

Review

War Victims and Survivors: The Expanding Vision of Yvonne Vera

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Published in 2002, Yvonne Vera's fifth novel, *The Stone Virgins*, gained the author yet another African region award, the first Macmillan Writer's Prize for Africa. However, recognition of Vera's voice as one of the most exciting to have emerged on the continent in the last decade spreads beyond Africa: the biographical notes to *The Stone Virgins* state that Vera's works have been translated into German, Spanish, Catalan, Italian, Swedish, Dutch, Danish, Finnish and Norwegian. She also has an American publisher, Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

Some of Vera's appeal to Western tastes lies, no doubt, in her style. Vera's writing is "difficult", "dense" and has post-modern characteristics: it is nuanced and ambiguous, and contains, as Lizzy Attree says, a meta-fictional commentary on the creative process itself (2002: 70). As Attree also states, much criticism of Vera's work has "tended to focus on her choice of taboo-breaking subject-matter and the use of a female perspective", ignoring the way in which "her language and imagery" provide "an alternative, fluid and often ambiguous perspective" that "identifies Vera's fiction with modernity" (2002: 63) [1]. This article will focus on the ways in which such modernist and post-modernist characteristics, once more in evidence in *The Stone Virgins*, carry potentially liberating implications for Zimbabweans, indeed for all of Africa's inhabitants.

It is the intensity and elegance of Vera's "poetic" prose, with its use of repetition, ellipsis, and accretion of metaphorical meaning, that compels the reader's engagement with content. Much of this content is the substance of the consciousness of her protagonists, and in successfully soliciting the reader's understanding, the representation of the protagonist's consciousness is crucial in the three novels, *Without a Name* (1994), *Under the Tongue* (1996), and *Butterfly Burning* (1998).

In each of these, the female protagonist kills (respectively committing infanticide, murder of a husband, self-abortion and then self-immolation when pregnant), with the author seeking to convey the anguish and rage that underlie these killings. None of these women kills without reason; in each case, either she herself or a daughter has been raped and/or abandoned by a man. Nevertheless, what is startling, even shocking, is the beauty of those passages that recount the acts of killing.

The Stone Virgins also contains passages representing acts of violence of remarkable power and beauty. In this novel, however, the acts are those of a man. Vera gives only brief glimpses into the minds of the guerrilla rapist of *Without a Name* and the incestuous father of *Under the Tongue*, but in *The Stone Virgins*, she extensively explores the rapist-killer's psyche. Sibaso has been caught up in war for years. Coming upon the Gumede sisters in the village of Kezi, Sibaso decapitates Thenjiwe, then rapes Nonceba, after which he slices off her lips. In the following passage, he is torturing Nonceba:

He turns steadily, with the movements of a hunter who kills not because he is hungry but because his stomach is full, therefore, he can hunt with grace... He thinks of scars inflicted before dying, betrayals before a war, after a war, during a war. Him. Sibaso. He considers the woman in his arms. He sees her dancing heels, her hands chaste dead bone, porous thin, painted on a rock. Her neck is leaning upon a raised arrow, her mind pierced by the sun. She is a woman from very far, from long ago, from the naked caves in the hills of Gulati. She does not belong here. She bears the single solitude of a flame, the shape and form of a painted memory. He thrusts the body to the ground: a dead past. Nonceba falls (71).

The aesthetic power of the passages in which women kill, like those in which Sibaso rapes and kills, raises a disturbing question: is Vera shaping an aesthetic of violence, as do many Hollywood films, such as those of Quentin Tarantino? Miki Flockemann suggests a partial response to this proposition when she notes "an emphasis in recent writing [from Africa] on what to some indicates the enormous power accorded to the creative imagination" and to the "symbolic ecstatic" (2003: 3). Flockemann says that "symbolic acts of creativity [may] function as a form of personal and cultural survival" (2003: 3) when embedded in work that recounts traumatic events, and that such work is located in "grounded aesthetics" (2003: 3). Thus, Phephelaphi's self-abortion and self-immolation in *Butterfly Burning*, which are described in passages replete with both repetition (that suggests ritual and profundity) and with images that evoke transcendence (flying, wings, purification), may be read as an achieved act of protest and self-assertion. This is comparable to the female protagonists' choice of death in Nawal el Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* (1975; 1983) and, to cite a Western example, in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899).

