

Women and Utterance in Contexts of Violence: *Nehanda, Without a Name* and *The Stone Virgins* by Yvonne Vera.

By

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## **DECLARATION**

I declare that this dissertation is my own work. It has not been submitted before for any degree at any other university. Where use has been made of the scholarship of other authors, they have been duly acknowledged in the text.

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## DEDICATION

For Mrs Miriam Mukiwa, the Woman who Fathered me for Real

and

Chido Rachael and Tinashe Goora, I will soon make up for the lost time.

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a study of women and utterance in contexts of violence in the three selected novels written by the late Yvonne Vera: *Nehanda* (1993), *Without a Name* (1994), and *The Stone Virgins* (2002). A study of the representation of women in particular is appropriate because their role in the making of the history of Zimbabwe has been deliberately undermined or ignored by 'patriotic' historians and politicians alike. This study incorporates a historical and post-colonial feminist analysis of women and their empowerment through utterance in Vera's novels. Their achieving utterance is seen as a way of countering a past tendency to focus on women being victims of patriarchal ideologies with little being done to expose the degree and nature of women's resistance against oppressive, socially constructed gender relations. The kind of violence experienced by Vera's women is both physical (rape and murder) and psychological. Two dimensions of utterance have been explored in this study. Firstly, the study examined what the characters can and cannot say about their conditions of suffering. This entailed an examination of their cultural and contextual limitations as well as their personal difficulties. Secondly, the study investigated how Vera, writing some fifteen years after the events she depicts and with the advantage of hindsight, represents her women characters as agents of their own recovery from the violation perpetrated against them. This involved an analysis of Vera's utterance and her thematic concerns, especially her revisioning of history in breaking the silence of her women characters. Positioned in relation to existing critical works on Vera's novels, this study's contribution to the critical debate has been its demonstration of how Vera, through the use of her narrative technique and unique poetic style was able to challenge the conditions of women in the past in a way that has relevance to present-day Zimbabwe and offers possibilities for the future Zimbabwe.

## Introduction

The three elements of my inquiry in this study are women, utterance, and the contexts of violence. I have found it imperative to study Vera's representation of women in particular because women's role in the making of the history of Zimbabwe has been deliberately undermined and ignored by nationalist historians and politicians alike (Ranger, 2005; Veit-Wild, 1992; Zhuwarara, 2001). I have chosen to analyse women and their empowerment through utterance in Vera's novels in order to counter the tendency to focus on women being victims of patriarchal ideologies with little being done to expose the degree and nature of women's resistance against oppressive, socially constructed gender relations (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997; Zhuwarara, 2001). Furthermore, issues of violence against women and women's empowerment are crucial and highly contentious at present in Zimbabwe and have been central in Zimbabwean novels, such as Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) and Chenjerai Hove's *Bones* (1988).

Vera's protagonists are mainly women who, after having being subjected to war and to 'peacetime' atrocities such as physical (rape) and psychological violence, struggle to give utterance to their pain. One of the many ways in which these women are empowered in Vera's novels is through utterance, the act of speaking out about their violation and asserting themselves as beings worth recognition. Thus my study has sought to determine what the act of utterance and consequently 'silence' means for Vera's characters. From the periods in which the selected texts are set it should be apparent that the contexts of violence referred to in my study are not only the wars of liberation but also those situations in which women find themselves in the aftermath of these wars, in post-independence Zimbabwe. The texts I have selected for my study are set respectively in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Zimbabwe. *Nehanda* (1993) Vera's debut novel, is set in the period of the First Chimurenga, *Without a Name* (1994) her second novel is set in 1977, the year in which the liberation war was approaching its peak. *The Stone Virgins* (2002) Vera's last completed novel, is set during the dissident movement after independence, between 1980 and 1985.

Stemming from the significance of the historical settings of the chosen texts, my study has sought to investigate the relationship between fiction and history in all the three chapters. I have argued that history is a much contested terrain and have shown how Vera re-visions it by giving prominence to her female characters and ‘mis-representing’ some of the major historical facts in her bid to break the silence of women. This study has been preoccupied, among other things, with how Vera creates possibilities of what could have been the situation as opposed to reflecting the actuality of what transpired. As has been discussed in Chapter One, Vera re-visions the role and importance of Nehanda and portrays her as having been one of the great spirit-mediums who were influential in instigating the people to rise against colonial rule in the First Chimurenga. She also gives her other women characters prominence in *Nehanda* that they did not have in real life in pre-colonial and colonial Zimbabwe. In *Without a Name*, Vera queries the ‘patriotic history’ (Ranger, 2005) of Zimbabwe which celebrates the freedom fighters as heroes who fought to liberate the country in the Second Chimurenga, ignoring the fact that they were part of the men who violated the people in whose name they claimed to be fighting. In *The Stone Virgins*, as will be discussed in greater depth later in this Introduction and in Chapter Three, Vera challenges the historical representation of what transpired in Matebeleland during the period of the dissident movement after the ceasefire period. In this novel, Vera’s military women are shown as a new kind of women who however, belong to the interim. Through their diffident confidence during the ceasefire period, Vera portrays what could have been for the women who were coming from the bush where they fought in the war of liberation with their male counterparts.

The structure of this study is largely determined by the order in which the selected texts were written and published. I found it important to be guided by this order in my analysis because it reflects a progression and development of Vera’s declared objectives and writing style as well as the perception of her thematic concerns from her first to her last novel. Muponde and Taruvinga observe that “[f]rom *Nehanda* (1993) to *The Stone Virgins* (2002), Vera gives us an emerging chain of female voices, and a new spiritual and psychological cartography of female consciousness” (2002: xii). The first chapter explores how Vera re-visions history in *Nehanda*, and celebrates Nehanda both in her

actuality as well as in her mythic and iconic status. The second chapter investigates how Vera explores the inner life of her protagonist, Mazvita, who is raped by a freedom fighter in her rural home, Mubaira. The third and final chapter of this study examines how Vera's last novel combines issues of re-visioning history with the inner consciousness of the protagonists.

This study is also preoccupied with the different kinds of silences that the protagonists experience and confront in their bid to recover from their violations. Shaw asserts that in general "Vera's female protagonists are introverted, inarticulate, desperate, but it is through identification with them that the novel moves" (2002: 25). In an interview with Hunter, Vera reveals that she likes to give a strong psychological profile to female characters, which is something she has not found in earlier literature. She says, "... we [women] live so much of our lives internally and it is really important to explore that. It's an entire world, which I find mesmerizing and it brings me closest to the character when I can enter her mental world" (1998: 81). By so doing, Vera celebrates women as complete beings who struggle to make their voices heard in the public sphere but have an entire inner world (that has been ignored by earlier literature) in which they can dream about their future. Vera's women are thus celebrated in their totality in her novels.

Based on the definition of feminism as "the recognition of the systematic discrimination against women on the grounds of gender and a commitment to work towards change" (Meena, 1992: 2), my study positions Vera as a feminist writer. In so doing, the study applies Critical Third World feminisms to challenge the dominance of Western feminisms as well as to incorporate a historical analysis linking political, cultural and psychological issues together (Meena, 1992; Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997). Vera's position as a post-colonial feminist Zimbabwean writer is as problematical as the position of her female protagonists, her written subjects. Quoting Hekman, Nfah-Abbenyi argues that

[i]f women have been excluded from the realm of 'the subject' in Eurocentric discourses, the Third World women have been 'objects' of discourses (Eurocentric, colonial and post-colonial) even more so than Western women.

Being the Other of the man, the Other of the West, the Other of the Other ... women[,] has been as problematical as the place(s) of post-colonial women [who are both] 'writing and written subject'. (1997: 31)

With regards to the silence of Third World women as 'objects' of many discourses, Boyce Davies argues that "[w]e can make distinctions between the conditions of silence, being silenced, silencing, on the one hand, and what has been referred to by some as voicelessness and the coming to voice or talking back on the other" (1995: 5). This shows that silence is multi-faceted and cannot be affixed to any one meaning. Nfah-Abbenyi extends Spivak's notion of the historically muted subaltern woman by arguing that

she [the subaltern woman] has always spoken, she has spoken in alternative ways that have challenged and continue to challenge not only imperialism and colonial discourses but...the critics as well, who have been slow to or have refused to hear and acknowledge when and how these voices have spoken. (1997: 31)

A fuller discussion of silence comes in Chapter Two, where I have argued that Mazvita's silence (largely intuitive), has to do with retreating from her reality and is usually indicative of self-delusion.

In *The Stone Virgins* history is a much contested terrain (this time Vera's challenge is not so much to 'history', but rather the Zimbabwean government's official silence over the Matabeleland massacres). Ranger claims that during what is known to have transpired in Matabeleland in the 1980s, tortures of civilians included "cutting open pregnant mothers' abdomens, women and children asked to beat their husbands to death....Women who had given birth to boys were forced to put them in stamping mills where they stamped these baby boys to pulp" (2002: 208-209). In her tribute to Vera, Lewis hails *The Stone Virgins* as a novel that "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" (2005: 1). Vera also addresses the challenge begun in the first two novels, of how to enable her readers to access the thoughts of her protagonists, Nonceba (the victim, physically silenced by the cutting off of her lips) and Sibaso (the perpetrator of the violence). Although Nonceba is portrayed as experiencing violation in multiple ways, she is also shown to achieve a subject

position that furthers her agency in her own recovery. Nfah-Abbenyi, with reference to novels by other prominent African women novelists, asserts that “female characters...are portrayed not in stereotypical[,] subservient, unchanging roles, or roles that are deliberately limiting. Instead they come alive as speaking subjects and agents for change” (1997: 151). As will be seen in Chapter Three, Vera’s description of the killing and raping of Thenjiwe and Nonceba intensifies the horror as well as the macabre beauty of the acts. The conjunction that Vera creates, as I have said in Chapter Three, is daring if not dangerous because it could so easily be seen as a celebration of the killer’s art and power. To balance the portrayal of her male characters in *The Stone Virgins*, Vera makes Cephas, her male character who sees the need for a woman’s healing, come to the aid of Nonceba in dealing with her violation, and subsequently to move on with her life.

In all the three novels, as will be explored more fully in discussion of them, Vera set challenges for herself as well as for her readers. In *Nehanda*, Vera had to grapple with how to fuse orality and writing. Samuelson, commenting that Vera undertakes to write orality in her meta-historical narrative, points out that “*Nehanda* is riddled with contradictions as the written text scorns the conditions of its existence” (2002a: 18). *Nehanda*’s prophecies are in spoken words and she and the Shona community in general (as evidenced by Ibwe’s mimes and speech to his people), distrust written words. *Nehanda*’s first prophecy, “Beware of blinding words” (Vera, 1993: 37), shows a distrust of the documents written by the white people for the black people to sign as concessions and sets up a dichotomy between orality and literacy, from the Shona people’s point of view. Whereas false spoken words would be deafening, *Nehanda* refers to the deceptions possible in written words as blinding. The question to pose regarding the characters’ distrust of words is how Vera manages to negotiate these contentious issues when her mode of communication is the written word. Vera, in considering the difference between the traditional sites of utterance in oral narratives and the sites of utterance available in written fiction has said:

If speaking is still difficult to negotiate, then writing has created a free space for women – much freer than speech. There is less interruption, less immediate and shocked reaction. The written text is granted its intimacy, its privacy, its creation

of a world, its proposals, its individual characters, its suspension of disbelief. It surprises in the best carnival way, reducing distances, accepting the least official stance. The book is bound, circulated, read. It retains its autonomy much more than a woman is allowed in the oral situation. Writing offers a moment of intervention. (1999: 3)

Vera has however, been taken to task by some critics who have cited how her assertion about the liberatory aspects of the written word contradicts what her characters say in *Nehanda* about the written word. There she has Ibwe, mimicking “their own chief”, say

[o]ur people know the power of words. It is because of this that they desire to have words continuously spoken and kept alive. We do not believe that words become independent of the speech that bore them....The paper is the stranger’s own peculiar custom. Among ourselves, speech is not like rock. Words cannot be taken from the people who create them. People are their words. (Vera, 1993: 39-40)

In relation to the above, Maurice Vambe argues that the “paradox of Vera’s creative imagination in *Nehanda* is that she has to represent the orality implied in the ritual myth of spirit possession through the written mode, thereby ironically acknowledging the authority of that same written mode that she seeks to displace” (2002: 137). Vambe here is perpetuating the either/or mode of thought, which feminists and post-colonial critics are moving away from in order to advocate a fusion of orality and writing. My view is that Vera does not seek to displace the oral mode as Vambe claims but rather she explores in writing, the pre-colonial Shona conceptions of the written word and the reasons for their attitudes. Thus, Vera uses writing in the service of orality.

In *Without a Name*, there is a progression from the narrative challenge that Vera poses for herself in *Nehanda*. The pertinent question of who sees, who speaks and who listens (Rimmon-Kenan, 1983; Spivak, 1988) in this novel is explored in depth in Chapter Two. My argument is that receiving Mazvita’s experiences from her point of view makes us comprehend her harrowing experiences. Thus I argue that in this novel Vera poses herself the challenge of how she can represent Mazvita in relation to the act of infanticide that she commits as a result of the rape that she has experienced, and in relation to her intuitive silence and her refusal to face the truth of her situation. In an

interview with Bryce, Vera says that “[w]hen I’m writing... I start with a moment – visual, mental – that I can see, and place it on my table, as though it were a photograph. In *Without a Name*, I had this ‘photograph’, or series of photographs, of a woman throwing a child on her back” (Bryce, 2002: 219). She explains that the image of a woman throwing a dead child on her back came to her first, and then she supplied it with choreographed movements. She says that she as a writer needed to be anchored inside this woman’s mind, “seeing this fragmented or fractured world, and how – usually a woman – is trying to bring the pieces together in her mind, to choreograph her life” (Bryce, 2002: 219). Thus, beginning from this visual image Vera portrays Mazvita as someone who becomes violent as a result of the violence perpetrated on her. As my study has shown, Vera’s style comes out of her wish to bring alive a visual image. Vera’s unusual qualities as a novelist enable the reader to see Mazvita’s killing of her son conceived out of the rape, though violent and extreme, as her resolve to get rid of the tangible evidence of her violation as well as memories of the rape. The reader is made to experience Mazvita’s anguish with her and hence understand the various kinds of silences that she experiences and intuitively adopts. What is notable in the narrative is the fact that although Mazvita is damaged by the liberation struggle, she sees great potential in herself, although sometimes this is in self-delusion. As shown in the analysis of the novel in Chapter Two, Mazvita neither wallows in self-pity nor laments her violation in despondence but she seeks physically and psychologically to break free by departing from the stifling environment of her violation. In Mazvita, as in Nonceba, lies the strength of Vera’s novels which show that national issues reside in intensely personal stories and that there is life after violation and hope in despair for her women characters, who are shown at the end of each narrative as preparing to start afresh.

As explored more fully in Chapter Three, in her last novel *The Stone Virgins*, Vera returns to the questions of the healing and possible growth of her female characters despite their violations. One of Vera’s challenges in *The Stone Virgins* is how to present some events from the rapist-cum-murderer’s point of view, such that the reader can begin to comprehend how the rapist-murderer has been shaped by the history of his country. Unlike in her first two novels, Vera makes use of four central characters in her last novel.

Thenjiwe and Nonceba, the two sisters, are portrayed in relation to Cephas and Sibaso, the two men from different regions of the country, one of whom draws on history for healing and the other who is shaped by history for murderous purposes (Ranger, 2002: 212). Explored in the last novel, is a different kind of silence. In *The Stone Virgins*, Nonceba is physically forced into silence by the mutilation of her lips by Sibaso, so that she cannot speak out as a witness of how Sibaso first kills Thenjiwe before raping her. Vera shows that Nonceba's silence is not in self-delusion as was Mazvita's silence in *Without a Name* and Nonceba's claim complicates the whole notion of 'utterance'. Utterance, in *The Stone Virgins* goes beyond the narrow sense of the word, which denotes speech, to women's assertion of their subject positions, as women are represented as agents of their own recovery.

The novel also features the military women in contrast to the non-military women and their responses and reactions to both the military and non-military men in Kezi. The military women are shown as a force to reckon with, as a new breed of women who require a new kind of language to define them and a new perception of women. Whilst they are also shown to adopt silence, their silence is an empowering kind of silence which challenges the non-military men of Kezi into silence. Vera's military women belong to the interim but fulfil Nfah-Abbenyi's contention that "African women need to claim an 'identity politics' that [not only] foregrounds their ability to fluctuate between the margin and the center, wherever these margins and centers might be, but will also enable them to move beyond constructed and constituting margins and centers, creating their own margins and centers along the way" (1997: 32). Vera's contribution to post-colonial feminism in Zimbabwean literature is invaluable as it has helped to create new spaces and locations for women (her military women), who take the "margins to the center and vice versa" (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997: 32). In these women, Vera is creating a possibility (what could be) and not reflecting actuality. The military women, as discussed in greater depth in Chapter Three, place themselves in focus at Thandabantu Store (the centre of Kezi society) while relegating the non-military men to the periphery. Thus, by shifting the margins and the centres in her fiction, Vera subverts the dominant political, cultural and social conceptions of gender both at the centre and at the periphery.

This study has attempted to show how utterance is important for purposes of healing women during and after the liberation struggle in Zimbabwe, especially considering the fact that the male subject/female object dichotomy has had adverse effects on the status of women in post-independence Zimbabwe. Brendt contends that “many female guerrillas who held command during the Second Chimurenga, and were accepted by most of their male comrades were expected to return to a life of devotion, silence and subordination after independence” (2005: 22). As a result, the female freedom fighters became the outsiders of a society that was still pre-dominantly patriarchal, making it clear that women were mobilized during the war for instrumental reasons rather than for their own liberation. Many non-military women also suffered untold violations, both physical and psychological during and after the war, but it is generally regarded as taboo for them to speak out about these violations in real life. Thus, a study of their empowerment through utterance in Vera’s fictional works which breaks these taboos is very important in shifting centres to margins and margins to centres. Gaidzanwa asserts that

[a]mong women, there is a potential for new ways of organizing for change as well as theorizing new ways of organizing just and democratic societies which are not premised on investing in patriarchy. All these developments need to be harnessed in a theoretically creative manner with the realization that meaningful changes do not normally occur over short periods but have to be consolidated over time through consistent and incisive action. (1992b: 123)

It is with the realization that during her lifetime Vera played an important part in exposing unjust patriarchal attitudes and behaviours in the Zimbabwean society that my study, positioned in relation to existing critical works on her novels, shows how both writers and critics can face the situation with openness and honesty stemming from the violated women’s utterance. Vera’s own utterance in her novels, of the taboo rape and incest subjects in Zimbabwean society as well as the Matebeleland massacres, is also an important contribution to development that my study has sought to explore, thus, giving it the critical appraisal that it deserves.

The “theoretically creative manner” that Gaidzanwa (1992b: 123) alludes to in her suggestions of the possible ways in which women can organize themselves for change of their situations is also evident in the narrative techniques that Vera employs in presenting silence and women’s resistance to being silenced. All three chapters of my study devote space to an analysis of Vera’s narrative techniques and the way they serve the subject matter in each novel. In brief, one of her narrative techniques that seeks to expose the conflict and fragmentation of her characters is exploring their inner consciousness and giving the reader privileged access to their thoughts or, as in Mazvita’s case, what they avoid. In this way, Vera exposes the ‘silent speech’ of these women who, even though publicly voiceless, are given a fictional platform to expose their violations. Another striking narrative technique that Vera uses is repetition in order to emphasize the gravity of the violations faced by her women characters. Vera keeps returning to the scene of the rape of Mazvita in *Without a Name*, Nonceba in *The Stone Virgins* and Zhizha, a child raped by her own father in *Under the Tongue* (a novel not analyzed in this study which focuses on incest in the context of the liberation struggle).

The temporal and spatial settings of Vera’s novels are also significant in the history of Zimbabwe. Muponde and Taruvinga note that:

[t]he consistent quest for the landmarks of Zimbabwean history and iconography to redefine its memory, its sense of place, underpins much of Vera’s work. The years 1896-97 (*Nehanda*), 1977 (*Without a Name*), 1979 (*Under the Tongue*), 1946 (*Butterfly Burning*) and 1980-85 (*The Stone Virgins*) recall not the historian’s emphasis on dates, facts and occurrences, but certain imaginative and spiritual journeys of colonized and oppressed people. These dates mark sites for metamorphosis and resurrection....The fact that her fiction is rooted in critical and decisive moments of Zimbabwean history reveals the value of an alternative psycho-social signage by which herstory (sic) of the nation may be told. (2002: xi)

As Muponde and Taruvinga note, the time in which Vera’s novels are set is important and her rural settings are also important as this study has argued in depth. The rural populace is usually relegated to the periphery but Vera puts them at the centres of her narratives as she “often turns to the 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" (Lewis, 2005: 2).

