives, daughters, mothers, grandmothers:

The women want to take the day into their own arms and embrace it, but how? To embrace the land and earth, the horizon, and triumph? To forget the hesitant moment, death, the years of deafness and struggle? The women want to take the time of resignation, of throbbing fears, and declare this to a vanished day, but how? And take the memory of departed sons, and bury it. But how? To end the unsure sunsets, the solitary loveliness of the hills? (45)

Vera's fiction itself suggests an answer to the "but how" through the work of her narrative, where painful remembering and numbing amnesia are pulled together in a staccato-like, yet lyrical prose. The story of these women is juxtaposed alongside that of the ex-combatants:

The women who return from the bush arrive with a superior claim of their own. They define the world differently. They are fighters, simply, who pulled down every barrier and entered the bush, yes, like men. But then they were women and said so, and spoke so, and entered the bush, like men. To fight like men, and said so, to fight, like women who fight. They made admissions which resembled denial. [...] They do not apologise for their courage and long absence nor hide or turn away from the footpath. (49-50)

The "bush" gave birth to a new breed of women who "define themselves differently," and who forthrightly challenge the normative values of the patriarchal society of Thandabantu and Kezi. Both Thenjiwe and Nonceba are part of this bold, new world, which is in turn met by the violence enacted by Sibaso. As Nana Wilson-Tagoë correctly points out, these women war veterans "dramatically reorient themselves differently from the community's cultural norms. Their distinctive experiences break the barriers of male and female roles and immediately create anxieties about possible gender transformations" ("Representing Culture"). It is this "anxiety" over gender transformation that engenders the hostility of the men who stayed behind and the murderous response of Sibaso who cannot cope with the possibility of a changing social structure. Trapped, like the spider in the fossil, within his own narrow view of history, Sibaso repeats its murderous narrative.

The novel is then also a study in the ways in which recuperation of women's histories, in this instance, of women's involvement in the struggle for Zimbabwean independence, comes up against other narratives—often, the 'dominant' masculinist liberationist narratives. Wilson-Tagoë argues that:

Because Vera's histories engage with cultural assumptions that have traditionally regulated gender relations, a combined focus on history and gender in exploring her writing reveals gender itself as a historical category that may be re-imagined and transformed. The parallel focus presents another context from which strategies of representation in the novel may contest notions of identity institutionalized in social science categories of gender analysis. ("History" 159)

She goes on to point out that the social sciences have proven to be inadequate for a more comprehensive and shared or comparative exploration of women's experiences since they have consistently worked to treat all women's histories as a collective whole. She stresses that it is in fiction rather than in the social sciences that this is more fruitfully realized. Notwithstanding the problematic representational nature of the novel in terms of its use of language as site of meanings, multiple points of view and its relativity in constructing identity, Wilson-Tagoë advances the novel as a site for the examination of women's histories and the reconfiguration of gender relations.

Reading *The Stone Virgins* in light of its rapprochement with the patriarchal model of liberationist historiography is an important feminist and counterdiscursive strategy. Such readings destabilize the monolithic fixity of patriarchal narratives, create apertures in the

discourse of both acts of writing and invite the critic to explore the important issue of patriarchal representations of 'truth' and 'reality.' Within the novel itself, patriarchal murder, represented by Sibaso, manifests its cruelty and will to repression through violence and necessitates the ideological disruption that Vera's text insists on. Her insertion of the women's inflammatory discourse articulates the silence of the fighting women (and women generally) and explores the nature of their marginalization in the society. Vera's strategy not only subverts the authority of these masculinist (per)versions (*père versions*) or masculinist versions of liberation history but also insists that there are other representations of this history. Wilson-Tagoe makes a vital point in this regard when she observes that:

The narrative is careful to separate its own fluid conception of history from the deterministic view that skews and destroys the mind of Sibaso, the disillusioned freedom fighter. Two different perceptions present conflicting views of how histories and cultures construct identities. Sibaso's linear deterministic view sees his community as doomed by centuries of failures and betrayals. He sees his own progress from being an idealist of the struggle to its destroyed victim as one cycle in a continuum of political betrayals that date back centuries. In his mind, the sacrifice of virgins several centuries ago is no different from the betrayals of the nationalist struggle and his own wanton killing and violation of Thenjiwe and Nonceba. ("Representing Culture")