The "symbolic ecstatic", evident to some degree in the texts of both El Saadawi and Chopin, is pronounced in *Butterfly Burning* [2]. In this novel, a network of images links Phephelaphi's aspirations, and her final act of self-immolation, with various kinds of creativity: the singing of a road gang, children at play, and kwela music. But it is only in *The Stone Virgins* that Vera offers more concrete, practical paths for women's liberation and agency: Nonceba moves to Bulawayo, begins to heal her appalling injuries with the help of a man who befriends her, and interviews successfully for a job. If it is possible to argue that when Vera's women characters kill, they are doing so out of rage arising from abuse or related motives, the purpose behind making the descriptions of Sibaso's appalling deeds as beautiful as they are is more elusive. It is not as if this is the way Vera feels compelled to write. Her short stories in *Why Don't You Carve Other Animals* are more conventionally realistic in form and style, and less saturated in imagery. Even more pertinently, in *The Stone Virgins* itself, Vera depicts the massacre of the villagers of Kezi in Chapter Thirteen in stark, unelaborated prose. What, then, might Vera be hoping to achieve through her extended, chilling evocations of Sibaso's horrible acts and of his psyche?

The Stone Virgins is the first of Vera's novels to be set (from page 59 onwards) in the post-colonial period. While she has consistently and bravely challenged the gendered myths of the discourses of post-independence nationalism in Zimbabwe, in previous novels she has focused on the past: events before 1980 and Independence. In *The Stone Virgins*, Vera takes an even bolder step. Setting two-thirds of her narrative in the period after Independence, she overtly criticises the regime that claims to have brought "freedom" to Zimbabweans. Specifically, she depicts the atrocities inflicted on the weak and innocent in Matabeleland so as to entrench the power of the MaShona-dominated ZANU-PF, led by Robert Mugabe. Although the atrocities in Matabeleland had an ethnic component, Vera ignores this, and, through her characterisation of Sibaso, focuses instead on how war may lead male combatants to become alienated and numbed. Sibaso says, when explaining why he once bit his thumb to the bone, "I wanted to reach something, to restore feeling" (89). Vera is especially intent on depicting how male sexuality may become depraved. Gestures that in normal circumstances may signify tenderness, such as placing a woman on one's knee, signify perversion.

The question that remains is: what does the reader gain from the "poetic" descriptions of Thenjiwe's murder and Nonceba's rape and mutilation? The point of the aesthetic force in the representation of a man such as Sibaso seems to be that, although severely damaged, he is still human and not a monster. The rhythmic repetitiveness of phrases, as Sibaso kills and rapes, conveys what the narrator elsewhere states, that soldiers like him enact their brutalities with purpose, "in a ceremony of their own" (160). Eventually incapable of achieving ecstasy through a blend of passion with tenderness and respect, they repeatedly

seek to recapture the experience of transcendence through ritually, but profanely, inflicting death and pain. Horror is therefore one appropriate response to the passages in which Sibaso kills and rapes, but pity for the perpetrator as well as his victim is another. Vera's use of narrative voice encourages this complex response from the reader. While Sibaso is "he" in Chapter 6, the author represents him through his own voice in Chapters 9, 11 and 15. What the "I" of these chapters provides is the testimony of a human being who has sacrificed himself for ideals, and has suffered extreme bodily and mental pain: "I fought in the hills of Gulati. I am a man who is reconciled. My mind is scalded and perfectly free. My mind is a ferment. What is it to live ... I embrace death, a flame" (107); "I am an instrument of war. I lose all sight of pity, toward myself" (129). Vera's language clothes Sibaso's consciousness in the terror and pity of tragedy. The implication is that in both the colonial and neo-colonial periods, Zimbabwe's men as well as its women are victims of the powerful.

