Intersections of language, landscape and the violated female body in the texts of Yvonne Vera
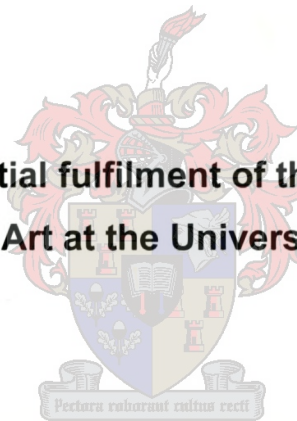
by

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Declaration

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

Signature:

Date:

Abstract

This thesis will examine the way in which representations of landscape and the language of nationalist discourse contribute to the creation of an environment in which the female body is particularly vulnerable to violation. In her novels *Without a Name, Under the Tongue* and *The Stone Virgins*, Yvonne Vera identifies the extent to which the linguistic and representational legacies of colonialism, as well as the language and operational strategies of nationalism, conspire to facilitate the layered disempowerment and victimisation of women in Zimbabwe. Vera exposes the inconsistencies in the symbolic economy of colonialism and nationalism by problematising the equation of the African woman with the African landscape in the case of colonial discourse and by questioning the equation of the African woman with the good, nurturing and self-abnegating mother of the nation in the case of nationalist rhetoric. By articulating the experiences of her female protagonists, Vera makes it clear that the liberation of the Zimbabwean land from white minority rule does not necessarily lead to the liberation of the women who live and work on the land. Colonialism, nationalist movements and the wars that sought to reclaim the land that was appropriated in the imperial endeavour impacted men and women in very different ways. In order to voice the stories of women, Vera chooses to eschew conventional modes of writing and speaking since they are pervaded with metaphors that perpetuate the disempowerment of women. Instead, she attempts to develop a new discourse that amalgamates poetry and prose, orality and writing and innovation and tradition. She turns to the female body and engages with the Zimbabwean landscape in an alternative way in her attempt to speak the hitherto silenced stories of women. In doing so, Vera reclaims the subversive power of women's speech and silences within communities of women. The way in which women communicate in these distinctly female spaces forms the basis of the language Vera creates to tell of women's experiences of rape, incest and mutilation.

Abstrak

Hierdie tesis sal ondersoek instel na die wyse waarop voorstellings van landskap en die taal van nasionalistiese diskoers bydra tot die skepping van 'n situasie waarin die vroulike liggaam uiters kwesbaar is. In haar romans *Without a Name, Under the Tongue* en *The Stone Virgins*, identifiseer Yvonne Vera die mate waarin die linguistieke en voorstellingspraktyke van kolonialisme sowel as die taal en operasionele strategieë van nasionalisme saamwerk om die veelvuldige ontmagtiging en viktimisering van vroue in Zimbabwe te fasiliteer. Vera ontbloot die teenstrydighede in die simboliese ekonomie van kolonialisme en nasionalisme deur middel van 'n problematisering van die gelykstelling van die Afrika vrou en die Afrika landskap in die geval van kolonialistiese diskoers en deur 'n bevraagtekening van die Afrika vrou en die goeie, self-opofferende moeder van die nasie in die geval van die retoriek van nasionalisme. Deur die ondervindings van haar vroulike karakters te artikuleer, maak Vera dit duidelik dat die bevryding van Zimbabwe van wit minderheidsbeheer nie noodwendig gelei het tot die bevryding van die vroue wat in Zimbabwe woon en werk nie. Kolonialisme, nasionalistiese bewegings en die oorloë wat die land probeer terugeis het wat in die kolonialistiese projek geapproprieer is, het mans en vrouens op verskillende wyses beïnvloed. In haar poging om vrouens se stories te vertel, besluit Vera om nie gebruik te maak van konvensionele maniere van skryf of praat nie, aangesien hulle gekenmerk word deur metafore wat die ontmagtiging van vroue bevorder. Sy poog eerder om 'n nuwe diskoers te ontwikkel wat 'n amalgamasie is van poësie en prosa, oraliteit en skryfkuns en vernuwing en tradisie. Sy wend haarself tot die vroulike liggaam en sy werk met die Zimbabwiese landskap op 'n alternatiewe wyse in haar poging om die stories van vroue wat tot nou toe stil gemaak is, te vertel. In hierdie projek neem Vera die mag van vroue se spraak en stilte terug. Die manier waarop vroue kommunikeer in die vroulike ruimtes van groepe wat eksklusief uit vroue bestaan, vorm die uitgangspunt van die taal wat Vera skep om te vertel van vroue se ervarings van verkragting, bloedskande en mutilasie.

<u>Acknowledgements</u>

Contents

Chapter 1

Historical overview and theoretical background.