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Nehanda*

This chapter's main focus is on how Vera's narrative approaches overcome the past silencing of women by patriarchy and colonialism in contexts of violence. The chapter considers Vera's revisioning of history in an in-depth analysis of *Nehanda* (1993), in relation to settler accounts of the First Chimurenga and the official nationalist history of the same event. *Nehanda*, which is Vera's debut novel, is based on and inspired by Nehanda, the militant spirit-medium (*mhondoro*) who was a key figure in the revolt of 1896–7 (the First Chimurenga) against colonial occupation of the Central and Western parts of the present-day Zimbabwe. I intend to probe the roles of the two great spirit-mediums, Nehanda and Kaguvi, in the Shona Revolt against colonial rule and to examine how Vera's representation of them rivals the official historical representation. Among the Shona people of the Zezuru tribe, Nehanda was considered to be one of the two most important spirit mediums and her influence extended throughout the Central and Western parts of Mashonaland. According to Chiwome, history speculates that the original Nehanda might have lived in the fifteenth century (2002: 180) but other historians who have discussed this myth say that she was the nineteenth century Nehanda. Charwe, the woman who became the medium for the spirit of Nehanda, first female ancestor of the Shona, is believed to have achieved power over the land through ritual incest with her brother Nebedza, at the instructions of her father Mutota. This incestuous act enabled Nebedza to inherit his father's position as head of the lineage (Brendt, 2005). Nehanda was believed to possess powers of making rain, giving and taking life and directing the course of wars through her link with the ancestors.

For this study it is very significant that Vera's debut novel was inspired by a woman spirit-medium who was a major leader (as mouthpiece of the ancestral spirits of the Shona people) in Zimbabwe's first uprising against colonial rule. Nehanda (Charwe) actually inspired the Shona people to fight for their land, and in the Second Chimurenga the symbol of Nehanda was important for the freedom fighters in their resistance to colonialism. In *Nehanda*, Vera bestows authority in the eponymous protagonist Nehanda,

contrary to the official historical record which portrays Kaguvi<sup>1</sup> as the leading spirit medium of the First Chimurenga. According to Ranger, the medium was more than a senior spirit medium. He asserts:

The 'Kagubi' medium clearly possessed striking gifts of personality and prophecy; he also gained great prestige through his close association with the Mwari cult, and may...have been regarded in addition as the vehicle of a new manifestation of the god-head; at any rate he emerged in 1896 as the ...layer-down of new law; the guarantor of invulnerability; the bringer, almost, of a new dispensation. Over and above the paramounts effective in their own area; over and above the complex inter-relations of the Nehanda with the Chaminuka hierarchy and both with the Mwari cult; the figure of the Kagubi medium provided coherence to the Shona rising. (1967: 217)

Wilson-Tagoe argues that

[t]he centrality that Vera's novel gives to Nehanda and her woman-centred world is an ideological choice that invites ironic parallels with histories like Terence Ranger's *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia* (1967) and Laurence Vambe's *An Ill-fated People* (1972). To explore Vera's *Nehanda* in relation to these texts is to recognize how the novel can engage with the past in radical ways and envision new possibilities in the present and future. (2002: 161)

According to Wilson-Tagoe, both Ranger and Lawrence Vambe privilege the male medium, Kaguvi, as the most influential in shaping the nature and course of the Shona rebellion of 1896. This they do in accordance with their political and analytical thrust as male critics (2002: 161). Vera, proposes, on the other hand, that "it took Nehanda in her spirit-mediumship, it took her effort and the ancestral world to persuade the people to resist the settlement" (Hunter, 1998: 76).

In expanding the arguments of critics like Wilson-Tagoe that Vera is revisioning history by bringing in a gendered view of what happened during the First Chimurenga, my main focus is on what Vera does with her women characters, especially Vera's giving us an account of Nehanda's birth and early life. Finally in this chapter, I will consider

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<sup>1</sup> Kaguvi is spelt as Kagubi, in Ranger (1967); Kaguvi is the Shona version while Ranger's spelling is based on the Ndebele use of 'bi' to represent the Shona 'vi'. In this study I have used Vera's Shona version.

how Vera's poetic and lyrical style as well as the symbolic level of meaning that she creates complements her view of the role of women.

*Nehanda* gives an account of the pre-colonial and colonial Zimbabwean society and the First Chimurenga in a non-linear style and basically from a female perspective. Much of the narrative is told through the dreams and consciousness of the women characters. The novel depicts the birth and death of Nehanda, its eponymous heroine, and the role she played as a spirit medium during the First Chimurenga. Nehanda's birth in the novel is a special event and Vera's focus on it enables her to bring out the important role played by the other women characters. Nehanda is portrayed as the link between the Shona people and their ancestors and her birth is said to have been facilitated by the ancestors. As an adult, Nehanda is gifted with the powers of prophecy and can communicate with the ancestors over the welfare of her people. As a result, she is able to initiate and lead the uprising against the white colonizers. Throughout the text, Nehanda is in direct contact with the ancestors while the great male spirit medium, Kaguvi, interprets and then passes on to the people the messages that are given by the ancestors through Nehanda. Nehanda encourages her people to fight for their land and prophesizes that although there will be much bloodshed, her people will be victorious in the end. After evading the settlers for a long time, first Kaguvi then Nehanda surrender themselves to their pursuers for the sake of their people. In the actual sequence of historical events Nehanda and Kaguvi were executed, but in the narrative Nehanda is portrayed as having surpassed the moment of her hanging because she had already departed for the land of her ancestors. However, before she departs, Nehanda tells the people that her death is necessary for the birth of the new nation.

Vera challenges the notion of history as a fixed and unchangeable phenomenon in *Nehanda*. The novel boldly challenges and questions the official settler accounts of history as well as the nationalist history of Zimbabwe by downplaying the role of men whilst emphasizing the important role that women played in the resistance to colonial rule. In the twentieth century, nationalist historiography portrays Nehanda as a mere symbol of resistance through its songs and poems, hardly acknowledging her as a woman

who played an active role by inspiring the Shona people to revolt against colonial rule in the late nineteenth century. It also reduces her to a maternal figure as will be argued later in the chapter. In commenting on Nehanda's recent role, Chiwome asserts that "[t]he bravery and resilience of Nehanda inspired the second war against colonialism between 1964 and 1979 in which mediums actively supported the war in fulfilment of Nehanda's prophecy" (2002: 180).

Ranger, a prominent historian, expresses initial surprise at how Vera distorts the official history of Zimbabwe by making up her own version of history. He points out that in the novel *Nehanda* is born, grows into an old woman and dies, all in the six years of colonial invasion, from 1890-1896 (2002: 203). Ranger wrote his nation-building history many years before Vera wrote her novel, and he is one of the 'nationalist historians' that Vera challenges in her novel, especially the views that he held then. Being one of the historians that Vera was revisioning, Ranger has come around to accept her point of view and to recognize that "*Nehanda* was an extraordinary feat of imagination. Vera had set out to imagine from the ground up and from the sky down what it would mean for a girl to make herself open to the ancestors so as to re-establish communication between them and the living" (2002: 203). He accepts that what Vera does in her debut novel is very important because it challenges the notion that history is fixed and unchangeable. Vera asserts that "[h]istory has never been fixed; if anything each retelling is influenced by the time in which it is told and the purpose for which the history is being retold" (Hunter, 1998: 79). Thus for the purposes of celebrating the empowerment of women, Vera depicts her women characters as liberated and decisive. Ranger not only acknowledges that "women have been victims of 'real' history but also how Vera has explored the ways in which they have been abused by the secrets and silence of patriarchal 'tradition'" (Muponde and Taruvinga, 2002: xvi). In 'real' history, women's voices were largely mediated by men, but Vera celebrates their ability to speak for themselves and also depicts them as agents of their own lives. Wilson-Tagoe hails Vera's achievement by asserting that "in *Nehanda* Vera places her writing beyond accepted margins by creating a narrative that derives its metaphysical source and performative form from the oral

tradition and at the same time works powerfully as a novel to suggest new interpretations of history” (2002: 162).

A brief background to the social system of the Shona communities will clarify what Vera is doing in her novel in relation to official history and to social practices in pre-colonial times. The Shona communities were patriarchally organized even before the onset of European colonization and the social status of the Shona women was much lower than that of their male counterparts. The status of a woman, like her voice in the public sphere, was mediated by men (Schmidt, 1992). It was mainly determined by her relationship to the men in her life, particularly her husband and his relatives as well as her father and her brothers. Brendt concurs that the Shona people were a patrilineally and patrilocally organized people and the social status of their women was significantly lower than that of their male counterparts (2005: 10-11). In this social system where power was mainly concentrated in the male figures, some women also helped to perpetuate the male-dominated system. These were rare exceptions of women who exerted authority over other women (the oppression of women by other women), in ways that advantaged them and the patriarchal system as a whole. Gaidzanwa, who considers Nehanda the spirit-medium as a representative of women, argues that “Nehanda’s involvement in the anti-colonial struggles is an indication of spaces which existed for women in the pre-colonial Shona society in the religious-political realm” (1992b: 107). Despite their structurally subordinate positions in society, some Shona women attained positions of significant prestige and influence through their political or religious influence. These women were even able to attain the prestigious position of spirit-medium, although it was not very common for women to be acknowledged as such. In other words, spirit-possession enabled women to attain an unusual degree of status and allowed them to exercise authority in and outside the ritual context (Schmidt, 1992). In an interview with Eva Hunter, Vera points out that “In Nehanda’s time anybody who had been chosen by the ancestors could emerge as a leader; she [Nehanda] was a leader of the first resistance against the Europeans” (Hunter, 1998: 78). According to David Beach, a prominent historian, “[d]uring periods of possession by the spirit, the *svikiro* [Shona: synonymous with *mhondoro*] was regarded as speaking with the voice and personality of the original

Nehanda and not her own....one medium, Charwe, was responsible for the organization of resistance to the government of the British South Africa Company and the settlers in the Mazowe valley, and in particular for the killing of H. Pollard, *Kunyaira* [a derogatory name for Pollard], the oppressive native Commissioner of the area” (1998: 27). According to the colonial version of history, Nehanda (Charwe) was executed after being convicted of killing the native Commissioner. The closest that Vera comes to acknowledging this event is in the narration of the death of Mr Smith, who after having gone “missing for two days ... is found tied to a fig tree in the middle of the forest” (1993: 76).<sup>2</sup> After Nehanda’s death, the spirit that the medium embodied continued to possess other mediums, largely in the north of the country (Beach 1998).

Vera’s *Nehanda* clearly rivals nationalist and white settler accounts of the history of Zimbabwe. In other words, Vera’s novel is a fictional account born out of the history of Zimbabwe, but not faithful in terms of detail to the colonial or national historical record. Vera deliberately subverts the male dominated version of the history of Zimbabwe by placing her women characters at the centre of her narrative, and therefore, at the centre of the Shona revolt against colonial rule. Vera has thus been hailed by critics such as Wilson-Tagoe who argues that, “Vera’s novels are unique in the ways they create narratives out of history rather than narratives of history” (2002: 160). It is clear that in her novel, Vera writes about a historical period in Zimbabwe with which readers will be familiar and therefore recognize her narrative as an ‘inaccurate’ or revisioned account of that history. When Vera claims that in *Nehanda* she was exploring a mythical consciousness, she is quick to clarify that she does not use myth as an opposite to history. She asserts that “it is history, told in an oral tradition. It is history being reinvented, which is what our mythical consciousness allows us to do....my writing of that novel was part of that activity of re-inventing the history for my current purpose and place, and in that way it is a contemporary novel which follows our own tradition of legend-making” (Hunter, 1998: 79). Writing through an imagined mythical consciousness enables Vera to reinvent and surpass the colonial facts of what is believed to have happened. Quoting Coetzee, Daymond argues that:

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<sup>2</sup> All further references to the novel will be given with the page number only.

Vera's writing ...would seem to 'rival' history in that her desire to get beyond the colonial 'facts' leads her to use another mode of thinking ... [and to produce a] ... "novel that operates in terms of its own procedures and issues in its own conclusions [which are not] ...checkable by history". (2004: 142)

In an interview with Eva Hunter, Vera reveals that when she started writing *Nehanda*, she

wanted to write beyond the photograph [of Nehanda in captivity]...that frozen image, beyond the date, beyond the fact of her dying. If anything, in my book she doesn't die, she departs. The people have never really believed that she was killed, though the records do state that she was hanged, because they are relating to her from another way of understanding which is a mythical consciousness of history, of understanding events, of understanding what the land means, of understanding what birth, what time itself, what history means. So that history as it is understood or suggested by these details I have outlined, of the photograph, of the dates...is negated in this other consciousness of feeling, of touching and of the body. Just how she feels within herself, even the voice, her speech, what she speaks, is something else. (1998: 77)

As in all her novels, Vera reveals how in *Nehanda* she started with a visual image of Nehanda in captivity and then created a story based on this visual image. Daymond also points out that Vera uses "no dates, no place names, very few character names and almost none of the signals by which a novelist usually enables readers to orient themselves in relation to the world of the narrative" (2004: 141). Wilson-Tagoe further contends that this is because, "their [Vera's novels] historicizing effect derives from their fluid re-invention of past memories around the general history of colonialism and the liberation struggle" (2002: 162). It is significant therefore that Vera inserted into history a female voice thereby opening up spaces in which the female agency and presence can shape history (Vambe, 2002).

In *Nehanda*, Vera's protagonist and most of her other characters are rural women who play a central role in the day to day life as well as in the rituals of the Shona community. The male characters are kept in the background and are over-shadowed by the women characters in Vera's narrative, which is contrary to the assumptions of official nationalist history. In *Nehanda*, Kaguvi only takes charge when Nehanda has left the

scene. The narrator says that “when she [Nehanda] has left, the horn-blower emerges again out of the crowd. His name is Kaguvi” (67). Kaguvi is humble and beseeching before the people who are the only ones with the power to grant him authority over their future. Thus, Vera conceives Kaguvi’s power as coming from the people, who are but mortal beings, whereas Nehanda’s power is bestowed on her by the gods. Taking a more masculinist view of events, Lawrence Vambe (a Zimbabwean journalist from the late 1940s), while acknowledging that Nehanda was one of the most senior spirit mediums together with Kaguvi, still asserts that “Nehanda has always been a woman, and affectionately called *ambuya*, grandmother, by all her Zezuru adherents in Central Mashonaland...” (1972: 118). Lawrence Vambe further claims that

Kaguvi, being the main leader of the Shona rising, was active practically throughout the length and breadth of Mashonaland and was also the main link between the Shona and the Ndebele planners of the rebellion. He was very well-equipped for this immensely responsible role. Being something of a cosmopolitan citizen in the Shona society of that day, he wielded unique influence...He was therefore the most obvious choice when the men who shaped Shona national policy in these momentous times looked around for the man best suited to meet the challenges of the coming war. (1972: 118)

In relation to what Vera does in her novel, Maurice Vambe (a contemporary scholar) acknowledges that she successfully interrogates both the colonial and Shona patriarchal systems by making Kaguvi subordinate to the spiritual powers of Nehanda (2002: 132). He asserts that “Implied here, is a reversal of political roles in which women take on new positive initiatives for fighting colonization and Shona patriarchy. The new role that women take in *Nehanda* interrogates the images of African women in male-centred African nationalist discourse as either victims or simply biological mothers” (2002: 132-133).

My argument in this chapter is that when Vera gives Nehanda the authority to speak as a spirit-medium to her people conveying what the ancestors ask her to say, Vera subverts not only the official version of colonial history which claims that it was Kaguvi who played that role, but also the nationalist notion of Nehanda as a maternal figure.

Several critics concur with Vera who says that nationalist discourse is downplaying the actuality and role of Nehanda in the liberation struggle by assigning her maternal images. Gaidzanwa points out that “symbolically, the re-domestication of women was effected by the renaming of the largest maternity hospital after Nehanda Nyakasikana, the militant spirit medium who was executed by the colonial regime for her role in the resistance to colonization” (1992b: 116). This prominent Zimbabwean woman sociologist argues that this is deplorable especially considering that, after ZANLA (the armed wing of ZANU PF) had invoked Nehanda as a fighter during the liberation struggle, it, as the ruling party, was so prompt in its conversion of Nehanda from a political to a maternal figure (1992b: 117). Vera says she felt that Nehanda “had been disempowered in the sense that she had become an image and the actuality of her life had vanished” (Hunter, 1998: 78). Chiwome also argues that the literature about Nehanda is part of the process of national symbol-creation on which the new nation state delicately balances (2002: 180). Vera bemoans how Nehanda is now only celebrated as a symbol at the expense of her actual being and argues that “Nehanda was used to justify the struggle of the second phase of the chimurenga [from around 1964 to 1979], and yet what emerged was another narrative that became patriarchal, even though it was feminized by the Nehanda figure who epitomized the spiritual struggle. But that struggle had become a grand narrative of heroism” (Hunter, 1998: 79). Christiansen, who sees a positive opportunity for Vera in Nehanda being only an icon rather than an agent, argues that “Vera’s narrative of Nehanda subverts a male dominated version of Zimbabwean nationalism and replaces it with a feminist nationalism, and ... it can do so because Nehanda is already an established icon in Zimbabwean nationalism” (2005: 205). Contrary to my argument that Nehanda’s iconic status obliterates her material role in the First Chimurenga, Christiansen’s argument is that Vera is able to celebrate Nehanda in her actuality alongside her role as a spirit-medium because of her iconic status. Christiansen is concerned with the spiritual history of Zimbabwe and argues that Mugabe now has usurped the role of the spirit-medium. Brendt however, points out that “The mythical figure of Nehanda and, especially her incarnation in Charwe during the first chimurenga, [that] has represented a national symbol of independence and strength, rather than the power and possibilities of women in general” (2005: 15).

In addition, in the present-day Zimbabwean political discourse, women feature as symbols of motherhood and rarely as active and self-defining beings who also played an active role in the liberation struggle. The current Vice President of Zimbabwe, Joyce Mujuru, an ex-combatant freedom fighter in the liberation struggle with well-documented war credentials, is referred to as “Amai Mujuru” (*Amai* meaning Mother), while some male politicians of dubious war credentials are referred to as “Comrades” (those who fought in the liberation struggle). This shows the extent to which nationalist discourse still embraces women as symbols of motherhood dating back to the days of Nehanda and fails to acknowledge their active role in the liberation struggle and subsequently in nation-building.

Another question that Vera grapples with is whether Nehanda, as a spirit medium who happens to be female, can ultimately represent the empowerment of women in general when she has entered the patriarchal domain of spirit possession. Apart from speaking on behalf of other women, can Nehanda still speak for herself as an individual, since her voice has become a communal voice? The established critical claim is that Vera’s writing about Nehanda in the way she does empowers women generally. My argument is that other women cannot simply claim authority as women on the basis of the patriarchal authority granted Nehanda as a spirit-medium. Rather, it is the central role that Vera gives to her other women characters that empowers them, and not only the authority she has bestowed on Nehanda. Samuelson observes that “the young Nehanda is also turned into a speechless vessel, transmitting the voices of ancestors” and also notes “the mother’s grief at losing her daughter to them” (2002a: 15) as she laments that her daughter “carries heavy words of silence she can no longer bear” (15). In the end the mother asserts that “...my daughter is no longer my daughter” (15).

As I have pointed out, while Ranger tackles colonial history and rewrites it into nationalist history he emphasizes Kaguvi’s leadership as having been prophetic and instrumental in the First Chimurenga, and renders Nehanda’s contribution peripheral. According to Wilson-Tagoe:

For Ranger, Kagubi's style of leadership was instrumental in transforming 'the appeal of the religious systems into something more radical and revolutionary;... a prophetic leadership operating over and above the restrictions implied by hierarchic order and links with the past'. (2002: 161-162)

With regard to Nehanda's iconic status, Christiansen argues that "Nehanda is in the novel described as a liminal figure who connects her people with the spiritual reality of their ancestors. [The novel] describes how Nehanda possesses a dead and a living part. Her dead part is seeing and has knowledge of the history of her nation" (2005: 205). I think there is a connection between the peripheral role given to Nehanda in the chronicle of the First Chimurenga, by nationalist historians, and her being given an iconic status in the Second Chimurenga by the new kind of nationalism prevailing then. In Vera's narrative we are told that Nehanda is possessed by the spirit of the departed and that "she has aged dramatically, as though overnight she has inherited the wisdom of all her departed" and that "at these signs the crowd continues to sing as though to teach her the meaning in her voice, encouraging her to speak..." (60). Nehanda, in calling for the Africans to drive out the stranger by force, encourages her people to fight and also prophesizes the bloodshed involved in the process. She proclaims that "together with our spears and our hard work we must send the enemy out of our midst...I am among you. I carry the message of retribution. The land must be cleansed with your blood. You must fight for what belongs to us, and for your departed" (61). Nehanda's words show that women were also part of the actual struggle and were not there just as servants cooking for their male freedom fighters. Christiansen asserts that "her [Nehanda's] living part will die, but this death is represented as the stepping-stone for the return of Nehanda as a stronger and more powerful spirit of war, and in this second coming the nation gains hope" (2005: 205). Thus, while Nehanda dies in actuality, her iconic status lives on, inspires the guerillas in the Second Chimurenga and is then misconstrued into a patriarchal narrative. Fortunately Vera is able to manipulate that same iconic status into a feminist nationalism.

