

Tribute

A Tribute to Yvonne Vera: 19 September 1964 – 7 April 2005

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A woman writer must have an imagination that is plain stubborn, that can invent new gods and banish ineffectual ones (Vera, 1999: 1).

Yvonne Vera, the Zimbabwean author, recently died in Toronto at the age of 40. She had moved there from Bulawayo in 2003, and was being treated for an AIDS-related illness. At the time of her death, she had published five novels (*Nehanda*, 1993; *Without A Name*, 1994; *Under the Tongue*, 1996; *Butterfly Burning*, 1998; and *The Stone Virgins*, 2002), several short stories, and an array of cultural, literary and social criticism. She had received numerous literary awards, including the Africa Region Commonwealth Writer's Prize in 1997, the Macmillan Writer's Prize for Africa in 2002 and the Swedish Tucholski Prize in 2004.

The mainstream literary tradition in which many African women writers are read and marketed usually places undue emphasis on the difficult circumstances of their lives. Reflecting stereotypes about the hopeless victimisation of marginalised people, this tradition also fixates on the tragic circumstances of their deaths. This is well illustrated in the case of another southern African woman writer, Bessie Head, whose writing is often believed to testify straightforwardly to her painful exile, illness, social alienation, poverty and early death at the age of 48. In the wake of Vera's death, it is disturbing to consider that this writer too might be popularly cast mainly as a poignant victim – of Zimbabwean politics, of patriarchal nationalism, of disease. While Vera's writing strongly condemns gendered, racial and postcolonial injustices, her literary vision has always been richly productive. In paying tribute to an artist whose work demonstrates such breadth, I want to recall the enduring power of her work and ideas about artistic creation.

It is no coincidence that Vera's first novel *Nehanda* (1993) was inspired by a woman spirit medium who was a major leader in Zimbabwe's first uprising against colonial rule. As conceived by Vera, *Nehanda's* leadership provides a metaphor of visionary resistance to all forms of tyranny. The path taken by the novel's central character therefore exemplifies the thrust of Vera's oeuvre as it exposes different facets of oppression and affirms liberating ways of seeing and living.

Currently, Zimbabwe's official history includes campaign speeches, press releases, stories told on television and the state-controlled press or radio, and school textbooks. These stories rationalise myriad injustices: the oppression of peasants and workers, the subordination of women and the ruthless suppression of all forms of dissent. Vera's first novel strives to banish the "ineffectual gods" of postcolonial rule; by telling a story upholding values very different from those in the stories that routinely circulate in Zimbabwe, she creates visions of society, human dignity and perception that provide liberating codes by which to "imagine" the self and the nation, and therefore, by which to live.

Her later novels continue to narrate repressed stories, with the writer sifting through public and visible narratives to uncover those that are usually silenced or invisible. In telling these stories, Vera often turns to peripheral places, experiences and people: to Zimbabwe's townships and rural areas, to the experiences of poor rural women, to violent, dehumanising and "irrational" acts that expose deep layers of trauma.

This trauma is explicit in her second novel *Without a Name* (1994). The central woman character here is totally disconnected from the heroic project of nation-building. Mazvita has been raped, and travels despairingly around Zimbabwe without any true sense of "home". She carries on her back a bundle that turns out to be the child she has killed, and which she

will bury at the scene of her violation. Mazvita's journey is shown to be a painfully solitary struggle, one of the many struggles that entirely elude the populist narrative of national liberation from colonial rule.

Like *Without a Name, Under the Tongue* (1996) deals with violence directed at women by focusing on incest in the context of the liberation struggle. Zhizha, the main character, is sexually abused by her father. She battles to make sense of her experiences and, like Mazvita, must deal alone with a trauma that her family and community neither prevent, nor assist her with. *Butterfly Burning* (1998), set in the 1940s, also presents the painful isolation of one woman's struggle. Phephelaphi is a young woman from a township who applies to train as a nurse in the colonial context of Rhodesia. But her ambition is interrupted by an unplanned pregnancy. The novel ends with this character setting herself alight in view of the father of her unborn child.

Vera's last novel, *The Stone Virgins* (2002) is distinctive in covering both pre- and post-independence periods in Zimbabwe. It directly contrasts the euphoria associated with the coming of independence in 1980 with the start of a civil war in Zimbabwe's southern province of Matabeleland during the mid-1980s. Vera connects personal with collective violence in her story. The characters' experiences are rooted in the period when President Mugabe mobilised armed forces to destroy political opponents in Matabeleland. This led to the widespread slaughter of numerous Zimbabweans, and brutalised those who fought in the name of defending the party in power. The novel graphically confronts the impact of this violent environment on individual Zimbabweans, and especially on women, who are primarily targeted in atrocious acts of torture.