In her construction of a gendered version of recent Zimbabwean history, and the continued "betrayals of the nationalist struggle," Vera thus links her narrative to this earlier, more ancient historical 'narrative' of the sacrifice of the stone virgins. For the restoration of the past revolves around the realization that there are many versions of the past which have to be unearthed and interrogated to yield the specific 'truth' which the narrator is attempting to reveal. In the novel, the author cast her version of the recent history of Zimbabwe against the backdrop of an older history, written on the stones in the cave of Mbelele in the Gulati Hills:

I placed my hand on the rocks, where antelopes and long-breasted women stand together. Tall women bend like tightened bows beneath a stampede of buffalo while the rest spread their legs outward to the sun. Even now, as I speak, they are there hunting something else beyond the buffalo, something eternal. What is it that they hunt? They move past the lonely herds. Are their arrows raised against time, these keepers of time? [...] The women raise their arms against the light. Perhaps their arms welcome the light falling from the curve of the rock, a light indelible, each stroke carries a thousand years of disbelief [...] Disembodied beings [...] They are the virgins who walk into their own graves before the burial of a king. They die untouched. Their ecstasy is in the afterlife. Is this a suicide or a sacrifice, or both? (*Stone Virgins* 94-95)

Here an ancient history is etched on the rocks. The author is describing something real, in that she is invoking another way of inscribing history—a 'pre-history' in the case of cave paintings of great antiquity by a vanished people. The text emphasizes the transhistorical nature of narrative mentioned in the Barthes quote in my introduction. The rock drawings are a text that inscribes the history of an older act of violence against another group of women. In this narrative, the rock

paintings serve as a trace, a document that is drawn on and assessed to shed light on the contemporary history of the involvement of women in the wars of liberation and up to the present. In *The Stone Virgins*, this older history is made contemporaneous with the more recent and contemporary history of violence in the Zimbabwe of the 1980s and since. The violence now visited on the women of Kezi, exemplified in the acts of violence against Thenjiwe and Nonceba by Sibaso, has its precursor in another ancient violence: that of the stone virgins. There is thus a palimpsestual link between the newer history written by Vera and that of an older history inscribed on the rocks in the Gulati Hills.

Here, Paul Ricoeur's notion of the trace and its refiguration assists us to read Vera's text so as to discover what it reveals about what happened in the past. Vera's inclusion of these cave paintings in the novel, functions, in a sense, to demonstrate the use of the historical imagination in interpreting "traces" from the past for greater meaning in the present. Her fluid narrative releases the creative potential of this history to provoke a capacity for revision. The narrator fittingly observes in this passage: "In Gulati, we planted landmines in shrines, among absent worshippers. We called out our own names among ancient shadows, the rocks that watch over you all night while you sleep" (*Stone Virgins* 90). The reference to cave paintings functions in the narrative to place history in a longer perspective that is not limited to colonial binaries. The rocks of the Gulati Hills, in addition to bearing witness to the violence of the stone virgins, also bears witness to a great past, harking back in the cultural memory perhaps, to the time of Great Zimbabwe, an ancient memory still drawn on as a vital trigger in helping to repair the psychic damage of colonization, war and terror. In *The Stone Virgins*, we get what Elizabeth Fox-Genovese identifies as a narrative act, that by telling the story makes it "possible to reclaim an impossible [impassable] past as the foundation for a possible future" (Fox-Genovese 272).

Conclusion

Vera's insistence on writing the future in the past, while re-enacting the past, underscores the importance of the connections between Zimbabwean history, contemporary events and literature. By envisioning past, present and future as three interconnected temporalities within a broad historical continuum, Vera "[allows] for an engagement with Zimbabwe's postcolonial phase in terms of its linkages to the forces that continue to shape" its present as well as its future.

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