In the narrative, Vera invents a ritual in which the people kneel down before Nehanda and listen to her "alluring" voice of prophecy. In the gesture of kneeling, men

seem to have surrendered their power to Nehanda, the *mhondoro* who is endowed with a “roaring” and a “comforting” voice of prophecy:

Nehanda’s trembling voice reaches them as though coming from some distant past, some sacred territory in their imaginings. It is an alluring voice, undulating, carrying the current of a roar that reminds them of who they have been in the past, but it is also the comforting voice of a woman, of their mothers whom they trust. Even the men stop dancing and kneel around Nehanda, and the women in the outer circle cast protective shadows over the bending bodies of the women. (62)

This is contrary to Mr Smith and Browning’s perceptions of Nehanda in the narrative, which are actually representative of the general attitudes of the settlers towards black women. Mr Smith asks “Is it possible Nehanda has some real sway over these people?” and Mr Browning replies that he doubts that the natives would listen to an old woman like Nehanda and that she cannot tell them anything. He argues that African society has no respect for women, whom they treat like children. He claims that “a woman has nothing to say in the life of the natives. Nothing at all” (75). Vera here shows how the white settlers fail to perceive Nehanda as a *mhondoro* and instead they view her as a mere female figure. Gaidzanwa sets out what the settlers could not understand: “Nehanda was not a maternal symbol and as the medium of a powerful spirit, her spiritual-political identity overshadowed her identity as a woman” (1992b: 107). The settler administrators, who had come from Victorian England where the control of women through the manipulation of the idea of feminine propriety was advanced, were taken by surprise by the unexpected role that Nehanda played in the Shona people’s resistance to colonial rule. They tried to trivialize Nehanda’s role by saying that she was a witch who had cast some kind of spell over the men of her nation, hence her bizarre behaviour and men’s collaboration with her (Gaidzanwa 1992b). Thus, Nehanda is positioned in the text against two factors that occluded women, that is, the official nationalist historical record and the settler accounts of the history of Zimbabwe. In addition, Vera is also working through a minefield of contradictions in order to construct her Nehanda as both a woman and (the medium of) a powerful spirit, that is, Nehanda is simultaneously portrayed as a gendered figure and a genderless *mhondoro*.

Vera's presentation of Nehanda as a real person and as a spirit-medium, which conveys Nehanda's affinity with the ancestors, is evident throughout the narrative where Nehanda's body and nature fuse. The opening chapter associates nature with Nehanda's body and is an unusual opening of a seemingly historical novel. Her body is indistinguishable from the natural world and this fusion is one of the ways in which Nehanda's voice becomes the voice of the departed. The affinity between Nehanda and the natural world is strong and her people respect it. This represents how close the Shona people were to the land and how in pre-colonial Zimbabwe they viewed themselves as custodians of the land for their ancestors. Vera's emphasis challenges the contemporary notion of land as individual property and also subtly critiques the current land invasions, dubbed the Third Chimurenga.

The novel's opening sentences tell us that "ants pull carcasses into a hole and she is not surprised...Nehanda carries a bag of words in a pouch that lies tied around her waist. She wears some along her arms. Words and bones. Words fall into dreaming, into night. She hears the bones fall in the silence ... Nehanda waits in silence" (1). One only realizes at the end of the narrative (where Vera narrates Nehanda's death but at the same time depicts it as the promise made by Nehanda about the future struggle), that the opening chapter is the climax leading to Nehanda's death where she "gasps as she feels another part of her depart...", for the land of the ancestors, before the white colonists persecute and kill her (2). Again we are told that "Nehanda carries her bag of words in a pouch that lies tied around her waist... Words are securely tied around her waist" (2). This is like a refrain in the narrative which Vera uses to emphasize that Nehanda is not the typical, traditionally silenced woman, but a spirit-medium who bears important words of prophecy for the whole nation. Even when she waits in silence with a parched throat (1) in the opening scene, which is a narration of her imminent death, Nehanda is in control of herself. Thus, the reading of her dual voice is complex.

In view of my argument that Vera's re-visioning of official historical facts concerning Nehanda as a spirit-medium would not empower other women in general as Nehanda assumed a communal prophetic voice, it is important to analyze how Vera also

gives prominence to her other women characters. First, she gives them the privilege of attending to the birth of the baby who later becomes the great spirit-medium of Nehanda. The narrative gives an account of Nehanda's birth and how the women "*wove a circle of strength* around the central hearth..." and "*asserted their strength* through their calm postures, waiting" (4, emphasis mine). One critic has argued that while it is true that some old women were midwives, they would not generally gather in the hut in the numbers that Vera suggests (Chiwome, 2002: 184). It is important however to note that Vera is not specifically portraying the Shona cultural practices as they are known but rather as she imagines them for her purposes, something which her use of mythical consciousness allows her to do. In the narrative we are told that "the women were here to welcome the child. Each of them had already met the child in dreams which they could not recall" (6). One can already infer that the baby will not be an ordinary child, as her birth has been foretold to the midwives in their dreams (which are in fact prophetic), prior to her delivery.

It is apparent that Vera deliberately makes use of rural women as her protagonists thereby imagining them as an empowered rather than as a marginalized group. The women who are midwives at Nehanda's birth are forerunners to the prophecies of the spirit-medium, Nehanda, concerning the Shona people's resistance to colonial rule. Another way in which Vera re-positions her women characters in the narrative is by giving them the privilege of narrating events long before the male characters have an opportunity to narrate the same events. Ibwe, the chief's spokesman narrates for the people the encounter he had with the settlers who were mining gold on sacred ground long after the women have hinted at this encounter through the narration of the trader woman's dream which is told while they are helping Nehanda's mother to deliver her baby safely. These women foretell the events that are going to take place in future through the narration of their dreams, prior to Nehanda's prophecies. For example, the trader woman tells the others of the coming of the white settlers with unknown customs and their desecration of the land. The trader woman narrates how in her dream, the stranger had decided to stay among them and how he had taken many cattle away from the indigenous people and then moved them into the barren part of the land where crops

would not grow. As a result of the dream's allusion to future events, even before Nehanda's birth, Vera makes this group of women forerunners to Nehanda's historic proclamations of future events. Thus, the women's dreams serve to confirm the truth of Nehanda's prophecies.

In the birth of Nehanda, it is not just Vera giving voice to the silenced women, rather it is "[t]he departed [who] had come to deliver a gift to the living, to shape the birth of voices, to grant the safe passage of the unborn" (3). When Nehanda is born, she does not cry for a day, but when she starts crying, no one can silence her. This not only foreshadows her prophetic powers and the loss of her individual voice as she assumes a communal voice, but also signals the fact that, traditionally, a girl child is silenced from birth. In the narrative we are told that "[t]he child came silently into the darkness and warmth of the hut...after she had been born she did not cry for a day..." (12). Nehanda's silence is echoed in Boyce Davies's assertion that many women who have spoken incessantly and have not been heard often choose to operate from silence which may then speak more eloquently. Boyce Davies argues that "within the terms of post-modern discourse...silence can be taken as a text of speech" (1995: 7). There is a strange connection in Vera's narrative between silence and speech: "afterwards, she [Nehanda] cried and the women sang her back to sleep, willing a silence onto her. She defied them with her tiny speech-seeking voice and cried all day and all night until the mother fell asleep" (12). Nehanda's silence at birth and her subsequent speech can be taken to suggest that women may have been silent or silenced for a long time by patriarchy and colonialism, but since they have found their voice, no one can silence them any more. Thus, Nehanda's silence at the beginning and end of the novel can be considered as eloquent under her circumstances.

Vera's women are endowed with speech in the narrative. This is especially significant in light of the fact that literary works have a great potential to expose contradictions within constructions of gender and oppressive gender relations in the social context they represent. Although in real life women experience oppression in multiple ways, in Vera's narrative, they are shown to achieve subject positions that

further their active role in the making of the history of Zimbabwe. By dreaming dreams that have significance for the future of the nation, women assume the role of nation-builders instead of their historically affirmed passive maternal roles. Because their dreams are prophetic and not logically verifiable, Vera's women assume the authority to foretell the destiny of the nation in the narrative. The importance of Vera's narrative exploring the women's dreams is that it is able to celebrate not only the physical and outward lives of her women characters, but also their inner, mental lives and experiences, their struggles and triumphs.

All four midwives in the birth hut are also endowed with positive physical qualities. We are told that the first woman was firm-limbed with long arms covered in thick bangles of engraved wood and ivory and belonged to the village only through marriage. The second woman is said to be very industrious and "the day's waiting was perhaps more difficult for her than for the others because for her it was unnatural to sit still" (5). The third woman is a trader who is widely travelled and therefore "knew where the best markets were, and how people lived in far-flung villages" (5). Vatete (aunt) is said to be the "most important of the human presences in the room" and yet "she was as silent as the shadow which climbed the wall behind her back" and "her brow was deeply furrowed; and wrinkled pouches, containing many memories, hung below her eyes....She had tucked some of her secrets into the folds of skin around her knees and ankles, and around her elbows. Her arms were surprisingly strong" (5). Vera's description of Vatete suggests that as a woman she has no language with which to express her wisdom. Through Vatete, Vera is able not only to represent how women suffer from their induced silence and loss of language, but also how the women struggle to find words with which to speak themselves out of their silence (Samuelson, 2002). In narrating to Nehanda how the settlers first came and desecrated the land, Vatete asks, "where would we find the mouth with which to tell what we had to tell? ...What mouth can carry a sight such as that?" (23). Hence, through these women Vera is able to begin to explore the theme of the women's search for a language and voice with which to utter their experiences of violation and the desecration of the land, a theme which continues in her later novels.

Besides taking leading roles in their daily social lives, having prophetic dreams and being used to narrate events, the women also take up arms in the war in the hills alongside the men. We are told that “an egg-shaped [boulder] is propelled by three women, one pushing the top while the others use a log as a lever” (86). By describing the women in action in one of the battles, Vera shows that women were also actively involved in the First Chimurenga as much as they were involved in the Second War of Liberation. In fact, everyone is involved in the war according to Vera’s version of the First Chimurenga in *Nehanda*: “the small boys and girls throw fist-sized rocks, while the men and the women hurl boulders as large as a person’s head” (87). Vera also portrays one of the battles as having been victorious for the blacks, contrary to historical records. According to the narrative, “in the morning, a tally shows that at least fourteen men have been killed, and eleven rifles captured. Some other men have undoubtedly been carried away....None of the [black] people has been injured” (87). This is a deliberate contrast to the official history of the times, which depicts the blacks only as having suffered heavy losses.

Other than actively participating in the war, women also perform judicial duties. Vatete, a senior village woman and midwife, is sometimes invited to the *dare*, the village fireplace, where she is sometimes an arbitrator in disputes of the village, especially those concerning women. Traditionally and historically, the *dare* was a closely-guarded male sphere of convergence and it was unheard of for a woman to be allowed to invade it. Thus, this is also Vera’s way of pulling down the patriarchal barricades in her re-visioning of historical and traditional events and beliefs.

When imagining most of the rituals that the Shona people carry out in pre-colonial and colonial Zimbabwe, Vera deliberately departs from their social practices in order to revision history. It should be apparent from the outset that Vera is not specifically replicating the Shona cultural-religious practices but is imagining how these rites may have taken place. Wilson-Tagoe argues that

[c]onstructed in the fluid immediacy of recounted stories, [*Nehanda*] integrates the past into a living imagined reality, giving itself the leeway to enlarge the specific into wider issues beyond its contexts, to suggest not only how things were but how they could be. (2002: 160-161)

In the scene of *Nehanda*'s birth, Vera's depiction of the first woman does not fit in with the customs of the Shona people that she is portraying. She says that the first woman "belonged to the village only through marriage, an event that had taken place three years previously" (4). It is highly unlikely that a "stranger" would be entrusted with midwifery duties only three years after joining the village through marriage. Vera seems to be suggesting in *Nehanda* that this beginning of ethnic mixing, or the mingling of different cultural practices, as exemplified by the accommodation of the trader woman in her marital village, could be the beginning of the process of healing from wounds perpetrated during the wars and their aftermath. Vera, who grew up in the Ndebele community, rather than being ignorant of the Shona customs, seems to be suggesting that women, no matter what ethnic group they come from, can accompany each other in their journey to emancipation from the yoke of patriarchy. The implication of what Vera does here is that her narrative opens up spaces in which people cease to regard themselves as Ndebele or Shona in their common cause of seeking the means with which to heal the wounds inflicted on them during the war and the 'peacetime' atrocities.

The trader woman is said to be a widow who has a circle of huts, and land to plant her crops. Vera portrays this woman as empowered although she does not have a husband. Yet in actual life in Zimbabwe, women used to get the right to use land only through their connections to men and the moment these ties were broken, women lost possession of their land. Gaidzanwa argues, however, that in communal areas, women only get access to rights to use land as wives of specific men and the survival of those women is endangered as soon as their relationship with specific men is terminated by death, divorce or other events (1992b: 120). Vera, thus, reverses the subordination of women and empowers them by rendering the male figure absent (deceased). The widowed woman was so liberated that "[s]he had no qualms about sitting on a stool like a

man” (5). This implies that the woman had been liberated from the chains of patriarchy by the death of her husband.

The symbolic language used in relation to Nehanda is another aspect of Vera’s strategy in creating her focus on women. Vatete’s allegory about the strangers who abducted a little girl and placed her in a goatskin bag is important in its figurative meaning and can be interpreted in two complementary ways. Firstly, it can be viewed as symbolizing that the white settlers took over the country by force. The strangers would then symbolize the colonizers and the captured girl represents Zimbabwe. The chewing of the goatskin alludes to an act of breaking free, therefore it can be viewed as the armed struggle that the indigenous people embarked on in a bid to free themselves from colonial rule. In a complementary reading, the allegory could also be seen as Vera’s way of suggesting how women (the girl) were once oppressed by patriarchal structures (the strangers) but have finally broken free from their subordination. This is especially suggested by the fact that “the girl sang a song taught to her by her mother and put the men to sleep” (15). The act of escape is suggestive of how women can negotiate their way to freedom. Schmidt argues that while women were generally structurally subordinate to men in pre-colonial Shona society, they developed diverse strategies for coping with their situation and resisted the most onerous aspects of motherhood (1992: 6).

The whirlwind, another example of the powerful imagery in Vera’s narrative, can also be interpreted in two complementary ways. The whirlwind is said to have “held the sign that it had been newly created, that it was among the newborn: it raged therefore with an innocence. Arrogant in its conception, it challenged the familiar categories of birth and death. It moved at once in opposite directions with time and against time, collapsing all time within its perturbed interior” (3). Whilst the whirlwind could be perceived as a figure of speech for Nehanda herself, as is explicitly stated in the narrative: “[i]n the future, the whirling centre of the wind, which is also herself, has collapsed, but that is only the beginning of another dimension of time” (111), it also seems to represent Vera’s novel which, as her first novel, is newly created and, as it “rage[s] with an

innocence,” rivals history and the pre-dominantly patriarchal literature in its conception. Vera’s experimentation with a style that is not quite new in Zimbabwean literature but also not quite familiar is indeed just like the whirlwind, arrogant in its own conception, as it challenges both colonialism and patriarchy and the historical representation of women. Firstly, Vera’s novel, with its gendered approach, also moves in opposite directions, both with the present time and against time by re-telling the history of a pre-colonial Zimbabwe to the contemporary world in a way that challenges the existing official history. Secondly, alluding to different time frames in her narrative (the events of the First Chimurenga as they were happening and the future Second Chimurenga, as prophesied by Nehanda), Vera wants her readers not to forget the important role that Nehanda actually played as a living woman during the First Chimurenga as well as the inspiration that she gave to the freedom fighters during the Second Chimurenga as a symbol of the struggle.

In portraying a pre-Christian religious Shona society, Vera also imagines a different world view that departs from the settler version of religion. She asserts that “forgetting is not easy for those who travel in both directions of time” (3). Thus movement across time can be seen as an important motif in Vera’s novel which signifies a departure from established traditions, colonial histories and patriarchal social practices. The journey motif (the protagonist’s departures in search of beginnings) is used even more centrally in Vera’s second novel, *Without a Name* as I will show in the next chapter.

Vera’s use of language and her narrative technique in *Nehanda* are important in her re-visioning of ‘patriotic history’ (Ranger, 2005) and her giving women prominence, both in the domestic setup and in the public domain. Vera’s novel is a poetic, multi-voiced and non-linear narrative. Because the novel is polyphonic, it ensures space for multiple meanings in its revisioning of the history of Zimbabwe. Through the repetitions which emphasize the power of words, for example the pouch of words tied to Nehanda’s waist and along her arms, as well as Vatete’s wrinkled pouches containing many memories, Vera is able to transcend the silences that have been forced on women by history and patriarchy. According to Lewis, “her [Vera’s] tools are words that encourage

readers to do far more than recognize 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” (2005: 2). Vera has said that she tried to write a novel in a voice and style which is engaging for contemporary readers and, above all, which is not bound to many [realist] conventions of novel-writing but depends a lot on images and symbols through which she could explore a mythical consciousness (Hunter, 1998: 79). Wilson-Tagoe posits that “Vera ... emplots a narrative that extricates itself from the linear time of political cause and effect” (2002: 162). To create this portrait of Nehanda and her world Vera deliberately abandons and explodes the restraints of the conventional chronological plot in favour of a non-linear form with modulating styles and shifting narrative voices.

The novel commences on an ambiguous note and immediately throws the reader off balance and out of the comfort zone of a linear, historically chronological, realist novel. According to Wilson-Tagoe, “Nehanda’s death ends the novel. Her death begins the novel as well, presenting a shower of unfamiliar images that seek to transcend the desolation and disconnection of defeat” (2002: 168). ten Kortenaar strongly argues that in Vera’s novels “there is no narrative drive forward, no character development, and little reflection of a social and physical world outside the protagonist’s perception. Instead there is a great deal of repetition, of words, of lines, and of imagery” (2004: 199). The power of Vera’s narrative techniques is anchored in the poetic nature of her language. Lewis observes that “Vera generally uses a lyrical style, with her minimalist, opaque and symbolically charged writing often suggesting poetry rather than prose” (2005: 2). Throughout her narrative, Vera uses a lyrical style in which the language almost always has figurative meanings. Chiwome points out that,

Vera’s symbolism, does... capture the constant search for new ways of representing the African world in a European language. The fusion of poetry with prose narrative helps to draw connections that transcend place and time. The poetic, but sometimes convoluted, narrative tells a grand story that constantly reminds the reader that the complex roles played by women in traditional society defy stereotyping. (2002: 190)

As a novel engaged in the politics of gender and in dialogue with nationalist and white settler versions of history, the novel could be criticized for its obscurity and possibly for its political escapism. Lewis, however, strongly contends that

...the powerful 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. (2005: 2)

This chapter has explored how Vera's *Nehanda* is able to celebrate women in their totality, that is, as complete physical, psychological and vocal beings who are agents of their own lives. Not only does Vera give prominence to Nehanda, the great spirit medium, but she also gives her other women characters prominence in their own capacities as women in the novel. Vera's strategy of revisioning history in order to overcome the past silencing of women by patriarchy and colonialism has been hailed as a great success by historians and critics alike. Her celebration of women through exploring their mental consciousness develops more fully in her second novel *Without a Name* (1994) where Mazvita, a non-combatant woman who has been raped by a freedom fighter, also asks "Who will help me carry this pain? Where will I speak this tale, with which mouth for I have no mouth left?" (86). Mazvita's questions bring out the pertinent issue with which Vera's own writing deals: how language may be made to express the inexpressible. The next chapter will thus explore how Vera's strategy of de-silencing women is developed by breaking cultural taboos. Through narrating events mostly from the inner consciousness of her women characters, Vera is able to explore the theme of their search for a language and voice with which to utter their experiences of violation and their exploring the various meanings of silences.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Without a Name*

An analysis of Vera's debut novel, *Nehanda* (1993), in Chapter One has shown how part of Vera's strategy is to overcome the past silencing of women by patriarchy and colonialism through re-visioning history as well as exploring her protagonist's physical and mental worlds. Vera's exploration of her female protagonist's mental consciousness in *Nehanda* is further developed in *Without a Name* (1994), her second novel, where the reader is made to experience the protagonist's harrowing experiences and anguish together with her. I will therefore examine what narrative techniques Vera employs in order to enable the reader to share Mazvita's anguish with her and to understand the various kinds of silences that she experiences and intuitively adopts. My discussion of Vera's technique will include an analysis of the time frame she uses, the settings of events that have a direct bearing on her protagonist and also a discussion of how she represents the male characters who impinge on Mazvita's life. In this chapter, I intend first to investigate what Mazvita can and cannot say about her condition of suffering which emanates from what has happened to her (rape) and what she consequently does (commits infanticide).