1.1. Introduction

Yvonne Vera locates the violated female body at the intersection of the Zimbabwean landscape and the language of traditional nationalist discourse. This thesis will explore the way in which language, particularly the way language is used to represent landscape and the female body, contribute to reducing the female body to the territory on which and for which men wage their wars. This thesis will then examine Vera's deconstruction of the linguistic and representational practices that conspire to relegate women's bodies to the status of battlefield. The focus will be on the way in which the interaction of landscape, language and nationalism, within the context of the war-torn Zimbabwean environment, facilitates the violation of Vera's female protagonists. My analysis will aim to show that the discourse of war has a constitutive impact on the construction of both male and female identity, in a way that locates agency and aggression in men while passivity and victimhood are postulated to be inherently female attributes. In order to explore these contentions, it is necessary to provide some background to the Zimbabwean situation to demonstrate how the discourse of war has affected gender constructions and resulted in a scenario that is particularly conducive to gender violence. Wars are fought on both a literal, physical and a figurative, symbolic front. Women, as the casualties of these wars, are physically brutalised and symbolically and materially marginalised.

1.2. Historical overview

In her novels, Vera attempts to articulate the silenced stories of women caught up in Zimbabwe's war of national liberation. The violation of female bodies is,

however, not limited to Zimbabwe's liberation struggle. On the contrary, it has become a defining characteristic of wars being waged from as far afield as Iraq to the more proximate conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The current political and social turmoil in Zimbabwe has again seen women being victimised to a disproportionate degree. This thesis will argue that the destabilisation accompanying social and political conflict in Africa cannot be comprehensively analysed without reference to the historical impact, and enduring legacy, of colonial occupation. As in the case of the East, the rise of nationalism in Africa has been "dialectically related to the growth of imperialism" (Jayawardena, 1986:4).

In her study of nationalism in Third World countries, Jayawardena identifies the tendency to "assert[ ] a national identity on the basis of which people could be mobilised against imperialism" (1986:3). For similar reasons, nationalism and colonialism have been inextricably intertwined on the African continent. The partition of Africa, which was formalised at the Berlin Conference in 1884 – 1885, was a largely arbitrary process during which European states laid claim to chunks of African territory without considering the pre-existing "ethnic, racial, religious and regional affiliations" (Osaghae, 1999:184). The result was the formation of African states with highly heterogeneous and fragmented populations. Violence and conflict were thus built into the very foundations of the artificially constructed African state. In addition, the need for African countries to present a united front against Western colonial aggression resulted in the rapid growth of nationalism as countries sought to unite their diverse populations against a common enemy. For these reasons it can be argued that colonialism greatly contributed to "turning nationalism into a political creed of global significance" (Heywood, 1997:115). Nationalism, and the colonialism to which it was a response, are discourses imbued with patriarchal assumptions and their continuing relevance in Africa continues to affect the symbolic and material place of women in African societies.

Analyses of nationalism have been problematised by the fact that the nation, as a concept, is a nebulous one. Anderson has observed that "[n]ation, nationality [and] nationalism [have] all proved notoriously difficult to define, let alone to analyse" (1983:12 – 13). Demonstrating similar frustration at the conceptual challenges posed by nationalism, Heywood laments that "nationalism shows every sign of suffering from the political equivalent of multiple-personality syndrome" (1997:109). At different times and in different contexts, nationalism has served vastly different purposes. As a response to foreign occupation, for example, various strands of African nationalism have been a left-leaning force working towards goals of liberation and democratisation. By contrast, expansionist versions of nationalism have been decidedly oppressive and authoritarian (Heywood, 1997:109). Indeed, expansionist nationalism served to secure public support for the European scramble for Africa. This form of nationalism ushered in decades of colonial repression and necessitated the rise of anti-colonial nationalism. Nationalism thus has a double usage: it functions "both as an ideology and as a movement to realise the national will" (Wilford, 1998:10). Smith offers a definition of nationalism that recognises the complexity of the term by describing it as "an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity and identity on behalf of a population deemed by some of its members to constitute an actual or potential 'nation'" (1986:15).

The political turmoil and social conflict to which Vera's protagonists are exposed can be seen as an accumulation of the battles and hostilities that span the history of Zimbabwe. These range from the colonisation of the country, to the struggles for liberation and the politically inspired violence that has marred the post-independence era. The incursions of Rhodes' British South Africa company in the 1890s were met by armed resistance to the white invasion. The two main ethnic groups in Zimbabwe are Shona and Ndebele. In addition to the violence perpetrated by the colonial state on Zimbabwe's indigenous population and the nationalist uprising against this state, the civilian population was also caught up in the ethnic rivalries between the Shona and Ndebele peoples. In anti-colonial

nationalist movements, the solidarity of an indigenous population in opposition to a foreign occupier is "propelled by an us/them, insider/outsider, inclusive/exclusive dynamic" (Wilford, 1998:2). In ethnically divided societies there is a tendency for this "us and them" dynamic to be projected onto inter-ethnic interactions. As a result, "inter-ethnic differences can spiral into violence as self-consciously distinctive groups take up arms in order to realise their claims to autonomy" (Wilford, 1998:2). This was the case with the Matabeleland massacres in the 1980s. In a campaign of violence and brutality that resembled ethnic cleansing, the Shona group powerfully sought to assert the exclusion of the Ndebele people from their conception of the nation (Alexander et al., 2000:1).