Even an extremely cursory review of the plots of Vera's novels reveals that her work has been unflinching in confronting historical events, and the personal and political challenges experienced by numerous Zimbabweans. Vera's characters struggle with colonial violence, infanticide, physical and emotional torture, rape, incest and civil war. They also struggle with forms of betrayal that exemplify the corruption of hopes and ideals in the postcolonial period. At the same time, her novels unravel the complexity of personal relationships, and refuse to limit these to norms of political correctness, nationalist orthodoxy or the various taboos entrenched in literary traditions and social conventions.

Because of the intricacy and depth of the author's personal and political subject-matter, her novels have a compelling relevance to circumstances and experiences beyond the immediate context of colonial and postcolonial Zimbabwe. She urges her readers to consider different forms of marginality, silencing, and violation, and insists on the need to hear the voices of those that are powerless and victimised. Or she traces the confluence of courage, determination, futility and despair in the struggles of those whose voices are not heeded in society. Her writing therefore opens up expansive visions of freedom and ever-widening paths of resistance. In an environment where African women's writing is often believed to offer insights only into very particular experiences, Vera's writing challenges the reader to explore a vast network of emotions, politics and values. Her tools are words that encourage readers to do far more than recognise real-life situations or existing political circumstances, words that gesture towards the immense possibilities for living, seeing and thinking beyond repressive social structures, relationships, fictions and silences.

The power of her tools revolves considerably around the poetic force of her language. In her novels, Vera generally uses a lyrical style, with her minimalist, opaque and symbolically charged writing often suggesting poetry rather than prose. It is often assumed that politically engaged writing must be realistic and mimetic, and that highly poetic and lyrical writing inevitably signals political escapism or obscurity. Yet the powerful poetic cadences of Vera's writing form part of an insistent call for political action. In the face of a utilitarian mindset that

limits notions of politics and social relevance, Vera insists on the continuities between activism, visionary storytelling and imaginative cultural production.

It is significant that Vera worked as the Director of the National Gallery in Bulawayo from 1997 until 2003. Transforming the Gallery's colonial legacy, she encouraged the unfettered imaginative expression of those usually excluded from canons of visual art. The Gallery was changed into a dynamic cultural centre, and provided studios where artists could work and freely interact with one another, and with visitors. On a visit to Bulawayo in 2002, I had the pleasure of meeting and talking to some of these artists, and was inspired by the Gallery's atmosphere of vibrancy, accessibility and community – so different from the elitist and aloof atmosphere of many gallery spaces. Many of the artists were women, whose embroidery, beadwork and batiks – often seen merely as spontaneous “crafts” – were properly recognised by the Gallery as powerful artistic creations. As Director, Vera also organised outreach programmes to encourage drawing, metalwork and woodwork by children and women in rural areas. Much of this work was exhibited at the Gallery, or reproduced in postcards that were sold there.

Like the artistic creation she sought to encourage, Vera's storytelling is not simply ancillary, or a form of preparation for action. The expansive meanings configured within her texts actively constitute political action in challenging a present world and pointing towards a society that is possible but also “not yet”.

The current backlash against feminism, and the consolidation of power in a neo-liberal globalised world, mark a new intensity in the way threatened ruling elites are marshalling knowledge and information to endorse the persecution of oppressed peoples around the world. Such information and knowledge are increasingly threatening to drown out liberatory expression. This partly explains why many radical feminist writers today insistently affirm new ways of thinking and speaking, and the pursuit of what is “visionary” and “imaginative” (see, for example, McFadden, 2002, hooks, 2000 and Pereira, 2002). Challenging us to transcend neo-imperial and patriarchal boundaries, these feminists suggest that it may be in imaginative expression that we can find the most abundant sources to resist the coercive powers of our present discursive context. Vera's death has occurred at an age when many writers are only starting to publish the works for which they become best-known. At the time of her death she was in fact working on a new novel, *Obedience*. But the body of work that she has left us is an inspirational call to take up the collective challenge articulated by one of *Nehanda's* characters: “to accompany the story-teller on the journey which may not be embarked on alone. The story-teller needs an accompanying tongue” (1993: 60).

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