*Without a Name* (1994) explores the life of its female protagonist, Mazvita, who comes from Mubaira, in Mhondoro (south west of the capital city, Harare). The novel traces Mazvita's life in the rural Mubaira where she is raped by a freedom fighter during the Second Chimurenga in 1977 and her homestead is burnt to the ground at the same time. The narrative gives an account of Mazvita's departure for the city in search of freedom and her brief experiences with Nyenyedzi, her lover and co-labourer on a tobacco farm near Kadoma, while she is en route to Harare. (The narrative consistently refers to Harari, a township attached to Salisbury. At independence the city was renamed 'Harare' and I have kept to this spelling.) It also gives an account of Mazvita's arrival in Harare from Kadoma where she stays with Joel. We are told of Mazvita's discovery of her pregnancy, her rejection by Joel and her subsequent crime of

infanticide. These events lead to her harrowing experiences on the bus back to Mubaira where she decides to bury her dead child and possibly to start her life afresh.

In exploring the different dimensions of silence, I probe how Vera's protagonist, Mazvita, affected by the liberation struggle but without the benefit of a wider understanding of events, perceives her situation. I argue that she deliberately suppresses speech as a form of self-protection and that she also adopts silence intuitively, thereby deceiving herself about her real circumstances. This argument leads to my examination of how Vera represents this character's personal struggle to achieve and realize a self-fulfilling existence.

In writing about violence against women in general, Meintjes argues that "[i]n exploring the experience of sexual violence during wartime and in the post-war period, it is important to understand the link between individual violation and socio-political intent. Political conflicts are played out across the geo-physical terrain, the battlefields of war. But this misses the geo-physical terrain of war across people's bodies, both men and women" (2000: 8). As Meintjes's comment implies, related to Mazvita's personal dilemma is the question of whether Vera connects her personal struggles to the larger social and colonial contexts of violence in which she finds herself. In an interview with Hunter, Vera says

I prefer to look at the particular because it makes me question the grand, the bigger, the larger thing which everybody might be saying. For example, that these [the rapist freedom fighter and his counterparts] are the liberation war heroes. These things did occur and for Mazvita, and maybe for women generally, there is the feeling of being left out in shaping the truth of the struggle, what it was. (Hunter, 1998: 80)

Vera's depiction of Mazvita's harrowing experiences, and her solitary quest for freedom is especially significant because in the post-independence Zimbabwean political discourse, women feature as symbols of motherhood but rarely as active and self-defining beings. The fact that many of them were physically and psychologically violated but nevertheless played an active role in the liberation struggle is largely ignored in the

nationalist discourse of the country. Brendt argues that *Without a Name* establishes its counter discourse by focusing on the war experiences of civilians who were “excluded from official historiography...The novel puts a young female in the centre of the narration who shows neither emotional involvement in the independence movement nor a connection with the land for which the guerilla soldiers fight” (2005: 167). Furthermore, Vera points out that nobody has asked what is happening to the women while the nationalist discourse is busy creating its heroes: “Mazvita is raped by a freedom fighter, and this goes against the narrative of the heroism of those who are going to liberate everybody” (Hunter, 1998: 80). As the novel indicates it was rural women in particular who suffered. Mazvita explicitly states that the rural people are vulnerable to both the freedom fighters and the Rhodesian regime soldiers. She says to Nyenyedzi, “we live in fear because even those who fight in our name threaten our lives” (Vera, 1994: 23).<sup>1</sup> Brendt concurs and says that “the rural areas were the places where both armies threatened civilians, where women were raped and where assumed ‘sell-outs’ were simply executed” (2005: 157). This violence, Vera says, justifies why she “was interested in a more contemporary reality of how women feel in their own pursuit of their own freedom and their own desire to understand their bodies against the background of changing times and relations towards things like the land....Even today the reality in Zimbabwe is such that women are wondering what their own relationship to the land actually is – and to their own bodies” (Hunter, 1998: 80).

As this brief background of the spatial settings of the narrative shows, violence came to the rural population from both sides in the war. Zhuwarara, assuming that the soldier-rapist was from the Rhodesian army, argues that “[i]n *Without A Name*, colonial violence that is manifested by the burning down of huts of Mazvita’s rural village by the soldiers is sometimes accompanied by the raping of women as in Mazvita’s case and this underlines the acute state of insecurity felt by the peasants in general and the women in particular in the sense that their own bodies became a site for the expression of male domination” (2001: 293). (Zhuwarara’s assumption that the soldier

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<sup>1</sup> All further references to the novel will be given with the page number only.

was from the Rhodesian forces is justified in that it is not specified in the narrative to which side the rapist belonged.) Mazvita comes from the class of illiterate rural women who are excluded from public discourse and, by exploring her mental consciousness or inner speech in this violent context, Vera celebrates her protagonist's 'being' at the height of the liberation struggle.

The temporal setting is also significant as Brendt points out, "the year 1977 brought neither spectacular battles nor other sustainedly influential historical or political events. It represents, however, a peak in the atrocities committed by both guerilla and Rhodesian soldiers" (2005: 157) and is characterized by increasing violence against the civilians in the rural areas. Zhuwarara explains that "caught in the middle of this expanding war, with the Rhodesian war machinery on one side and the African freedom fighters on the other, were the rural folk, unarmed, vulnerable and often desperate not to antagonize any of the warring parties" (2001: 292). The narrator registers this combination of despair and hope when s/he says, "It was 1977, what else was there to do but push forward" (10).

During this period in Zimbabwe's social history, there were many Zimbabweans who fled from the rural areas in search of opportunities and a sense of security in towns. Mazvita tells Nyenyedzi that "the war is bad in Mhondoro. It is hard to close your eyes there and sleep" and she tries to convince him that they should go and live in the city because "the war is everywhere in the rural areas" (23). She says of the city, "It is said that there is no war there. Freedom has already arrived...The news about the freedom in that city has reached all ears in Mubaira...It will be easier in Harari" (24). Thus, Vera probes the delusion operating at national level and not just at an individual level by using Mazvita's pursuit of freedom and her belief that the city is a place of refuge.

After being raped, there are different kinds of silence that Mazvita experiences and adopts, as well as the cultural and contextual limitations on utterance that she faces. As Boyce Davies's arguments (quoted in the Introduction) show, silence, if

adopted voluntarily or even spontaneously, will not always yield the intended effects. Hence, the need to explore the different kinds of silence that Mazvita experiences and adopts and her later attempts at coming to voice.

Vera's strategy of breaking the silence of women is further developed by her breaking of cultural taboos in her second novel. In particular, women's speaking out about their sexual violations in the 'real' world would largely be considered taboo. Vera says "I am interested in Zimbabweans responding positively and crossing some of the taboos which they have not been able to cross. This is a way of mediating between people who are unable to speak, like women, and people who should be listening" (Hunter, 1998: 82). Vera highlights the need for the 'listener component' because even if women were able to speak out against their oppression, if the oppressor is not willing to listen to them then the whole purpose of their utterance would be defeated. Boyce Davies contends that

[t]he appropriate critique of the inability of oppressors to HEAR allows for more resistance. Indeed, while some women have been silent or silenced, many black women have spoken incessantly without fully being heard and have reached the point where they say nothing verbally and instead operate from a silence which often speaks more eloquently. (1995: 3)

In 'real' life contexts of violence, women and children are the first to be targeted as victims because they are the most vulnerable members of society, as Hayson argues: "women are the first targets as victims during the war in what is an accepted strategy of attack on the social fabric of the 'enemy'..." (2000: 2). In these times, when women are attacked (raped or sexually abused) by warring factions or strangers in general, the inability of men to protect their women is exposed, hence their opposition to these violations being divulged. Even in the context of marriage or courtship, rape, be it marital or date rape, is not a subject that the victims can easily divulge. Women who try to come out in the open about their abuse are stigmatized or, worse still, blamed for having played willing participants or having provoked the violent act. According to Meintjes, "both the experience of rape and responsibility for the behaviour were hidden

in a cocoon of silence, embedded in a culture which blamed women for what happened to them...Women still feel constraint in coming forward to admit to having been raped” (2000: 6). They therefore either deliberately withhold speech as a way of protecting themselves from the painful realities of their violation and the blame that could come with it, or they retreat into silence so as to avoid having to face their situations themselves. The latter is a way of coping, a mechanism which is tantamount to self-deception. According to Zhuwarara, Mazvita “is described as feeling *dry* and struggling to suppress the memory of her rape and the horrors of the violation through silence – a process which is likely to exacerbate her situation in so far as she has become psychologically fragmented” (2001: 294, original emphasis). When Mazvita’s fragmentation reaches its height on the journey back to Mubaira, what *Without a Name* then depicts is a gradual movement away from the different kinds of silence and Mazvita’s move to utterance, which becomes a valuable way of coping with her violation and infanticide.

Mazvita is raped by a freedom fighter in Mubaira one misty morning. When she endeavours to come to terms with her violation, Mazvita struggles to find a language and voice with which to express the inexpressible. She asks, “Who will help me carry this pain? Where will I speak this tale, with which mouth for I have no mouth left?” (86). Mazvita’s question reveals women’s problematic positioning by the war and other contexts of violence. In Mazvita’s wish to utter her unspeakable pain, Vera successfully explores not only how the violations against women are beyond that which existing language can express but also how achieving utterance is a valuable kind of coping with violation. Vera is able to show that there is need to create a new discourse in the fictional world through the characters’ speech, and in the reader’s world in order for readers to respond appropriately. A new discourse may then become available in the public domain (from fiction to the larger world), that is adequate to express the violence perpetrated against women.

Mazvita first retreats into silence as a way of combating her rape and, rather than seeing silence as damaging or debilitating, she deludes herself by seeing it as

a beginning. Evident in the rape incident is the fact that silence as adopted by Mazvita is a weapon to combat the silence forced on her by the rapist. In the narrative we are told that,

Mazvita gathered the whispering he had spread between her legs, over her arms, over her face....She gathered the whispering into a silence that she held tightly within her body. She sheltered in the silence. The silence was hers, though he had initiated it....The silence was a treasure....The silence was not forgetting, but a beginning. She would grow from the silence he had brought to her....She had discovered a redeeming silence. (28-30)

The problem here is that, as spontaneously adopted by Mazvita, silence becomes a debilitating tool which prevents her from coming to terms with her violation. At first Mazvita intuitively adopts silence to shut out the silence initiated by the rapist and also to silence his whispering, which attempts to make her a willing participant in the rape. When the rapist calls her 'sister', she intentionally withholds her name, thus adopting a self-protecting silence. Mazvita also 'shelters' in the 'treasures' of the surrounding silence when the actual rape ordeal is over. Mazvita then thinks that her silence is a beginning and yet the reader, due to privileged access into Mazvita's thoughts, knows that her silence is not a forgetting but is actually the start of her self-deceptions. When she seeks escape in silence, one can see that her silence is a stifling kind which involves perceiving herself as pure, strong and whole and yet in actual fact she is fragmented. Mazvita is said to have lost her seasons of motherhood. "She did not question this dryness of her body but welcomed it as a beginning...She sheltered in the barrenness and the silence of her name" (29). Retreating into this kind of silence, Mazvita refuses to question the dryness of her body, most probably the cessation of her menstrual periods. Instead, she conjures up what she is longing to feel and not her actual state of dryness and fragmentation.

Another example of Mazvita's self-delusion is when she has bought the apron with which she carries the dead baby on her back. Mazvita tries to distance herself from the baby and yet she finds that

there was not enough space between her and the child she bore on her back. If she could remove her head, and store it at a distance from the stillness on her back, then she could begin. She would be two people. She would be many. One of her would protect the other, that is how she conceived of her escape. She attempted this enigmatic separation by drawing mightily forward, by dropping her chest down, by pulling her arms to the back by restraining her shoulders. (19)

Separation, however, proves to be a futile exercise as her body refuses to cooperate with her. The narrator comments that Mazvita's "past was more inventive than she was, laid more claim on what belonged to it" (87) than Mazvita could control. The pregnancy that results from the rape and the subsequent birth of the child are tangible results which show that she cannot run away from the truth of what has happened to her: "The baby had chosen her, risen above its own frailty in order to hinder her" (87). In other words, her body tells her that she cannot escape from her situation or overcome it by merely avoiding the reality of her situation. It may be argued that avoidance of her situation by unconsciously silencing her pain is likely to worsen her situation because she is unknowingly being dishonest with herself. For example, Mazvita pretends that the pregnancy is not real when she is staying with Joel. In Joel's room "Mazvita lay still on the bed. It was a dark room. She lay still and tried to bury the child inside her body. Mazvita buried the child. She would keep the child inside her body, not give birth to it" (64). Mazvita obviously deludes herself by thinking that she can bury the child in her stomach for ever by merely lying still and imagining that the baby is just not there. By trying to erase her child from her reality, Mazvita tortures herself, and this finally leads to the killing of her baby. The narrator tells us that "Mazvita longed to release the heaviness that made her unable to spread her arms and embrace the future" (87) but her problem was that her arms were heavy with the child. In the infanticide scene, the narrator tells us that "Mazvita wept silently, because she knew that her desire for the baby was ill-conceived and harmful" (93) and Mazvita herself reveals that "her heart beat so hard at her effort to suppress that inclination [her desire to close her child's eyes permanently], but the desire lunged forward like something sweet and secret" (93). My argument here is that silence, although not always negative, especially when it is adopted voluntarily as a part of the healing process, can be debilitating if it involves avoiding the reality of the violations that have taken place. Immediately after the rape, Mazvita claims that she has

recovered her name, which is contrary to her true situation. Mazvita is using silence to cope with two apparently different aspects of violence in the narrative. On the one hand, she uses silence to cope with the violence perpetrated against her and on the other, she intuitively adopts silence to deal with the violence she commits. Mazvita was overwhelmed by the silence that she had bottled up for too long and it welled up as the “desire ... to close the baby’s eyes finally and truthfully” (94). The narrator says, “Mazvita sought her freedom in slender and fragile movements, *finely executed*” (94, emphasis mine). The act of infanticide is thus another kind of skilful silencing (this time Mazvita silences her baby) and she even mistakes her resolve to kill her baby for kindness.

After first retreating into silence in the narrative, Mazvita later partially relates her rape ordeal to Nyenyedzi, her lover and co-worker on a commercial tobacco farm near Kadoma. Under normal circumstances or in ‘real’ life situations it would have been extremely difficult for Mazvita to divulge her rape ordeal to anybody, let alone her lover, for fear of stigmatization and rejection. In the Zimbabwean context, issues that revolve around sex and sexuality are not openly discussed to the extent that people usually resort to euphemisms, for instance, when referring to reproductive organs. By relating only part of her ordeal to Nyenyedzi, it becomes apparent that Mazvita is observing some of the social proprieties that are predominant in her culture. She deliberately leaves out the details of how her rapist had whispered to her as he violated her. The narrator says, “[h]e whispered as though he offered her life, in gentle murmuring tones, unhurried....Mazvita felt a quietness creep from the earth into her body as he rested above her, spreading his whispered longing over her” (28). In *The Stone Virgins* (2002), Sibaso’s whispering to Nonceba as he rapes her is resonant of this whispering by Mazvita’s rapist. I think Mazvita leaves it out when she narrates her ordeal to Nyenyedzi because she realizes that whispering was a tool employed by the rapist to make the whole encounter seem mutual and collaborative. In this instance, Mazvita therefore consciously withholds remembered speech as self-protection and self-affirmation.

When Mazvita talks to Nyenyedzi she also openly criticizes the land for having forgotten black people. She blames her rape on the land because the war of liberation was basically about the land. On the one hand, the freedom fighters were fighting so that they could regain their land which had been usurped by the white settlers and, on the other hand, the settlers were fighting so that they could retain control and ownership of the land that they had taken away from the indigenous people. Women are caught in the cross-fire of this war and yet they are still expected to be loyal to the land. While Nyenyedzi argues that the land is inescapable, is everything that defines the indigenous people and gives them unity, Mazvita acknowledges that what he says of the land is true but she asks the pertinent question of whether the truth about the land belongs to all people, men and women equally (33). The land could not claim her undivided loyalty because

[s]he wanted something different from her truth. She wanted to conquer her reality then, and not endure the suspension of time. She felt a strong sense of her own power and authority, of her ability to influence and change definitions of her own reality, adjust boundaries to her vision....She possessed a strong desire for her liberty, and did not want to linger hopelessly between one vision and the next. She had loved the land, saw it through passionate and intense moments of freedom, but to her the land had no fixed loyalties. (34)

Perhaps because she has chosen to depict not only Mazvita's victim status but also her resistance to oppression and violence by breaking cultural taboos, Vera has asserted that she knows the intense risk that a woman takes "in placing herself beyond the accepted boundary, abandoning the securities of less daunting, much more approved paths" (Vera, 1999: 3). Although Mazvita is portrayed as experiencing oppression in multiple ways, she is also shown to have the ambition and drive to move out of her oppressive environments. In commenting on Vera's depiction of her protagonist's quest for freedom, Zhuwarara points out that "even during wars people do not necessarily stop having their own dreams and ambitions, their own goals to achieve in life and Mazvita is no exception" (2001: 292). Mazvita flees from Mubaira to a tobacco farm near Kadoma where she co-habits with a fellow worker without having gone through any marriage

formalities. When she sees it fit to move on to Harare, Mazvita does not hesitate to do so, although she does not know Harare at all.

Although Mazvita is damaged by the liberation struggle she sees great potential in herself, but sometimes this is in self-delusion. She does not lament her violation in despondence but seeks physically and psychologically to break free by departing from the stifling environment of her violation. For her, the solution to her problems lies in departures. Mazvita asserts her potential by moving on, first to a farm near Kadoma and then to Harare, the capital city. When Mazvita arrives in Harare, she feels exhilarated, but Vera also uses the narration to point out that her excitement is just an illusion of happiness as life in the city is without substance and therefore unable to provide her with the anchorage that she needs: "It was like that when she arrived in the city. She felt a rare freedom eagerly anticipated...freedom was a thought tantalizing and personal" (4). Mazvita looks for work while Joel is away but at the same time deceives him into thinking that she is naïve and satisfied by her stay with him. We are told that "she did not dream dreams around Joel. She dreamt dreams around herself...She would not succumb to being a mere aspect of his dream. Mazvita was free of Joel...She allowed Joel to believe that she had no plans for the future" (57). Mazvita thus seeks to surpass her men in vision and aspirations for the future. She tells herself that if she found a job, she might even leave Joel, or if she chose to stay with him, then it would be in the knowledge that she could leave when she desired it. Mazvita is represented as a woman who departs from the traditional patriarchal version of an ideal rural woman who, in the words of two men conversing on the bus to Mubaira, "would never rid herself of this particular suffering" (42). They see no place for women in the city: "The city is corrupt. A serious woman will not manage to live there. A woman can lose her head. Only a man can manage those streets, those lights, those policemen" (52).

Writing seventeen years after the liberation struggle and with the advantage of hindsight, Vera draws her readers to the questions of what freedom the people have gained since they attained independence. The narrator emphasises that in the city

[n]ewspaper headings covered the dark alley, promised no freedom to the agitated people. But there were ample signs of freedom the people had already claimed for themselves – empty shells of Ambi, green and red. The world promised a lighter skin, greater freedom. It was 1977, freedom was skin deep but joyous and tantalizing. *Ambi*... Freedom spoke from behind a mask, but no one understood what freedom truly was....Freedom was, after all purchasable...procured even if the cost was nothing less than one's soul. (26-27)

Vera seems to be exploring the self-delusion about freedom at national level, not just as Mazvita's personal dilemma. She seems to be highlighting the fact that people are deceiving themselves into thinking that they are free and yet they are languishing in poverty and "were known to die amazing deaths" (76). As the narrator puts it, their "freedom was only skin-deep" (26). Literally the people were corroding their skin in trying to get a lighter complexion and therefore *Ambi* becomes a metaphor of unfreedom (bondage) in the narrative because while it promises superficial freedom (lighter skin), in fact it leaves the people with irreversibly damaged faces. In the same way, travel is also used metaphorically to symbolize escape and death at the same time. It is evident in the narrative that just as Mazvita's running away to the city is not a solution to her violation, travelling for the people is a great risk as "travelling was a suspension of all pretence to freedom...A road was not for pursuing destinations: a road was another manifestation of death" (76). Literally, travelling is risky because of the raging war and the landmines that are planted on the roads by the warring parties. Thus, whilst it offers temporary freedom to the people moving from their rural homes to the city, travelling is just another manifestation of death.