Vera's latest exploration of war-damaged sexual relations in *The Stone Virgins* is initiated with her title, which draws attention to the stone virgins represented on rock inside a cave in the heart of the hills of Gulati near the town of Kezi. The Gulati cave, "the most sacred of sacred places" (91), is like a "womb" (92), a site that, in terms of traditional cosmology, guarantees continuity of fertility, time, even memory. When the virgins of the past walked into their own graves before the burial of a king, "the life of rulers [was] served" even if not "saved" (95). But during the Second Chimurenga, freedom fighters "planted landmines in shrines" (90), so desecrating them and exacting a toll upon themselves. Men like Sibaso have lost connection with custom, memory, and other human beings. Thenjiwe and Nonceba are sacrificed to contemporary goals, to "the life of rulers" of 1982. But theirs is a sterile sacrifice, as shown by Sibaso's sense of desolation, the destruction of Kezi, and even by the fact that both sisters are childless. Thenjiwe is murdered before she can give birth to a child; Nonceba, physically and emotionally damaged, dislikes red, the colour of passion as well as blood, and she lives chastely with Cephas.

What Zimbabweans require is not, however, a return to the past. Sibaso, who has become extra-societal, returns to the Gulati hills, but has nowhere to go and has lost touch with his family. Nonceba finds psychological and physical healing, but this occurs in a city. The depiction of Bulawayo as full of the sight and scent of flowers in Chapter 17 probably implies the author's endorsement of urbanisation as the inevitable context of Zimbabweans' search for a transformed future. In this vision of the future, Vera also traces the outline of a new belief system that favours women, heals them, and offers them true freedom and creativity. Nonceba, who prefers white and yellow flowers to red ones, is a spiritual rather than a sensual person, a mark of character that contrasts her with the patterns of the standard MaShona cosmology, which links women with body/blood, but men with spirit, and so with the powerful ancestors. Also significant is the fact that although Nonceba finds healing in the company of a man, Cephas does not make sexual demands of her; instead, he genuinely wishes to allow her freedom of choice. After a year, "[t]hey have become friends" (163).

A Zimbabwean "new man" and a woman recovering from the worst that can be inflicted on her by civil war are the "ordinary" Zimbabweans who embody the potential for recovery, healing, and regeneration. Regeneration is also latent in the marula tree at the heart of Kezi, Nonceba's village. In *The Stone Virgins*, the image of the tree represents, among other things, emotional depth and the capacity for memory; and it is memory that is necessary for healing both the individual and the nation. The last paragraph of the novel has Cephas realise: "A new nation needs to restore the past" (165). The most insistent and important patterns of images found throughout Vera's work are, on the one hand, dryness and sterility, lack of voice, inability to speak, lack of memory; on the other, rain, water, speech, movement and dancing, creativity, fertility, growth. Kezi's population (those that have not been murdered) have fled. Nobody now sits beneath the tree. Soldiers have destroyed the vivid village life Vera celebrates at the start of the novel - the comings and goings in the store, the

children playing in the dry riverbed - everything "communal" (118). Vera emphasises collective suffering in contrast to trumpeting the virtues of select, enshrined national heroes who serve the purposes of the ruling powers. Too rooted in the cruelties of recent history and current realities to be utopian, Vera's style, with its fluidity and ambiguity, nevertheless offers signposts to greater freedom and new possibilities of identity for Zimbabwean women and men.

Vera writes of the particular, and of her own country, but in *The Stone Virgins* she claims for the first time in one of her novels a continental resonance for her vision: "Of all continents, only Africa has known the crushed solitude of a dead spider. Charcoal perfect" (111). She also writes that: "The crushed spider is an outline, the shape alone a faint sketch in charcoal ..." (111). Africa has a "weightlessness" (111) of identity and definition, and the continent's impress or mark on the world, its "weight", has been crushed. Its truth and its history have either not yet been written, or they have been marginalised or silenced. In its broader psychological scope, exploring the agonies of men and women damaged by war, this novel holds a warning for the entire African continent. Africa's colonial legacy of cruelty, especially towards women, endures in ongoing wars. But Vera also pays tribute to the continent's peoples in enduring the worst suffering, while also regenerating body, mind and spirit.

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Footnotes

[1] Attree's essay is found in *Sign and Taboo: Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera*. This collection of seventeen essays and one interview with Vera is an important addition to the scholarship and criticism of Vera's oeuvre.

[2] See Hunter (2002) for a fuller discussion of the resonances of the lengthy passage in which Phephelaphi self-aborts in the veld [grassy plain or bushland].

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