As my account of Mazvita's complex silence has indicated, an examination of the narrative voice (who speaks?) and focalization (who sees?) as aspects of the narrative situation in *Without a Name* will further illuminate how Vera undertakes the de-silencing of her female protagonist. The question of who speaks, who sees, and who listens is also important because much of the time the narration is done from within Mazvita's consciousness where sometimes she is the implied-listener as well as the narrator. In telling her story to herself, Mazvita remembers and misremembers events in

her life especially as she refuses to speak to others. After she has strangled her baby, for example, Mazvita stands outside her own self, bewildered as she remembers some of her actions towards the child. She recalls how she had “managed a constricting knot from which the child could not survive” (96). To examine the narrative voices in order to find out who speaks in telling the story of Mazvita’s rape, her subsequent evasion of the truth of what has happened to her, and her search for beginnings without a name, leads to an enhanced understanding of Vera’s strategy of breaking the silence long imposed on women by patriarchy. The question of ‘who speaks?’ is asked of the whole narrative because it is important to establish the agent whose point of view orients the narrative text.

Vera once again makes use of a non-linear narrative in her second novel and poses a two-sided narrative challenge for herself as a writer and for her readers and analysts. The challenge that Vera poses to herself as a writer is how to make her readers respond positively to Mazvita’s predicament and to indicate the limits to her protagonist’s understanding of what she is doing as a result of what has been done to her. To accomplish this Vera blends protagonist-narration and authorial-narration to create what is known as dual-voiced or figural narration (Rimmon-Kenan, 1983). This narrative mode guides a reader but also poses a challenge to the analyst, who has to deduce when s/he is confined to the character’s ‘head’ or inner speech, and when s/he benefits from authorial guidance. The novel basically de-silences the woman character, Mazvita, by exploring her mental consciousness, and the multiple meanings of her silence. Mazvita’s thoughts remain private as she is suppressing speech but Vera gives her readers privileged access to them through point of view narration. Mazvita can be described as an autodiegetic narrator (a protagonist-narrator) and it is apparent that sometimes she is the implied audience of her own self-deluding narration. By depicting many events through Mazvita’s consciousness, Vera makes her the focalizer, or the person through whose point of view the story is oriented. The term ‘focalizer’ was coined by Genette (1980) to distinguish narrative voice (who speaks?) from perspective (who sees?). According to Jahn,

A focalizer is the agent whose point of view orients the narrative text. A text is anchored on a focalizer's point of view when it presents (and does not transcend) the focalizer's thoughts, reflections and knowledge, his/her actual and imaginary perceptions as well as his/her cultural and ideological orientation. (2005: N3.2.2)

Through her protagonist-narrator, who is also the focalizer, Vera is able to tell the reader much about Mazvita's mental processes and emotions without having Mazvita burst into speech. The reader is thus allowed access into Mazvita's head although outwardly Mazvita continues to act normally and keeps her thoughts to herself.

In addition to depicting the narrative from Mazvita's point of view, Vera also makes use of an author-narrator who is the agency that transmits the events of the narrative verbally and recounts them from a position outside the story, adopting the omniscience of someone who knows everything about the characters and events. In *Without a Name* this author-narrator is covert as s/he neither refers to him or herself nor addresses any narratee but is able to support and extend the reader's insight into Mazvita's consciousness. This narrator has a neutral voice, is indeterminate, and is thus able to maintain neutrality over Mazvita's predicament. The author-narrator reports Mazvita's thoughts and sensations and also describes the geo-physical contexts in which she finds herself, which often echo her particular circumstances. The authorial-narrator is the one who has to be a witness to Mazvita's agony in the alley when she has bought the apron with which she carries her dead baby, and to reveal how Mazvita's "past came to her in rapid waves that made her heave the child forward, away from her, in a deep and uncontrollable motion of rejection" (17).

Because at times Vera makes use of point of view narration whereby the reader is held mostly within the consciousness of her protagonist-narrator, the authorial-narrator cannot, in these passages, tell the readers directly that Mazvita is making a mistake by deluding herself and avoiding the truth about her situation. Therefore the narration alternates between Mazvita's perspective and that of the omniscient authorial-narrator, who in most cases has access to Mazvita's consciousness and sensations. By giving her readers privileged and enhanced access into Mazvita's consciousness, Vera is

able to accomplish her challenge of making her readers comprehend Mazvita's actions, no matter how cruel and initially incomprehensible they are.

Vera's strategy of alternating two time frames and journeys in her narrative helps to strengthen Mazvita's point of view narration. As Mazvita remembers her experiences and relives them through her sensations, rather than as the events happen there and then, it is as if her memories are co-present with her on her second journey. *Without a Name* begins *in medias res*, that is to say Vera's point of attack (the beginning of her narrative) comes when the developments in Mazvita's life are already well under way, thereby plunging the reader right in the middle of them. The narrative begins with the later bus journey (from Harare to Mubaira), and then moves into the earlier journey (from Mubaira to Harare) cutting from one to the other with each new chapter. In the later journey the authorial-narrator explores Mazvita's deliberate suppression of the crime of infanticide that she herself had committed in Harare and during the earlier journey the author-narrator explores how Mazvita adopts silence as self-protection against the violence perpetrated on her in the form of rape.

By alternating the two time frames, Vera wants the reader to feel how Mazvita's delusion of herself in one journey clarifies the presence of delusion in the other journey. Her narrative technique is to disorient her readers by making it difficult to know exactly what has happened and why, thus leaving the reader with many questions. This technique compels the reader to imagine what might have happened to Mazvita. The later journey from Harare to Mubaira implicitly reveals through Mazvita's internal agony the violence which Mazvita has committed herself as having emanated from the violence perpetrated on her prior to her earlier journey from Mubaira to Harare. The crime of infanticide that Mazvita commits becomes understandable after reading about the earlier journey which explores Mazvita's rape ordeal. By beginning with Mazvita's return to face the reality of her past, the author-narrator subtly suggests to the reader that Mazvita should not have run away to the city from the reality of her rape, and this is reinforced when she later discovers that the city is without substance. This helps Vera in making her

readers empathize with her protagonist who longs to be strong, pure and whole and yet in reality is fragmented and disoriented.

Vera also depicts contrasting environments as the main settings of her narrative, as well as contrasting male characters who have a direct bearing on Mazvita, in order to bring out the anguish that she goes through. In the narrative there are three men, each one situated in one of the contrasted environments, who have a direct impact on Mazvita's life. Of significance are the soldier who rapes Mazvita in Mubaira, Nyenyedzi her lover and co-labourer on the tobacco farm near Kadoma, and Joel, the man Mazvita first meets and with whom she co-habits in Harare. However, I will also mention the attitudes of the men on the bus from Harare to Mubaira towards their wives. The descriptions of Mubaira (especially the misty morning of the rape), the lush vegetation on the tobacco farm, Harare and its cramped alleys, the tormenting heat on the bus to Mubaira, all have a bearing on Mazvita's mental and physical suffering. The rapist, although anonymous in the sense that Mazvita is unable to see his face during the rape, represents patriarchy and a betrayal of the objectives of the struggle in the narrative. His violation of Mazvita renders women's bodies sites for expression of male domination (Zhuwarara, 2001). He calls Mazvita "*Hanzvadzi*" (meaning sister) and yet he rapes her. The authorial-narrator tells us that "[h]e did not shout or raise his voice but invited her to lie still in a hushed but serious rhythm...He spoke in a tone trained to be understood, not heard" (29). The rapist whispers to Mazvita as if they are engaged in consensual love-making and yet he is imposing himself on her. Because Mazvita fails to see the face of her rapist and hence does not have a face on which to attach blame or hatred, she then blames the land for her rape:

Hate required a face against which it could be flung but searching for the face was futile. Instead, she transferred the hate to the moment itself, to the morning, to the land, to the dew covered grass that she felt graze tenderly against her naked elbow in that horrible moment of his approach...She hated the land that pressed beneath her back as the man moved impatiently above her....He had never been inside her. She connected him only to the land. It was the land that had come towards her. He had grown from the land.... (30-31)

Mazvita's problematic relationship with the war and the land which she sees as the cause of her rape reflects the burden of patriarchy that the Zimbabwean women have to bear (Zhuwarara, 2001).

The forest near the tobacco farm is described by the authorial-narrator as having a lush greenness and the "large tree glistened with wide thickly veined leaves. The leaves were rounded partings of green moon" (5). The lush vegetation complements Mazvita's hope for the restoration of her old self as she was before the rape incident. The fact that Mazvita and Nyenyedzi see a bird's egg in a nest in a crevice within the rock symbolizes the promise of life, a new beginning. Nyenyedzi is portrayed in deliberate contrast to the rapist and to Joel. Nyenyedzi (literally meaning 'star') symbolically represents light, however small, at the end of the tunnel of Mazvita's harrowing experiences. His relationship with Mazvita is associated with nature and open spaces and deliberately depicted as an antithesis to the earlier rape that Mazvita had endured in Mubaira. Zhuwarara argues that, "[t]he Mazvita-Nyenyedzi relationship has the potential to heal wounds inflicted upon her body and soul in Mubaira...Nyenyedzi, whose name stands for nightstars, renames her *Howa*, a mushroom which simply comes out of the earth in all its purity and wholeness in a miraculous manner that one associates with the unexpected" (2001: 295). The description of Mazvita and Nyenyedzi's intimacy is in sharp contrast with the violent rape that Mazvita suffered at the hands of the soldier back in Mubaira. Mazvita is said to have

pulled Nyenyedzi down beneath the rocks which had been warmed by the sun, and felt the warmth rise over her naked back....The knee pressed down on her, but not painfully....Their eyes met in a silence rich with imaginings, with a brave ecstasy. He was heavy where he rested above her, but even in that she had found an exultation so complete and final, an ease unquestionable, a profuse tenderness. There was no beginning or ending to her happiness. (12-13)

To complement Mazvita's happiness, "the air was bright and clear beneath the sky, transparent" (13). This is also in sharp contrast to the misty morning of the rape. Nyenyedzi offers Mazvita a stable future and is interested in going with her to Mubaira

so that he can meet her parents and marry her in a traditional and acceptable manner. However, Mazvita refuses the offer because for her that arrangement would be taking her back to the place where she had been violated and it would remind her of the painful ordeal. Mazvita is determined to move on with her life. She says "I must move on. I will move on" (23).

Besides being portrayed in contrast to the other men in Mazvita's life, Nyenyedzi is given the view of the land that was held by Nehanda. He says,

[w]e cannot carry the land on our shoulders. No one can take the land away ....The land does not belong to us. We keep the land for the departed. That is why we can work on the land while strangers believe it can belong to them. How can something so vast and mysterious belong to anybody?...No one can own the land ....We must remain here or else join the fight, fight to cleanse the land, not find new dreams to replace ancient claim. (32-33)

Nyenyedzi raises the important and ancient understanding of the land, articulated in *Nehanda*, that people should view themselves as the custodians of the ancestral land and not as private owners. However, this is not the case in present-day Zimbabwe, as is evident to the post-independence reader, who is witness to the coveting of the land as private property by the very people who fought for the re-possession of the ancestral lands for communal ownership. In Nyenyedzi's failure to influence Mazvita to stay on the farm, Vera seems to be using Mazvita's argument about the land not having fixed loyalties to challenge the new type of nationalism that came into being from around 1994. Vera seems to be critiquing the fact that after women suffered untold physical and psychological violation during the liberation struggle, there are some elements that are, in the name of nationalism, betraying the cause of the liberation struggle by grabbing the land at the expense of the women and the majority, rural-based poor.

In contrast to the lush vegetation in Kadoma, the alley in Harare is described as a filthy, narrow and cramped place which smells of urine. This can be interpreted as signifying the fact that Mazvita's fleeing to the city in search of freedom is a futile exercise as the environment of the city is not fit for beginnings. Mazvita admits

that she had not anticipated the city in its entirety (57). In Harare, Mazvita once again co-habits with a man, this time one whom she does not know at all. When she met Joel, “there were no greetings, preliminaries or rituals to courtship....That was how their life together began. There was no discussion, no agreement, no proposal. They just met and stayed together” (48; 50). Joel, the man who seems to be Mazvita’s saviour when she first gets to Harare, is described as a man of no substance. At first Mazvita thought that Joel was a miracle: “He had a quickness in his speech, a quickness in his movements, a quickness everywhere...” (50). Joel is the type of man who thinks he can use women as much as he likes and then discard them at his convenience: “Joel never spoke of consulting her parents concerning living with her like this...” (50). Thus, when he takes Mazvita to his place he thinks that he is going to use her like all the others before her and then abandon her when it suits him. Co-habiting was taboo in the traditional Shona cultural context, but Mazvita does it as she moves forward in search of beginnings.

Vera however shows that Mazvita was way ahead of Joel’s assumptions because her plans were just as exploitative and, as can be seen, she did not dream dreams around Joel but around herself. Mazvita’s ambition and drive reflects the image of a new kind of person who is developing partly out of the settler ethos of individual ownership. Mazvita actually felt alienated when she was with Joel because he did not consider their intimacy as something that had to be mutual. The dual-voiced narration clearly shows that Joel did not care for Mazvita but had his own selfish desires to satisfy. Concerning their love-making it is said that “Mazvita was completely alone while she was with Joel. She closed her eyes and heard him move quickly above her.... Her eyes were closed. Joel saw her eyes closed and imagined the closing was about him, about his fingers touching her face, touching the curve of her eyes, searching her forehead. But Mazvita was alone....There were no words spoken between them” (59). In a ‘real’ life situation it is very difficult for a woman to voice her dissatisfaction over her intimacy with her partner for fear of being labelled ‘loose’ or a prostitute. However, Vera is able to break the taboo and raise the issue on behalf of Mazvita and the many women who suffer in silence. Mazvita thinks about this and Vera captures her frustration by exploring her mental consciousness.

In her personal struggle to achieve and realize a self-fulfilling existence, “[Mazvita] searched for who she was as she had realized that in the city, she was someone new and different, someone she had not met....She had to find a voice with which to speak, without trying to hide from herself” (57-58). Mazvita’s fleeing to the city, where she believes she will find freedom, is evidence of her wanting to take charge of and shape her life. In the narrative it is said that

Mazvita arrived in Harari ready to claim her freedom....Harari banished memory, encouraged hope. Mazvita had a strong desire to grow....Mazvita recognized Harari as the limitless place in which to dream, and to escape....Mazvita longed for a future in which she would look backwards and feel fulfillment, so her divisions of time were cautious and laboured. She hoped to succeed. (55- 56)

From the point of view narration one can deduce that Mazvita is simply hoping against hope because as she listens to “the whirls of days and months” (61) that separate her from Mubaira and recalls how she had cried as Joel slept with her and how “the cry had defeated the silence in her body... [she realizes that] the cry was not the lulling freedom she sought” (61). Mazvita wishes loneliness would protect her and supreme silence would reign in her life. The wreckage here also complements her “vision full of chaos” (16). Struggling in her seemingly hopeless situation where she does not have a language with which to express her pain, Mazvita is said to have “walked through the impassive faces, in a tunnel of her own where it was truly unlit, desperately narrow. She sent her head forward through the tunnel and met a darkness tall and consuming, where she could not turn or speak or see” (10). The narrow and cramped alleys physically complement the psychological dark tunnel that Mazvita’s mental consciousness struggles through.

The attitudes of the men on the bus from Harare to Mubaira towards their wives and women in general also warrant a comment in this chapter. They both give a stereotypical view of women as only fit to stay in their rural areas tilling the land. One of the men recognizes his wife’s hard work, saying: “My wife stays at home, we had a large harvest of groundnuts last year...I wonder how she did it, but a woman’s strength is not

to be frowned upon" (53). But his companion says "It is not the woman. It is the rain. There was a lot of rain last year. All the women had to do was merely harvest" (53). By juxtaposing the two contrasting views about women Vera is able to represent how her women characters' contribution to nation-building, a role so vital, is deliberately undermined even in 'real' life by the Zimbabwean politicians and historians alike. Brendt argues that Mazvita

is a female character who bears no resemblance to a patriarchally defined female stereotype or role model. She refuses to appropriate the identity layers that embody the idealized role model of the Zimbabwean woman but, instead, decides to boldly seek new identity layers that might accommodate her desires. Throughout the narrative she is both a victim and a perpetrator, she is helpless and self-assured, stubborn and indecisive. (2005: 169)

I concur with Brendt that Mazvita moves beyond the stereotypical role model of a mother figure (especially, ironically, by killing her own child). I also agree with Brendt's allusion to the series of contradictions that Mazvita contains. My argument is that despite these contradictions Mazvita can be very decisive in the narrative, even under trying circumstances. For example, after she has been raped, she decides to leave Mubaira for the city and then, due to a lack of financial resources, she decides to stop over at a farm near Kadoma, then decides to move on to Harare. When she realizes that her body has betrayed her by conceiving as a result of the rape, she decides to kill her child, who she sees as a hindrance to her ambition and quest for freedom. After she has strangled her baby (son, not daughter as Brendt, 2005 incorrectly says), Mazvita decides to leave Harare, although at first she has no clear idea of where she is heading to. Gradually she decides that she must go back to Mubaira where she hopes to bury her child and start all over again. The second journey can thus be seen as a process by which Mazvita arrives at this decision.

On the bus journey from Harare to Mubaira, Mazvita has not yet resolved on her destination but she is ready to go somewhere. The journey from Harare to Mubaira reflects Mazvita's intuitive silence about her crime of infanticide. The dual-voiced narrator says that

Mazvita maintained a detached pose...[and] had to keep her world in focus, or else it would change shape....Mostly she feared her world would move into another room in which the door was tightly shut against her....Then, she feared that her world might enter the bus and leave her out of it....It was hard for her to establish disguises that would permit her to be unrecognizable to her world, so that she could follow it successfully. It meant becoming a stranger to herself, first of all. (68)

Once again Mazvita conjures up what she longs to feel rather than face what she is actually feeling. The authorial-narrator says that “she held her neck up, or at least thought she did, though in truth, she sat curled in a miserable hump of fear, her shoulders crushed” (68). As the journey progresses Mazvita is shown as developing a split sense of herself which she cannot control. She seems terrified that her other self, which takes the guise of the woman whose face is covered with dust, will reveal what she has been so intent on concealing – that the child on her back is dead. On this return journey to Mubaira Mazvita assumes two voices, that is, one is within her and the other comes out of the strange woman on the bus. To defend her secret, Mazvita hears herself telling “the strange woman that her child was sick [and] she must keep her child on her back where it was quiet and safe” (92). In one part of herself, Mazvita sees the woman seizing her child saying that she wants to feed the baby. We are told that just then, “the cry exploded in her again and Mazvita opened her eyes and found her fingers clasping the tied ends of the apron” (92). The cry indicates that her defenses (her silence) have collapsed and she can no longer hide from herself what she has done. This splitting is a technique that carries much further Vera’s earlier suggestion that at times Mazvita is the implied listener to her own inner, silent speech in the narrative. As already suggested, the journey depicts a process whereby Mazvita wrestles with accepting the reality of what has happened to her and what she has done as a result of it.

Before her splitting is fully developed, Mazvita gets temporary solace from the music being played on the *mbira* by an old man on the bus. As Pfukwa rightly suggests, “[o]nly an old man serenely plucking his notes on a *mbira* in a bus, heading for Mazvita’s rural home, manages to ‘capture her soul’ in a fleeting moment” (2004: 252). We are told that, “The *mbira* vibrated through the crowd, reached her with an intact

rhythm, a profound tonality, a promise graceful and simple...It was a moment too exquisite to bear and she folded her arms across her breast and closed her eyes tightly, for the joy was reckless and free, stirring and timeless. A lapse and the *mbira* hid from her” (69). The *mbira* episode is very intense even though it does not last very long. Pfukwa suggests that

[t]he notes [from the *mbira*] gently stroke the deep wounds of [Mazvita’s] shattered spirit which is burdened by the infanticide....The music evokes deep feelings in Mazvita that spiritually transforms her....The flowing tunes almost assume cathartic qualities purging and cleansing her guilt-ridden soul. In a moment of self-discovery, she finds the solace and freedom that she has been looking for. The *mbira* beat gently hauls her out of her abysmal depths of despair and gives her a sense of hope in a bleak world. (2004: 252)

Pfukwa has some inaccuracies concerning the details of the narrative (for example, he inaccurately claims that Mazvita goes to the city in search of her boyfriend Joel), but in his attempts to sum up the healing impact that the traditional music from the *mbira* has on Mazvita he rightly posits that “*Without a Name* is suggesting a statement about the cultural reorientation of a lost person” (2004: 253). Whilst I agree with Pfukwa that the *mbira* music has a soothing effect on Mazvita, I disagree that the tunes flowing from the *mbira* completely purge and cleanse Mazvita’s guilt-ridden soul and give her the comfort and freedom that she has been looking for all along. My reading is that after the momentary solace from the *mbira* music, and after she has “allowed herself to hope” (70), the music stops and its effects are lost: “the sound died...as though someone [had] hit hard at the instrument with a fist” (71). The narrative then cuts, in Chapter 21, to Mazvita’s memory of what took place in Joel’s room and she remembers how the sun licked her face as she woke “to the reeking smell” of the paraffin stove in the cramped room. There Mazvita had tried to bury her child in her stomach (in self-delusion), as has already been discussed.

As the narrative shifts between the bus journey and Joel’s room, Mazvita remembers how she had had no name for the baby whom she could neither love nor identify with since “[a] name binds a mother to her child. A name is for waiting, for

release, an embrace precious and permanent, a promise to growing life. She had no promises to offer this child. Mazvita could not even name the child from the emptiness which surrounded her” (75). From there, the authorial-narrator takes us to the bus journey and the anxiety of the other passengers when they are halted at a road block: “The people searched fearfully behind the sheltering glass in a temporary refuge for their fear” (77). Then the narration moves into Mazvita’s point of view as she sees an armed soldier at the road block who reminds her of the rape in Mubaira, and she feels herself to be back in Joel’s room where she begins to sense that she is splitting into two people: “It was as though she was living with two men. When she thought of Nyenyedzi, she loved the child deeply....When she thought of Joel, she wanted the child to go away” (79). This constant oscillation of narration between the bus journey and Joel’s room highlights Mazvita’s divided disposition as pressure from Joel mounts for her to leave, and she recalls the rape scene in Mubaira. Mazvita recalls how she had woken up screaming in Joel’s room which represents the collapsing of her defences in more or less the same way as her defences collapse on this bus journey.

The narrative’s concluding scene is an open ending in which Vera offers a partial resolution to her protagonist’s anguish. In the concluding paragraph, the narrator captures Mazvita as she moves towards the huts back in Mubaira:

The smoke is long departed, but Mazvita can see it over the huts which have been burnt. It is yesterday. Mazvita walks in gentle footsteps that lead her to the place of her beginning. Mazvita bends forward and releases the baby from her back, into her arms. The silence is deep, hollow and lonely. (103)

Although the narrative seems to return to the beginning, its effect is that of an open ending, because there does not seem to be one definite conclusion to the events of the story. We are left speculating on whether Mazvita is going to bury her child and move on with her life or whether she will kill herself after burying the child. The didactic thrust of the narrative is that in order for Mazvita (and other victims of rape or sexual abuse) to recover from her violation she must re-member the violation that she has been subjected to, that is, go back in time and face the truth of what has happened to her. At the same

time, the narrative's ending seems to echo despair and hopelessness as Mazvita releases the baby from her back (which symbolizes the off-loading of her burden which was a result of her rape) in a silence that is "deep, hollow and lonely" (103). Thus the novel's ending is ambiguous in that one cannot tell whether Mazvita has finally found solace in her going back in time, or whether the hollow silence and loneliness represents the real silence of the deserted landscape, or whether it suggests that there is no great transcendence in her return to face the truth of her violation. What we know for certain, however, is that by the end of her return journey to Mubaira, Mazvita has finally come to terms with the truth of her rape, infanticide and all her other experiences.

In *Without a Name*, there is a progression from the narrative challenge that Vera poses for herself in *Nehanda*, which is how to write orality. In her second novel, Vera poses the challenge of how she as the writer can represent Mazvita without being judgemental concerning her infanticide, her intuitive silence and her refusal to face the truth of her situation. In her last novel, *The Stone Virgins*, Vera returns to the questions of healing and possible growth of her female protagonists despite their violations. One of Vera's challenges in *The Stone Virgins* is how to tell part of the narrative from the rapist's point of view, such that the reader can begin to comprehend how the rapist has been shaped by the history of his country. Vera makes use of four characters (two sisters and two men from different regions of the country) in re-visioning history as well as in de-silencing her female characters from the silence imposed on them by their violation.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *The Stone Virgins*

*The Stone Virgins* (2002), Vera's last novel represents a development of her ideas about the weight of history and how it can be re-visioned to suit different times and contexts. The novel also represents a development of the narrative challenges that Vera set for her readers, as well as for herself as a writer, in her first two novels, especially in making her readers understand the violation of her female characters from their point of view and how they strive to recover thereafter. A new phenomenon in this novel is Vera's use of two central female characters (sisters) and two men (from different regions of the country). The effect of this new phenomenon will be explored in Vera's narrative techniques. Continued from *Without a Name* is the use of town and country settings, with the narrative opening in Bulawayo before going to Kezi and then ending in Bulawayo. In this novel, Bulawayo, unlike Harare in *Without a Name*, is not a place without substance for the protagonist, Nonceba, who begins to recover and find new paths of starting afresh in life in the city, despite her gross violation.

In *The Stone Virgins* Vera engages with the 'ugly' or dark part of the history of Matebeleland after Independence, in a way that no other writer has dared to do in Zimbabwean literature. Her novel is divided into two parts, with the first part being a time of hope as well as uncertainty on a national scale (and on a personal scale, it is the time of Thenjiwe and Cephas's intense love affair). The second part of the novel represents a time of terrible retribution for reasons that are never declared. The novel embodies unexplained violence on a national scale and the reader's shocked discovery of the extent of that violence. Vera does not attempt to make us understand the killing of the storekeeper and other civilians by soldiers in the same way that she does with Sibaso. On a personal scale, Sibaso never says why he kills Thenjiwe and rapes Nonceba. Nevertheless, Vera writes her narrative in a way that makes us understand Sibaso without condoning his brutality even while we know that he is one of the sources of the horrors that take place in Kezi.

In this chapter, first I will investigate the relationship between fiction and history in *The Stone Virgins*. The events that are challenged in the narrative are, however, not as far away in time as those that are usually designated 'history'. Thus, this study will make it clear that Vera's challenge in *The Stone Virgins* is more to the government's propaganda machinery than to official history. I also intend to analyze how Vera represents war and where she places her women characters in the aftermath of these wars. This includes how Vera, with the aid of hindsight as in her other two novels under study, explores her subject matter, that is, the violence that her women characters suffer in Kezi during the dissident movement between 1980 and 1985. A key objective of this chapter is to determine what the act of utterance means for her two female characters, Thenjiwe and Nonceba Gumede, the sisters who are grossly violated. The question extends to whether the act of utterance is itself a way that Vera sees for Nonceba to recover from the violation perpetrated against her. I will then look for a link between utterance and the agency of women, that is, I will inquire whether Vera shows that women can be agents of their own recovery and the means by which they eventually find words which might heal their pain. What is also significant and worth exploring in this novel is how Vera makes one of her male characters, Cephas, aid her surviving female character to deal with her violation, begin to recover and subsequently move on with her life. This consequently leads my study to the investigation of whether there are any signposts for the future of Vera's women. This arises especially with regards to the return of the female freedom fighters to Kezi during the ceasefire, as well as Nonceba's hospitalisation and her promising recovery. It is significant that the women soldiers feature during the ceasefire period, a time of optimism with everyone hopeful for the unity and prosperity of the new nation. With regards to the male characters in the narrative, this chapter will question whether they too can draw on history for healing or whether, like Sibaso, they are shaped by history for murderous purposes (Ranger, 2002: 212). Driver and Samuelson suggest that "the two male characters Sibaso and Cephas enter, conceive of, enact and relate to history in quite different ways" (2004: 185).

The first part of *The Stone Virgins*, which introduces the geo-physical setting of the novel, presents Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second largest city, and then it moves to the

rural Kezi (which is in Southern Matebeleland and was the rural home of the former ZIPRA leader, the late Vice-President, Joshua Nkomo). This first part also gives us a glimpse of Thenjiwe and Cephas's brief relationship. The second part of the novel, which is set during the period 1981-1986, revisits the lives of Vera's characters who are caught up in the war between the ZIPRA (the armed wing of Nkomo's ZAPU) and the ZANLA forces (armed wing of Mugabe's ruling ZANU PF) in Kezi after the 'ceasefire' declared on 21 December 1979 and also in post-independence Matebeleland. This second part explores two major, horrific events that took place in Kezi. The first incident of horror is the violation of Thenjiwe and Nonceba, the two sisters who are attacked by a dissident named Sibaso. Sibaso kills Thenjiwe in a cold-blooded murder while Nonceba watches and then he rapes Nonceba and cuts her lips off in a delicate but ruthless manner. The second incident of horror is the killing of the villagers and the storekeeper, Mahlatini, and the burning down of Thandabantu Store (the centre of convergence for the people of Kezi) by members of the Fifth Brigade. Vera balances the incidents of horror by showing how each side is responsible in one way or the other for the violation of the people of Kezi. Cephas Dube, briefly Thenjiwe's lover, reads about the killing of Thenjiwe and the rape of Nonceba while he is clipping cuttings from newspapers in an archive where he files documents. Cephas goes to Kezi to look for Nonceba, and manages to convince her to go back with him to Bulawayo where he pays for her to undergo surgery. Unspoken love develops between Nonceba and Cephas. In the narrative we are told that they do not discuss their relationship (154) and that Cephas "dares not question his continuity of emotion, of love – a form of incest, loving two sisters" (159). An interesting observation made by Driver and Samuelson is that the novel does not represent Cephas and Nonceba's relationship in sexual or romantic terms (2004). The narrative ends on an optimistic note with Nonceba having successfully undergone surgery and having found a job for herself on the same day that Cephas has also found her a different job. Thus, the novel's final word 'deliverance' (2002: 165)<sup>1</sup> signifies hope for the future of her female character in the narrative. Vera optimistically points out that during the period of the dissident movement in Matebeleland "people did live, as well, and fall in love, at this time" (Bryce, 2002: 226).

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<sup>1</sup> All further references to the novel will be presented with the page number only.

There has been an official silencing of debate about events which took place in Matebeleland in the 1980s. Thus in order for this study to examine the relationship between fiction and the attitudes and statements of the Zimbabwean government in Vera's last novel, there is need to first give a brief historical background of the ceasefire period in Matebeleland.

The ceasefire of 1979 brought an end to Zimbabwe's liberation struggle. It was a time of hope, as well as of ongoing insecurity and violence. Everywhere guerillas, who had been in the bush living a 'hide and seek' life of fighting, had to turn themselves in at designated Assembly Points (APs) from which they would be demobilized and possibly be integrated into the new ZNA (Zimbabwe National Army). Many guerrillas refused to go to the Assembly Points because they feared that they would be attacked while gathered in these camps, especially as in those days the Rhodesian Army was still intact and not disarming. Some objected to the ceasefire which they regarded as a 'sell out', while others sought to campaign on behalf of their different political leaders outside the Assembly Points. Some simply wanted to enjoy what they saw as the spoils of war.<sup>2</sup>

In the narrative, we learn from Sibaso's thoughts that he neither surrendered nor fought to please another. He says, "In the bush I have no other authority above me but the naked sky" (129). Sibaso's revelation also indicates what might have been another reason for some of the guerrillas' hesitation to move into the designated Assembly Points. Possibly, the guerillas who had been used to so much authority in the rural areas did not want to relinquish that power. According to Alexander et al, the escalation of violence after the end of the liberation war built on the ZANLA and ZIPRA regional patterns of recruitment and operation in the 1970s and the history of hatred and distrust between the two armies and their political leaders (2000: 181). ZIPRA forces were comprised mainly of Ndebele-speaking soldiers from Matebeleland while ZANLA forces were

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<sup>2</sup> The information on the historical background of the ceasefire period in Matebeleland in this section is largely drawn from Alexander, McGregor and Ranger (2000).

predominantly Shona-speaking. This contributed to a deterioration of the relations between the two forces.

The year 1981 saw the arrival of North Korean soldiers who were called in by ZANU PF to train a special Fifth Brigade, alias *Gukurahundi*, (answerable only to the Prime Minister) which, according to press reports, was to be used to wipe out dissidents and criminals, including those found in the army. According to Godwin, the name *Gukurahundi* literally means the first rains of the wet season, that much-awaited downpour which washes away all the accumulated dust and debris of the preceding year. In this context it is used, however, to refer to the Fifth Brigade, the section of the army which was meant to purge society of all the unacceptable debris of history (1996: 343). According to Ranger, “In January 1983, the Fifth brigade was deployed in Matebeleland North and in February 1984, it was deployed in Matebeleland South” (2002: 207). Unimaginable atrocities occurred throughout Matebeleland as the Brigade attacked, brutalized and killed Nkomo’s supporters. Cephas comments in the narrative on his return to Kezi that “the most unimaginable event is not only possible but probable” and also refers to Kezi as “a naked cemetery” (143).

Challenging a national silence about these events, Vera’s narrative boldly re-visits that part of a dark chapter in the history of Zimbabwe. In an interview with Bryce, Vera explains her reasons for re-visiting that ugly part of our history. She says, “Why we’re revisiting the horror of this is to ask how it was possible” (Bryce, 2002: 225). Thus Nonceba thinks to herself when she considers the risk that Cephas has taken with tenderness to be with her in Kezi whether “he can tell her what exactly it took a man to look at a woman and cut her up like a piece of dry hide without asking himself a single question about his own actions, not even the time of the day? What did it take for a man to possess that sort of *obedience*?” (146, my emphasis). From Nonceba’s point of view, there seems to be a driving force behind Sibaso’s brutality which commands him to violate her and her sister. Vera’s two main female characters are caught up in the prevailing political atmosphere of distrust and the conflict between the armed wings of ZANU and ZAPU, which resulted in the deaths of many people in Matebeleland.

Through her representation of the horrific violations that the two sisters experience, Vera shows that we cannot simply ignore or relegate the 'dark chapter of our history' to oblivion. She says "[a]s a writer, you don't want to suppress the history, you want to be one of the people liberating stories, setting them off" (Bryce, 2002: 226). The argument for silence by the perpetrators of that violence, which is tantamount to an official cover up, is that talking about it would be reviving past animosities. According to Ranger, "...Mugabe himself declared in December 2002: '[w]hatever remains were [sic] historical differences. These remain as history of our country and we can't bring ugly history into the present affairs and rewrite that ugly history. No'" (2005: 240-241). Vera, however, has shown us in *Without a Name*, her second novel, how Mazvita unsuccessfully tried to run away from the reality of her violation but could only come to terms with what had happened to her and the crime that she had committed after facing the reality of all her experiences. Thus in both novels, Vera shows us how the people of Zimbabwe can only begin to recover from their ugly history by facing its reality.

Vera's narrative thus boldly challenges the official nationalist historiography that emphasizes the unity of all Zimbabweans regardless of ethnic origin while pretending that the atrocities that occurred in Matebeleland are not worth remembering and people would be better off forgetting them. *The Stone Virgins* questions the essence of 'Independence' and the celebration and merry-making activities that occur in the streets of Bulawayo, while the rural populace is being violated by soldiers from both the ZANLA and ZIPRA factions. Sibaso regards independence as a compromise to which he cannot belong as he has shifted from the idealism which motivated him to join the liberation struggle. According to Driver and Samuelson

As a member of the politically subordinate Zapu, or, more specifically, of its guerrilla army Zipra, Sibaso returns to the Gulati hills after the war, living among the dead, entombed in the memory of death and violence....As a Zipra soldier, Sibaso is not remembered and honoured as a freedom fighter by the ruling group....Steeped in death and violence through the Liberation War, and himself a creature of violation and abuse at the hands of treacherous fellow Zimbabweans, Sibaso becomes a rapist and murderer. (2004: 185)

History has brutalized him and consequently turned him into a brute. When he goes to Njube Township to look for his father, it is said that “[the] whole street is celebrating....There has been daily and spontaneous festivity” (109). We are told that the new owner of the house that used to belong to Sibaso’s family also

did not understand what people were doing with their arms waving miniature flags in the air for weeks....He did not adorn himself like the rest, and shunned those who suddenly wore expensive garments all day, and went to the beer garden in nicely ironed shirts, to drink Chibuku....The elaborate hairstyles of the women give the false impression that everyone has a wedding to attend. (110)

The sympathy between Sibaso and the present occupier of his family house suggests similarities in their views about the war and its aftermath. It is also significant in that it enables Vera to move the concept of ‘dissident’ beyond disaffected ex-freedom fighters. It is also significant that the only thing that Sibaso recovers from the new owner of his former home is Solomon Mutswairo’s historical novel *Feso* in which Nehanda Nyakasikana features. Embedded in the novel is a dead spider which seems to suggest the weightlessness and death of the old idealism that Sibaso once held. In this way the narrative seems to suggest the need to postpone the celebrations for independence in order “to ask questions about the nation, the society and the individual created in that struggle and its aftermath” (Driver and Samuelson, 2004: 175). Later in this chapter I will suggest that narration from Sibaso’s point of view also stimulates questioning.

It is significant that while breaking the silence instilled in people about the Matebeleland massacres, Vera is careful not to identify one side as simply to blame. The narrative does not designate the returned men and women soldiers to either faction, but simply refers to them as the men loose in the bush and soldiers who are “both equally dedicated to ending lives” (146). This is important in that the narrative turns away from the finger-pointing and the blaming that went on between the two factions and holds both factions accountable for the atrocities they committed in Matebeleland. *The Stone Virgins* shows that the killings and the atrocities committed during the period of the dissident movement in Matebeleland should be condemned, regardless of which of the warring

factions committed them. Whilst the nationalist propaganda machinery claims that *Gukurahundi* went into Matebeleland to stop the dissidents from killing innocent people in the region, *The Stone Virgins* shows how villagers were ruthlessly murdered at Thandabantu Store in Kezi. According to Alexander et al “In the early 1980, guerrillas who left APs were condemned and they were termed ‘outlaws’, ‘unruly elements’, ‘bandits’ or ‘renegades’ but the semantic change occurred in the post-election period when armed men on the loose came to be called ‘dissidents’, and the problem they cast was increasingly cast in political terms” (2000: 185). The justification that has recently been given by the ZANU PF spokesperson, Nathan Shamuyarira, is that it was because the dissidents were killing people that the *Gukurahundi* went to correct the situation and protect the people. Effie Mazilankatha-Ncube, the Executive Director and CEO of the Matebeleland Empowerment Services Association, however, counter-argues that Shamuyarira’s justification is a tired argument that has long lost the propaganda relevance it may have held in the 1980s. President Mugabe himself is said to have described the *Gukurahundi* killings as part of a dark chapter in the history of Zimbabwe. (*The Zimbabwe Standard*, Friday, 20 October 2006). In the novel, we are told that “[a]fter all, there is nothing else left communal since the day Thandabantu Store blazed down. Kezi is a place gasping for survival; war, drought, death and betrayals: a habitat as desolate as this is longing for the miraculous” (118). The narrative goes on to reveal that

...the soldiers had walked into Thandabantu towards sunset and found over twenty local men there, and children buying candles, and the old men who should have been at that ancient Umthetho rock dying peacefully but preferred the hubbub at Thandabantu and therefore went there each day, all these. The soldiers shot them, without preamble – they walked in and raised AK rifles: every shot was fatal. (121)

Through this account of the indiscriminate killings that occurred at Thandabantu, the narrative questions the authenticity of the official ZANU PF claim that it assigned the Fifth Brigade the role of intervening in Matebeleland in the interests and protection of the civilians from the dissidents. The narrative explicitly articulates the point that the atrocities committed by the soldiers in Matebeleland were systematic and well-planned:

the team of soldiers who had congregated at Thandabantu Store had demonstrated that anything which had happened so far had not been random or unplanned. Atrocious, yes, but purposeful. They committed evil as though it was a legitimate pursuit, a ritual for their own convictions. (124)

The narrative thus challenges the claim that the Matebeleland massacres were in defense of civilians, and clearly depicts the killings as driven by ulterior motives. Vera does not indicate these motives as stemming from a political power struggle, but, nevertheless, shows that civilians were caught in the cross-fire.

The liberation war and its aftermath impacted on the general populace of Zimbabwe in different ways and with varying degrees but it is common knowledge that the people who suffered the most were women, especially those in the rural areas. The majority of women who remained behind to look after their families while the men went to fight in the war were physically violated and psychologically scarred by the war. Not only were the women raped in the absence and sometimes even in the presence of their men, but they were also subjected to methodical torture by both the Rhodesian forces and the guerrilla soldiers who accused them of being mothers of sell-outs and renegades. In the narrative, the women's celebration on the return of the soldiers shows that although they may have been violated during the war, they endured and survived to see the return of the soldiers. The women who remained behind to look after their families are described as jubilant at the return of the soldiers:

[t]hey sing earth songs that leave the morning pulsating....They weep in daylight....Their minds a sweet immersion of joy; they float; jubilant....Their senses almost divine, uplifted: their pain inarticulate. Voices rise to the surface, beyond the dust shadows which break and glow, and lengthen. They will not drown from a dance in the soaring dust – the memories of anger and pain. They will not die; the accumulation of bitter histories, the dreams of misfortune, the evenings of wonder and dismay....Today they walk on a dry earth, not dead, in an intoxicating brightness, and leave no trace of fears, embraced by the day overflowing....Independence will not come again, and the best spectacle of it is in these women, with the pain in their backs, the curve of their voices, and their naked elbows beating the air. (46)

By referring to the rural women as the embodiment of independence, Vera is celebrating the fortitude, courage and resolve of these women in the absence of the men during the war. On the one hand, the women's will to survive the war-time atrocities and the aftermath is a positive attribute that Vera celebrates in the narrative. They raise their voices in celebration at the return of their husbands, brothers and sons. Their jubilant voices symbolize their recovery of speech, lost during the war-time atrocities that they experienced and witnessed. The women are said to "have no desire to be owned, hedged in, claimed, but be appreciated, and to be loved" (48). Vera seems to be suggesting the passing of an era in which women used to be happy just to be married and to feel that they belonged to their husbands. Gaidzanwa points out that "what is important to note is the fact that women in the rural areas used changes in the gender ideologies that took place during the war to renegotiate their relationships within households" (1992b: 111). The men from the bush are welcomed by women who demand to be loved and appreciated as equals. So even as the military men have returned from the bush, they have another domestic war to fight unless they are prepared to love and appreciate their women who have been patiently waiting for them and who have learnt to survive without father figures, during their absence. It is also possible that alongside these positive developments for rural women, Vera sees their celebrations as a passing joy, a transient bliss which will be cut off by the rise of the dissident movement and the coming of the Fifth Brigade.

Vera represents war and its impact on women in graphic detail that no other novelist has used before in Zimbabwean literature. Her novel alludes to the fate of the women from whom it takes its title, virgins who had to be sacrificial victims at the burial of kings (they had to be buried alive with the dead kings to accompany them on their journeys to the afterlife). We learn from Sibaso's point of view that the women are "virgins who walk into their own graves before the burial of a king. They die untouched. Their ecstasy is in the afterlife....The female figures painted on this rock, the virgins, form a circle near the burial site, waiting for the ceremonies of their own burial" (95). Sibaso's interpretation of the stone virgins as sacrificial figures is an indication of the brutality in him and a turning away from the idealism that motivated him to drop out of

university to join the war. He says “I open my palm against the belly of the woman on the rock...The space between her knees, shafts of light” (95). According to Driver and Samuelson “Sibaso transfers his own experience of sacrifice onto women as his means of displacing it, in a grotesque memorialisation analogous to the stone virgins” (2004: 191). From Sibaso’s thoughts on these stone virgins, one can sense his need for vitality which probably leads him to kill Thenjiwe and rape Nonceba.

In the narrative, however, Vera portrays her female characters not as sacrificial victims but as women who are agents of their own recovery from the violations perpetrated against them. Some of her minor characters, who are rural women, also refuse to be bound by the limits of patriarchy. For example Sihle, the aunt of Thenjiwe and Nonceba (their father’s sister), refuses to go and live with the father of her children and remains in her parents’ home. We are told that “Sihle is not married to Ndabehle Dlodlo, the man with whom she has had four sons...[but i]n the mouths of all the people of Kezi, they are as married as if they lived together. Sihle refuses to leave the home in which she was born” (102). Even Thenjiwe and Nonceba’s mother left their father and “went back to her village because she had tired of his desire for a son” (102). Sihle confides in Thenjiwe that her father had not married again because her mother had taken his heart away with her. The period in which this part of the narrative is set, is before the effective implementation of gender equity policies in Zimbabwe and women were still generally compliant with patriarchal demands. To have such radical rural women characters in the narrative signifies the fact that women in the present cannot simply be regarded as victims (like the stone virgins of the past), but rather as agents of their own lives, and therefore a force to reckon with. Sihle and Nonceba’s mother are two women who will not be sacrificed to societal norms. Through these women Vera shows that there is something beyond ‘sacrifice’ in the present.

The narrative also portrays the women soldiers, who returned from the liberation war in 1979 prior to the Matebeleland massacres, as a force to reckon with. The returned women soldiers, who are a major component of Vera’s moving her female characters beyond patriarchal structures, appear during the ceasefire which was a period of

optimism. They do not belong to the post-independence period of the Matebeleland massacres. Driver and Samuelson argue that there is a sharp contrast between the rural women who welcome the warriors returning from the liberation war, and the women soldiers who return from this war with their male counterparts (2004: 189). The women soldiers return from the bush with a superior claim of their own because they fought together with their male counterparts in the struggle for independence. In the novel we are told that “[t]hey are fighters, simply, who pulled down every barrier and entered the bush, yes, like men” (49). Vera’s women soldiers are assertive and do not apologize for their courage and their long absences from their families. Whereas it is still widely recognized that in real life the female freedom fighters were initially regarded with contempt and either scorned for having discarded their maternal duties or even insulted as having been important only as girlfriends of the male fighters who are believed to have done the actual fighting, in *The Stone Virgins*, Vera gives them their due respect as true combatants. Gaidzanwa points out that “[y]oung women also joined the guerrilla armies together with the young men and this had a dramatic effect on the perceptions about the roles of women among the guerrilla leaders, the peasants, as well as the guerrilla men and women themselves” (1992b: 110). She also points out that “the involvement of women in the liberation armies was resisted initially because the leaders of the liberation movements perceived women’s roles as those of cooking, cleaning and as medical auxiliaries to the male liberation fighters” (1992b: 110). Driver and Samuelson point out that Vera counters these attitudes by excluding from *The Stone Virgins* any “depiction of sexual or erotic relations, that is, among the warriors themselves” (2004: 190). In the narrative we are told that “[t]hese women wear their camouflage long past the ceasefire, walking through Kezi with their heavy bound boots, their clothes a motif of rock and tree, and their long sleeves folded up along the wrist...They stay in camouflage and pull out cigarettes and smoke while standing under the marula tree” (50-51). The fact that these women continue to adorn themselves in their war regalia symbolizes pride in their role as soldiers and their preparedness to fight beyond the end of the war. Whereas in the bush they were fighting for the liberation of the country, I envisage that after the ceasefire these women could fight for equal rights both on a personal scale and in the public domain. The women sit on empty crates like the men and also spend the day at

Thandabantu away from their designated Assembly Points. The men from the village “whose feet have never left the Kwakhe River or wandered anywhere further than Thandabantu Store, lower their eyes frequently and efficiently, and their shoulders too, and pull their torn and faded hats further down. Thus contrite they glance at those military shoes, at those arms like batons, and look straight away, enchanted but not betrayed” (52).

The men from town as well as the men from Kezi simultaneously fear and revere these courageous women. As the men arrive at Thandabantu Store Bulawayo on the bus, the female soldiers do not show any of the excitement that other rural women would normally show on such occasions. These women regard the men from the city with complacency and even look “right past their ... shoulders as though they are invisible” (53) while the men cautiously look around at them examining the air. These men

have read enough and know that these women are not mere pictures from the newspapers folded under their arms announcing a landslide victory for the new prime minister but beings they could greet with care and due respect....These women, alive now sitting on the edge of this smooth wall are the most substantial evidence of survival there is, of courage, of struggle. (53)

Because Vera's women soldiers are impenetrable to the men in Kezi, the men are hesitant to greet them, and keep their distance from the serene gaze of these women. Vera overturns the patriarchal view of the world as the one who is usually the male gazer is turned into the one gazed at. The men cannot comprehend the thought of owing their lives to these women and “knowing they owe too much to even begin to speculate; to owe a woman a destiny is more than their minds can deal with....[they] stare and let themselves be enamoured by the possibilities of freedom” (54). What the men cannot comprehend is that they owe their destinies as well as their lives to this new breed of women, the women freedom fighters who fought in the war to liberate the country from colonial forces. Vera represents her women soldiers as agents of independence together with their male counterparts. She turns her non-military male characters into speechless

vessels thereby empowering her female characters. The men cannot speak first and ask even simple questions about how they killed doves in the forest. The men

would like an account of something simple like that, an answer, about killing doves. If they placed their question carefully like that, innocently, plainly, perhaps they would get an answer that would satisfy all their questions...if they started by asking about the doves, could it not be that some other revelation would tumble out, a truth they could not even imagine, some astounding fact which would gain them too their own legitimacy, some facet about this war beyond their own conception. (54)

Vera shows us how the war created the need for a new kind of relationship between men and women, and subsequently, the need for a new language. Concerning the loss of voice of the males, we are told that “[t]hey panic....and their ... voices vanish and no words can be found to greet a woman at noon. No words at all. They fumble and fail. With disbelief at their own inability they submit to a lengthening silence” (54-55). What Vera is doing with her women soldiers in the narrative is very important because it contrasts with the ordinary village women who are happy and excited at the return of the male soldiers. Driver and Samuelson further argue that the novel uses these groups of women to represent two possibilities for the future. The non-military group will ensure growth of the nation by being faithful to their maternal role while the military women are important for their patience and memory of pain. What the novel does with these military women is important especially considering the fact that in real life women’s role in the making of Zimbabwe has been deliberately undermined or ignored by nationalist historians and politicians alike.

In contrast to Vera’s women soldiers, women are usually rendered speechless in African literature generally, especially literature written by male authors. According to Nfah-Abbenyi,

One facet of [the] male tradition that has come increasingly under attack has been the subservient image that the African male writer has given of the African women. They are portrayed as passive, as always prepared to

do the bidding of their husbands and family, as having no status of their own and therefore completely dependent on their husbands. (1997: 4)

In the past, if women were the protagonists of male-authored narratives, they were usually portrayed as prostitutes and generally wayward characters. Nfah-Abbenyi further argues that “the African woman was not only silent as depicted in print, but was ignored when she herself spoke, when she broke the silence” (1997: 6). Vera herself has spoken about her own experience which is similar to what Nfah-Abbenyi describes. As quoted by Ranger, Vera says that “[w]hen I say that I have been raped, abused, been a victim of incest...I am either met with a shocked silence or shouted down” (Ranger, 2002: 204). Explaining her fellow feeling with the victims of violence, Vera points out that “I write from the margins of my identity...I wrote my name and my hopes down, then a few mistruths” (Ranger, 2002: 204-205). Vera’s experiences show that as a woman writer she offers self-images and general insights into women’s situations which are inaccessible to or ignored by the male writer.

The silence that the women soldiers adopt is one of indifference which challenges the men, and is thus different from the kinds of silence that Mazvita contains and experiences in *Without a Name*. Although she is raped by a freedom fighter in rural Mubaira and makes mistaken attempts to cope with what she is subjected to, as discussed in the preceding chapter, Mazvita is not simply portrayed as a victim. Vera shows her determination and her struggle to find fulfillment. In *The Stone Virgins*, whereas Nonceba is violently silenced by the mutilation of her lips, the women soldiers adopt silence of their own free will and force the men by their silence to go through some kind of soul-searching. Driver and Samuelson posit that “the mutilation of Nonceba’s mouth, specifically, is an attempt to silence her as a woman, to silence one who might bear witness to the male murder and rape of women, and to silence the history of the more general social sacrifice of women that has been effected throughout Zimbabwean history” (2004: 186). In contrast to the other silencing of women, this time it is the men who lose their speech as Vera celebrates the women soldiers’ utterance in the contexts of violence in which they find themselves. The military women, as I have said in the Introduction,

place themselves in focus at Thandabantu Store (the centre of Kezi society) while relegating the non-military men to the periphery. Thus, by shifting the usual margins and the centres in her fiction, Vera subverts the dominant political, cultural and social conceptions of gender both at the centre and at the periphery.

In *The Stone Virgins*, things come to a sudden end for Thenjiwe, but Nonceba, who survives her rape and mutilation, is portrayed as a woman who has the will to go on with her life despite her violation and the killing of her sister. The fact that Thenjiwe and Nonceba are violated in the aftermath of the war highlights Meintjies's claim that in the period of 'peace and reconstruction', in almost every case, new fields of battle emerged over women's bodies as society appeared to re-build its social, political and economic institutions. Meintjies argues that "while violence against women has been given some recognition, not yet fully acknowledged, is that in the aftermath of war, women continue to experience violation on an unprecedented scale..." (2000: 4). During the course of the rape in *The Stone Virgins*, as part of her coping mechanism, Nonceba imagines herself to be a caterpillar which "can hide inward, recoil, fold her knees and her elbows, and all the parts of her body which can bend, which are pliable..." (62). And when "he enters her like a vacuum...her anger rises furiously [and].... she would like to speak; to spit" (62). Even when Sibaso, who is described as a predator with all the fine instincts of annihilation, mutes her physically by cutting off her lips, Nonceba still has the will "to survive the ambush" (62) and "she holds on to life" (63).

Vera's objective in *The Stone Virgins* is to represent the horror of the Matebeleland killings and the gravity of the violence perpetrated on her female characters in a compelling way. She also re-visions the 'patriotic history' which lays all the blame of the Matebeleland killings on the dissident movement, by showing that both sides of the warring factions were responsible for the violation of the civilians. Vera uses two male characters and two female characters in her narrative, and eye witness accounts in describing the destruction of Thandabantu Store. The point of view can shift abruptly and regularly between these four characters. By creating a complex, oscillating narrative mode, Vera is able to fulfil her objectives in *The Stone Virgins*.

Vera creates the scene in which Thenjiwe is beheaded and Nonceba is raped and mutilated by Sibaso in sublime terms. She has said that she regards her writing of the scene as a challenge for her. In an interview with Bryce, Vera has revealed that she wanted the scene to be her opening scene but was faced with the challenge “to find the words to make this work in the novel, both to make it believable, dramatic, but to do it in a way which celebrates writing” (Bryce, 2002: 224). Having realized that she had to enable the horrific scene to be read as sublime, as “an astounding, beautiful, creative experience” (Bryce, 2002: 224), Vera says that she decided to “choreograph it [so that] the death becomes like a dance, the way the man kills this woman is almost *sexual, its skill* and passion and intimacy,...[and that she should do this] while maintaining the violence and the blackness of the scene, which was true of the experience in Matebeleland” (Bryce, 2002: 224, emphasis mine). It is important to note that Vera’s choreography of the killing and the rape was her way of creating a conjunction of the beauty (the skill) and the horror of the whole act. Vera suggests that Sibaso is a trained killer who is practising his artistry. My emphasis in the quotation picks out Vera’s suggestion that Sibaso has become an artist of rape as well as murder. Directly from Nonceba we learn how Sibaso beheads Thenjiwe and how “he holds the dead body up, this stranger, clutching that decapitated death like a rainbow” (67) in a skilful and almost sexual way. Then the narrative shifts to an author-narrator who is watching Nonceba, and we are told that “[i]n that quickness, moments before that Nonceba sees the right arm pull back and grab the body by the waist, a dancing motion so finely practised it is clear it is not new to the performer. It is not the first death he has caused” (68). Then the narration once again shifts from what Nonceba sees of the killer’s artistry and turns to what goes on in the killer’s mind: “He holds tight as though this part of the game requires courage, and ingenious tenderness, this part when his mind dances with a dead body” (68). Vera’s representation of the violence in the whole scene is done through the co-presence of and co-operation between point of view narration and authorial narration. First, we view the scene through Nonceba and then through the narrator we see Nonceba watching what is happening, and finally we are given access to Sibaso’s feelings.

While the murder and the rape are violent acts of cruelty, Vera describes them as creative in the way they are executed. The effect of her technique at this point is that it helps to portray the cruel acts as a combination of beauty and horror, as sublime, and yet still leave the reader able to understand the scene of the killing as a miniature representation of what actually took place during the Matebeleland massacres. This helps Vera in her challenge of how to present Sibaso to her reader as a rapist-murderer, who, at the same time warrants the reader's understanding. The implication of what Vera does here is that we have to understand horror if we are to be able to act against it and prevent it in future. What Vera is doing is to make her readers realize that Sibaso has been inevitably shaped into a murderer by historical forces that are beyond him, that even we are still trying to understand today in real life. As hinted in my Introduction, the conjunction that Vera creates of beauty (skill) and horror in the act of murder is daring if not dangerous because it could easily be seen as a celebration of the killer's art and power.

As has been mentioned in the preceding chapter on *Without a Name*, the rapist's whispering is part of the horror of the rape scene. Sibaso too whispers to Nonceba during the rape as if they are engaged in consensual love-making. In contrast to the narration of the freedom fighter's whispering as he rapes Mazvita (we do not get his words from Mazvita who is not inclined to divulge everything as it happened), we hear Sibaso's actual whispered words in *The Stone Virgins*: "Are you afraid to look at me....Hold me. Touch me here. Look at me. I said touch me here" (63; 64). However, Vera does not use any speech marks to indicate Sibaso's whispers. On carefully reading the episode, one realizes that Sibaso's direct speech is unmarked, which reflects that the reader is getting privileged access to the scene as it takes place. When Nonceba recalls her rape and the killing of her sister we get access into her thoughts as she traces every step that Sibaso takes in raping her. There is dreadful clarity about Nonceba's knowledge and her words as she thinks of what has happened to her and her sister, which is different from what happens to Mazvita in *Without a Name*. This too is like a choreographed dance, especially as Sibaso cuts her lips. Nonceba is fully conscious as she thinks, "I am waiting. I am alive, now, a companion to his every thought. I am breathing...I am alive,

on this knee. I am waiting. I am alive” (62; 66). In the whole scene Nonceba both collaborates with and resists Sibaso, at times yielding to his commands as when “she must put her fingers in his” (66) and to his actions when she leans backward “her body like a bent stem”, and at other times resisting when “she swings forward, away from him” (62). Nonceba’s first-person inner voice helps us to see her will to live on beyond this incident, and the figural narration that blends with Nonceba’s point of view narration helps to support what she says.

The narrative then shifts from Nonceba’s point of view to Sibaso’s point of view as “he thinks of the scars inflicted before dying, betrayals before a war, after a war, during a war. Him. Sibaso. He considers the woman in his arms” (71). Here, the reader gets insight into how Sibaso probably became the murderer and rapist that he is. From his thoughts, we get to know about the betrayal before, during and even after the war, which explains his current position. Driver and Samuelson argue that “[e]ntering into Sibaso’s consciousness, Vera urges us to note his psychic damage: ‘My mind is scalded and perfectly free. My mind is a ferment’” (2004: 185). Driver and Samuelson’s argument is that Vera gives Sibaso space to explain his own betrayal “even while the harm he inflicts is uncompromisingly represented in all its horrors” (2004: 185). Sibaso’s sense of betrayal is corroborated by the historical study of violence and memory in Matebeleland by Alexander et al, who say that many of the former ZIPRA guerrillas became dissidents not by choice but as a means of survival while they were being hunted down by the former ZANLA forces now integrated into the new ZNA. According to Alexander et al, “Interviews with former Zipra<sup>3</sup> combatants revealed that violence within the ZNA was widespread. Many alleged that Zipra guerrillas were killed, beaten or otherwise victimized. In several battalions, former Zipra guerrillas allege that they were segregated, disarmed, and some were taken away never to be seen again” (2000: 189). This account also helps to explain Sibaso’s outlook as that of someone who was moulded into the dissident that he is.

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<sup>3</sup> I have used capital letters in referring using the acronym for Nkomo’s armed forces but Alexander et al write it as an ordinary word.

After Sibaso's thoughts, the narration shifts back to Nonceba's point of view as she tells of how Sibaso cuts off her lips in a delicate but ruthless manner. She remembers that

[i]t seemed he had only touched me briefly with the back of his hand, mildly....His motion was simple. It was soft and almost tender but I did not know that it was no longer his touch tracing my chin, not just a touch on my lower lip, but more than that. For a moment all this was painless....He sought my face. He touched it with a final cruelty. He cut smoothly away. (71-72)

Narration blurs the order of the violent acts as it moves from Nonceba's point of view narration (Nonceba becomes the focalizer of the story as we get insight into her first hand account of the violation) to authorial narration then to Sibaso's re-membering of his days as a soldier in the hills of Gulati. By alternating the victim and the perpetrator's focalization in the narrative, Vera gives us a balanced view of the magnitude of the violation and the possible reasons for the brutality of the perpetrator. The overall oscillation between Sibaso and Nonceba's points of view helps the reader to participate in the violence perpetrated on Nonceba and to create some kind of subtle explanation, if not justification, for Sibaso's actions.

In Section 7 of the narrative which continues the rape episode, Vera gives the reader privileged access to Nonceba's thoughts so that we follow Sibaso's actions through Nonceba who is the focaliser and feel the impact of her violation through Nonceba herself. Soon after, we are given access to Sibaso's first person narration (as he becomes the focaliser), where he identifies himself by name and reflects how "it is an easy task to forget a name...in a war you discard names like old resemblances, like handkerchiefs torn, leave them behind like tributaries dried" (74). Vera once again exposes how someone can discard a name when it is convenient to do so. As discussed in Chapter Two, Mazvita in *Without a Name* refuses to name her child because she knows that the act of naming is an act of identification with the baby. She also hopes to begin her life again without a name, because by discarding her name, the badge of her former identity, she believes that she can recreate a new identity for herself. In the same way, Sibaso explains how during the war it is necessary to be able to discard one's identity in

order to survive. Sibaso says that “during a war it is better to borrow a name, to lend an impulse to history” (74). In this episode, Vera humanizes Sibaso and makes us understand his cruelty. In the process, Sibaso talks and listens to himself, he is the narrator and the implied listener at the same time so that we see someone in a state of unrecognized conflict and contradiction within himself, just as Mazvita goes through a similar conflict in *Without a Name*. Sibaso constantly uses ‘you’ for his narratee in the episode in which he disassociates himself from ‘independence’. He says “I am a man who is set free, Sibaso, one who remembers harm....” and then to himself as narratee, “[i]f you lie flat over the rock and there is no moon, the stars spread over your body like a glittering mat, and warm you like a blanket. You have the feeling of being divine” (89-90). The narrative has already revealed that Sibaso

finds himself in dark places, unlit sites, dark and grim. A shadow when he walks, a shadow when he sleeps...When he stands his head hits against something heavy – he discovers that history has its ceiling...*He has to crouch, and his body soon assumes a defensive attitude; the desire to attack.* If he loses an enemy, he invents another. This is his purge. He is almost clean...Of course, this idea involves desecration, the violation of kindness. (74, emphasis mine)

The way Sibaso crouches gives the reader the visual image of an animal ready to defend itself and also poised to pounce on its prey. Having lived in the arid terrain of the Gulati Mountains, Sibaso needs vitality which he seeks from the bodies of Thenjiwe and Nonceba. Thenjiwe has been associated with rain by Cephas who thinks that she is more beautiful than the rain and “[i]n the deep dark pool of her eyes the man sees places he has never been, she has never been” (32-33). Whilst Cephas says that he wants to wash Thenjiwe’s body with drops of dew, and pour over her the liquid collected from the early morning dew, his obverse, Sibaso seeks for himself the vitality that Thenjiwe’s body can give. In addition, the war that Sibaso has been fighting requires a soldier to divide everything into good and bad and people are consequently divided into either allies or foes. Thus even at the end of the war, soldiers like him have the desire to attack and if there is no enemy then they will necessarily invent one. Furthermore, Sibaso tells us that he had to swim out of his mother’s womb at birth, because his mother had died while

trying to give birth to him. His sad childhood, coupled with the brutality that he faces in the war, possibly contribute to his brutality.

There is also a strong connection between Sibaso and spiders in the narrative, even as it shows how Sibaso has acquired intimate knowledge of the natural world. Through Sibaso's thoughts, we learn about the different types of spiders and how he has "harvested handfuls of spider legs while they remained like promises, weightless, harmless needles" (75). The connection between Sibaso and spiders is significant in that both are predators. When he says he has seen a spider dancing with a wasp, he recalls to mind that he was involved in something like a choreographed dance with Thenjiwe's corpse. He says "I have seen a spider dancing with a wasp....Most men watch motions of such a spider. Every survivor envies a spider dancing with a wasp" (75). Sibaso here seems to be admiring how a spider engages in a potentially fatal dance with a wasp, and because he has been trained to create illusory enemies in the absence of real enemies, Sibaso likens Thenjiwe to a wasp, thereby trying to justify why he kills her. In this way we are thus shown the idiosyncratic tendencies of thought that Sibaso's 'training' has instilled in him.

As has already been mentioned, the two incidents of horror in the narrative are blamed on the warring factions in the narrative. In order for Vera to strike a balance between the gravity of the violence and killings committed by the two sides, she gives an equally graphic description of the horrific events that took place at Thandabantu Store when Mahlatini and the other villagers are killed by the soldiers. This description is not however done with the interiority that she gives to Sibaso. We are told that

Mahlatini, long the storekeeper of Thandabantu Store has died. Those who claim to know inch by inch what happened to Mahlatini say that plastic bags of Roller ground meal were lit, and let drop bit by bit over him till his skin peeled off from his knees to his hair, till his mind collapsed, peeled off, and he died of the pain in his voice....Mahlatini. They made a perverse show out of his death ....Who was Mahlatini? He was only a storekeeper whom they could skin alive and discard....first, they shot his legs. It was when he was on the floor that they tore off his clothes and lit the plastic bags....They tied him up. Then, they let the burning emulsion down. On him. The soldiers focused on

this one activity with force and intensity, their faces expressionless as they sliced plastic after plastic.... (121-123)

It is from “those who witnessed the goings-on at Thandabantu on this night” and also from the authorial narrator that we learn how “Mahlatini howled like a helpless animal....What followed the series of gunshots, the torture, was a cacophony of sound which lit the night with its explosion. The odour of charred flesh filled the air and has stayed in the minds of the Kezi villagers forever” (123). In describing the killing of Mahlatini and the other villagers at Thandabantu Store, Vera uses repetition (as in the passage just quoted) and leads us to picture Mahlatini’s death over and over again, which brings out the horror of the killings. Connecting this to her technique of fusing orality and the written word in *Nehanda*, I would say that probably Vera was inspired by oral narratives, where repetition is used for emphasis. Besides that, Vera also presents the account of the events as having come from witnesses of the violence. Her use of eye-witnesses and of an omniscient narrator makes the whole account more believable as it is re-told by those who claim to have seen the event.

By distancing herself from this account as well as from Thenjiwe’s murder, Vera is able to give other perceptions of the actual killings that took place in Matebeleland. The accounts of the killings at Thandabantu Store, however, seem to be fraught with inconsistencies in that those who claim to have been there when Mahlatini was killed and Thandabantu was burnt give different accounts of the same events. Some say that no one survived to tell the story, while others say that those who escaped fled to Bulawayo, and yet “others insist that nobody fled to Bulawayo on that night” (124). Nevertheless the authorial-narrator keeps referring to eye witnesses of the incident. What Vera achieves by this is to suggest how difficult it was to get people to come out as witnesses because the Fifth Brigade made sure that it left no traces of its violence by killing all those who were condemned to die and intimidating those that were fortunate to remain alive. The accounts of what happened in Kezi on that night are similar to the real life events described in Peter Godwin’s autobiography, *Mukiwa* (1996). Godwin also writes about how it was difficult for witnesses to come forward as they knew that they would be

tortured if found out, which happened in most cases. When Godwin goes to rural Matebeleland as a reporter but disguised as a Catholic priest, he actually sees a disused mine shaft where bodies of those killed were deposited to rot. In Vera's novel we are told that "[o]ther [witnesses] insist that nobody fled to Bulawayo on that night but that some men were forcibly taken kilometres from Kezi, dragged way past the hills of Gulati, deep into campsites where many others were being held, tortured, killed and buried in mass graves" (124).

Because she as a writer wants to question the motives of the Matebeleland killings and also to challenge the silences about the killings, Vera sets the reader solidly in the main settings of her narrative so that her narrative does not seem like a fictional account of things that did not occur. This helps to authenticate her account of what happened in Kezi as a miniature representation of what actually transpired in the broader Matebeleland region. Vera orients the reader in relation to the settings of her narrative, which are Bulawayo and Kezi. This is different from her first two novels where the reader is left to figure out for him/herself, where events in the narrative occur. The opening of *The Stone Virgins* takes the reader from a long account of the city of Bulawayo, where the narrative will also end, to Kezi where the main events take place. Vera also gives a detailed description of Thandabantu Store before its destruction so that the reader can feel the impact of its destruction when it is reduced to rubble by the soldiers. Before the killings, Thandabantu Store is depicted as the centre of Kezi which draws people together and where life is slow and relaxed, whilst *ekoneni* (the corner) in Bulawayo represents the junction where people have to make their own focal points and can go in either direction. Bulawayo, unlike Harare in *Without a Name*, is a source of healing to Nonceba, and not a place without substance as Mazvita finds Harare to be.

Back in Kezi after her hospitalisation and subsequent discharge from hospital, Nonceba is visited by Cephas who then takes her to Bulawayo, where she undergoes further surgery. And when Cephas reappears it is as though for him Thenjiwe lives on in Nonceba. Cephas regards them as "[two] sisters, two sides, but not quite opposite: connected. Their birth, and a life shared; linked. The trace of one voice is in the other, the

gesture of one, in the other... the shape of a nail, of a bone, especially the voice: oneness. They exist in each other, and where one life ended; so did the other" (158). Therefore by bringing Nonceba back to life the memory of Thenjiwe can live on in Cephas. Nonceba tells Cephas that she had been a teacher the previous year but she is now staying at home because the school has closed down due to the fighting in Matebeleland. After a year in Bulawayo Nonceba finds a job for herself at a company called "Duly's" (157) on the same day that Cephas gets her a different job in the Public Library. She however opts for the job that she has found for herself. She feels that "[a] new path has opened for her, she will meet other people at work, build new friendships, have colleagues, discover qualities of her own" (157). Furthermore, Nonceba feels that she has the strength and the resolve to face the challenge that the new job will afford her.

Traceable in Nonceba's recovery is the interlacing of her focalization with many other things, especially with Sibaso's focalization and the screaming woman in the hospital scene. In Section 8 in the hospital scene, Nonceba hears a woman screaming as "[h]er voice sweeps down the corridor like a hot liquid" (79), and she struggles to hold on to the broken, distant voice of the screaming woman. In the confusion of her thoughts, Nonceba thinks of Thenjiwe and also sees "a man approaching from behind the hibiscus bush" (83). The man who emerges from the hibiscus shrub, as we find out later is Cephas, the man who shields her from the invisible scars and pays money for her to have the visible ones surgically removed. At this time, Nonceba is mute and does not realize that she has been lying in the hospital bed for a week. The narrative then turns to Nonceba who becomes the focaliser as we see her back home in Kezi beginning to recover and staying with Sihle. Although she is still unable to speak, at this stage Nonceba has regained some coherence in thought and is able to recognize Sihle as she walks into the room towards her. She also realizes the extent of the harm that has been done to her face as she says, "I am unable to speak, my forehead is heavy...My entire face is swollen, and throbs. The skin on it pulls down and tightens, then my words quickly withdraw" (113). Although her face is painful and swollen, Nonceba begins to test her ability to speak: "I open and close my mouth...I test my ability to speak. I have not heard my own voice for so long. A sound moves from the bottom of my chest, rises

to my throat” (114). From Nonceba’s thoughts we can see how she makes an attempt to recover her ability to speak which she has lost as result of the mutilation of her lips. Even when she is in pain, Nonceba is portrayed as a woman who will not succumb to her forced silence.

Another example of the development of Nonceba’s attempts to overcome her traumatic situation is when she emerges from a bad dream “with no light in it. In this dream, she moves her hands over each object, her pulse is beating against the darkness....Her arms are flung out” (125). After the bad dream, Nonceba is able to rise from her bed for the first time since the rape and the mutilation, although initially “her legs are not steady” (125). She even realizes the need to put her thoughts in order, as she slowly gets dressed and once again thinks about Thenjiwe. Putting on Thenjiwe’s jersey is a way of re-remembering the good times she had had with her sister and represents her ability to confront the reality of her loss by thinking back and re-living how it was before their gruesome violation and separation: “She slides her arms in next to Thenjiwe’s arms, close to her, feeling the warmth gathering to her fingers, like touch, like breathing....She slowly buttons the jersey, slowly, each movement makes her stronger” (126). Nonceba imagines herself talking to Thenjiwe just as they used to do before Thenjiwe’s murder. Once outside, Nonceba watches “as the stone dissolves like salt....[and she feels that t]here were no words to describe their absence of form, or shape” (126-127). Nonceba knows that she is alone but she accepts her grief and does not try to run away from her loneliness and pain, as Mazvita does in *Without a Name*. From this bleak vision of the terrain, emerges an edge and “[i]n that she perceives a drizzle of soft rain” (127). This vision can be seen as symbolic of her promised recovery and the emerging of Cephas from the desolate terrain to aid her in getting on with her life. Cephas’s undertaking of the risky journey to Kezi with tenderness may be associated with hope that the drizzle of soft rain brings to Kezi which Nonceba perceives. When Cephas emerges, Nonceba is initially not sure of where she has seen him but recognizes that he is not unfamiliar.

The description of the atmosphere in Kezi in the scene in which Cephas appears, is suggestive of the recovery that is on its way for Nonceba who can now “raise her arm

and breathe in the marula, a fine layer of perfumed air over her” (131). We are told that “[t]he scent is everywhere, penetrating each dream, each decision. The sun is shining bright, striking pure and downward and hot enough that everyone says today it will rain, but the only thing raining down is the marula haze, colouring every dream from morning to noon, to sundown” (131). This scene of the marula fragrance-filled atmosphere is resonant of Thenjiwe and Cephas’s first meeting and the promise of rain symbolizes the coming of healing for Nonceba as well as the relief of the dry Kezi landscape. Relaxing in her solitude, “sitting under the shade of the mphafa tree and listening to the perfumed shadow and the smooth calling of doves Nonceba sees a man emerge in the far distant horizon...” (132). The calm atmosphere, coupled with the calling of doves which surround Nonceba at the time of Cephas’s approach, are typical of Vera’s use of symbolic language in the build up of her narrative towards its resolution.

Initially Cephas is faced with the obstacle of how to win Nonceba’s trust when she had not heard anything about him from Thenjiwe with whom she thought she shared everything. After what she has suffered, Nonceba cannot easily trust Cephas and she thinks that “[h]er pain is her own, untouchable, not something to be revealed to a stranger who just happens to follow his past [in Kezi]” (141). At first, she resents Cephas when he tells her about how he had learnt about the killing of Thenjiwe and her own violation from the newspaper cuttings thus showing her that she has become public knowledge. From now on we get the narration of what is happening through the oscillation between Nonceba and Cephas’s points of view. For example, Vera explores Cephas’s qualities that make him able to help Nonceba through her consciousness as she wonders: “[w]hat had Thenjiwe loved about him? Was it his eyebrows, dark ink? His voice, gentle, forceful, confident? His kindness? His offer perhaps at all times to help, his capacity to surrender his life to others, to herself, the sister? His spontaneous will? His ability to grasp another’s pain?” (144). In the closing section of the novel, we learn that Cephas and Nonceba’s relationship, although “undefined” is “pleasurable and supportive” (154) and that Cephas has kept his promise of helping her find recovery. From Cephas’s point of view, we also learn that “Nonceba has grown on him, that is all, like a good song” (160) and because of his love for the two sisters “[h]e feels himself located between

them, suspended, unable to pronounce love of one of them, the living sister, the one who can cure him of his dreams” (160-161). Due to the fragility of their relationship, Cephas resolves to “retreat from Nonceba” and “stick to restorations of ancient kingdoms, circular structures, bee-hive huts, stone knives broken pottery...the vanished pillars in an old world” at the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe (165). From Cephas’s desire to restore broken historical artifacts and his help in Nonceba’s recovery, Vera represents a new breed of men who are “possible but not yet” (Lewis, 2005: 3).

On the whole, *The Stone Virgins* completes Vera’s project of telling those Zimbabwean stories that are customarily denied exposure in real life. The Matebeleland massacres are a taboo subject in real life as they are regarded as that ‘ugly’ part of our history that should be laid to rest and not be excavated again. The narrative of the violation of Thenjiwe and Nonceba represents the many untold women’s stories and gives hope to the real life Zimbabwean women who can begin to see hope in despair as they realize that their stories are now being represented in literary works by other women who realize the need to speak out about their experiences. Vera’s last novel shows that among the many men who are usually the perpetrators of violence against women, there are some men like Cephas, who realize the need for women’s healing. As Driver and Samuelson argue, “through the characterization of Cephas (his occasional blurring with Sibaso, his feeling of failure, his desire to remember, to serve, to create), the novel asks questions not only about male transformation, but also the writer’s own relation to history and violence” (2004: 198). By describing the murder and the rape as having been carried out with great skill and art, Vera de-mythologizes the taboo associated with speaking about such experiences, let alone the creativity with which some of the gruesome acts are carried out.

## Conclusion

In my study of women and utterance in the first, second, and last completed novels of the late Zimbabwean feminist writer, Yvonne Vera (19 September 1964 – 7 April 2005), I have examined how the writer did not just publicly lament the neglect of Zimbabwean women as writing and written subjects. I have shown how Vera overcame this neglect through her own act of writing and her constructive breaking of women's silence by way of re-visioning history. According to Lewis,

[Vera] 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 victimized...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. (2005: 3)

I too have argued that even as Vera explores the violation of her women characters in multiple ways, she also shows their determination to move out of their oppressive conditions and to create "visions of freedom."

In paying tribute to the late Vera, Lewis records that 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 [*Why Don't You Carve Other Animals*, 1992], and an array of cultural, literary and social criticism" (2005: 1). In recognition of her outstanding achievements during her short career as a writer, Vera had received numerous literary awards which are mentioned in Lewis (2005) and Zhuwarara (2001). Zhuwarara acknowledges that "[i]n all these outstanding publications one senses a writer who is deeply committed to her art and is often exploring Zimbabwean experience from the point of view of women" (2001: 261).

In my study I have argued that in the three selected texts, Vera reclaims the Zimbabwean women's marginal positions and shows them as spaces of strength. In *Nehanda* as in *The Stone Virgins*, these marginal positions are inverted as Vera's female characters move out of the peripheral positions of the Other to occupy central positions of

the Subject. This inversion of women's marginal positions is especially evident in these two novels in which Vera's narratives are informed by historical actuality, that is, the First Chimurenga and the Matebeleland massacres, respectively. In *Without a Name*, Mazvita the central woman character does not wallow in self-pity when she is raped by a freedom fighter in her rural home. Instead, she sees her solace in moving out of the environment in which she has been grossly violated. For her, the answer to her problems lies in departures, although, as I have argued in Chapter Two, sometimes this is in self-delusion. Lewis asserts that "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" (2005: 2). As this implies, in a novel which is not overtly historical, Vera again demonstrates the national importance of repositioning and reconceptualising women.

In all the three novels under study, Vera set new challenges for herself as a writer each time in order to break the silence of her women characters. I have shown that in *Nehanda* Vera has taken up the challenge of how to write orality, thus repossessing and maintaining "a tradition that speaks directly to women's roles as custodians of (oral) histories and indigenous forms of knowledge" (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997: 150). In the novel, *Nehanda* prophesises the struggle that is going to ensue between the indigenous people and white settlers and the bloodshed that will come with it. The other women characters remember and foretell their dreams and experiences, which are confirmation of *Nehanda*'s prophecies of the future of the country. In relation to African cultural practices in general, Nfah-Abbenyi argues that

[t]his tradition of remembering and retelling, which is culturally defined and acknowledged as women's work, is reclaimed by women in ways that are empowering and sometimes subversive. If this custodianship is empowering to women in oral cultures, then the act of writing, the act of accepting the task of spokesperson, becomes a subversive act that is empowering not only for the writers, but also for the community (of women) for and about whom they write. (1997: 150)

Vera thus uses writing in the service of orality as one of her tools of giving voice to her women characters. As I have argued in my discussion of *Without a Name* in

Chapter Two, one of Vera's challenges in overcoming the past silencing of women by patriarchy and nationalist historiography is exploring the inner speech or mental consciousness of her women characters. In so doing, Vera is able to break the cultural taboos inhibiting her women characters from speaking about and against their violation. I have argued that this is especially important considering the fact that women's speaking out about their conditions of suffering (especially rape) in the 'real' world would largely be considered taboo. In exploring how Vera breaks these taboos in her fiction I came to the conclusion that the act of speaking by her female characters is itself a way of opening spaces for self-affirmation and occupying empowering subject positions, and thus a way Vera sees for women of recovering from the violence perpetrated against them.

I have also established a link between speech/utterance and the agency of women in all of the novels I have discussed. In *Without a Name* as well as in *The Stone Virgins*, women are shown to be agents of their own recovery after they have been rendered speechless by their physical and psychological violation. One of the biggest challenges that Vera set for herself in her last novel was how to tell the narrative from the violated woman's point of view and to bring in the rapist-murderer's point of view in such a way that the reader could understand him as someone who was shaped into a brute by the history of his country, without condoning his actions. Vera also had to grapple with showing that both sides of the warring factions in the Matebeleland massacres were to blame for the suffering of the civilians. Although Vera does strike something of a balance in her depiction of the gruesome acts by the armed forces from either side, she does not give any of Sibaso's interiority to the Fifth Brigade and so does not attempt to make the reader understand their motives in killing in the same way that she does with the rapist-murderer (Sibaso). Another of her challenges in this novel was how she could use four central characters in depicting the contexts of violence that her women characters are immersed in. Writing in an environment where the violation of women was rife, Vera was able to explore how one of her male characters (Cephas) might help her surviving female character (Nonceba) begin to recover from her violation. In this way, Vera was able to counterbalance her account of Sibaso, which has important implications for her and our understanding of gender and its construction. She was also able, through the

women soldiers and to some extent through Cephas, to represent (as she did with the revisioning of history in *Nehanda*) what might be and not what the situation has been in actuality. In *The Stone Virgins* the main characters and the ideas they represent are established first and the minor characters are used to confirm these ideas, whereas in *Nehanda* Vera gives us the minor characters first but confirms the significance of their ideas through the main characters. On the whole, Vera's novels have great potential to expose the contradictions within constructions of gender and the oppressive gender relations in the Zimbabwean context.

As Lewis rightly asserts “[l]ike 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’” (2005: 3). Positioned in relation to existing critical works on Vera's novels, my contribution to the critical debate has been to demonstrate how Vera, through the use of her narrative technique and unique poetic style was able successfully to challenge the conditions of women in present-day Zimbabwe and point to a possible Zimbabwean nation which, as Lewis says, is “possible but also not yet”.

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