Prior to the declaration of Rhodesian independence by Ian Smith in 1965, two distinct strands had crystallised from Zimbabwe's national liberation movement, namely the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) and the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU). The liberation of the country from white minority rule in 1980 and the subsequent election victory of ZANU under the leadership of Robert Mugabe, ushered in a particularly bloody era as the ZANU government strove to consolidate its power by eradicating all remnants of support for ZAPU. Since ZAPU was a predominantly Ndebele party and ZANU was primarily Shona, this political rivalry manifested itself in violent ethnic conflicts, culminating in the Matabeleland massacres mentioned above (Alexander et al., 2000:5). In 1990, ZANU and ZAPU amalgamated to form ZANU-Patriotic Front and the erstwhile ZAPU was effectively neutralised as a counterweight for the political power of Mugabe's party (McGowan and Nel, 1999:246). In present day Zimbabwe, the increasing electoral significance of Morgan Tsvangirai's Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) has again led to escalating violence across the country as the state seeks to repress the political threat posed by the MDC.

1.3. <u>Gender and war</u>

In Zimbabwe, colonialism, war and nationalism have all contributed to an environment that is conducive to the comprehensive victimisation of women. The experiences of women in Zimbabwe are indicative of a much broader, global tendency of women in wars to be exposed to a multiple, layered situation of victimisation. In order to explore this contention, it is necessary to recognise the distinctly gendered nature of war, colonialism and nationalism. These are not gender neutral phenomena. On the contrary, very specific conceptions of manhood and womanhood lie at the very heart of colonialism and nationalism. Stereotypical gender assumptions are also evident in any analysis of the dynamics of war.

Although the exclusively female armies of the mythical Amazons and of ancient gathering-hunting matriarchal societies do suggest possible alternatives, the overwhelming majority of wartime fighters in contemporary conflicts are male. Of the approximately 23 million soldiers who are currently serving in uniformed standing armies across the globe, a mere 3% are female (Goldstein, 2001:10). On closer examination, it also becomes apparent that the majority of these female soldiers are ghettoized in positions that have traditionally been regarded as the domain of women. Women in military forces thus continue to do the bulk of administrative and care-taking work. In a discussion of the Mozambican war for independence, Amina Mama notes that, since sexual inequality was rife in Mozambican society, women were frequently sent to rural areas because, as women, "they were able to shame men into volunteering" (1997:55). Even when women participated in military activity, the construction of women as passive and men as active thus remained intact. This means that, even when women actively contribute to the defence or liberation of their countries, the conventional, gendered relations of power between men and women are not disrupted to any significant degree.

The women who made such a crucial contribution to the liberation of African countries in general, and to Zimbabwean liberation in particular, were firmly

yanked back to the private sphere in the aftermath of national liberation. The master narrative of Zimbabwean nationalism seems to be suffering from amnesia when it comes to recounting the role women played in nationalist movements. The women, however, remember things very differently. During the Lancaster House talks in London in 1979, women were sharing in the euphoria of newly attained national liberation and they fully expected to be equal recipients of the freedoms they had helped to secure. Jane Ngwenga, then ZAPU Secretary for Women's Affairs, captured this sense of female optimism when she stated that everyone could "now see [that] there is no difference between a man and a woman in Zimbabwe, they suffer the same" (1983:82). She argued that women were "not only active in that they [fed] the boys, and [got] killed and so on" (Ngwenya, 1983:82), but that they played an indispensable part in every aspect of the armed struggle. She, along with many other women, erroneously believed that nationalist movements would put gender equality on a par with racial equality. It must, therefore, have been a particularly rude awakening for women to be confronted by traditional gender stereotypes and oppression when the nationalist liberation celebrations had died down. Mama, for example, observes that "many of the [Zimbabwean] women who joined men in the bush to fight the white settler regime found themselves rejected in favour of more traditionally feminine women once the fighting was over" (1997:56). This, together with countless other examples of reversions to conventional gender expectations, convinced her that there was no basis "for assuming gender equality would be a necessary fruit of military victory" (Mama, 1997:56).

The relegation of the female to the domestic sphere after national conflicts has left many women with a profound sense of betrayal. Manchanda observes that "women's activism . . . is predictably devalued as accidental activism and marginalised post-conflict, as politics become more structured and hierarchical" (2001:9). In addition to the lack of acknowledgement of women's war-time contributions, the very nature of war affects cultural conceptions of womanhood and manhood in a way that further facilitates the victimisation of women. At a

time when women anticipate greater gender equality, they thus find that their position is even more precarious than it was pre-conflict. The brutality of war, as well as the totalising discourse of military machismo which serves to mobilise men to fight, tend to lead to men romanticising the women on whose behalf they are supposedly fighting.

In many instances women actively celebrate their symbolic role as mothers of the nation and support the exploitation of this image by nationalist movements. This is a particularly familiar trope in the history of Afrikaner nationalism. A significant contingent of Afrikaans speaking South African women relished their role as *Volksmoeder*. In the profoundly patriarchal South African society, they grabbed what little status this role afforded them and encouraged their husbands, sons and brothers to fight for the defence of the status quo. The construction of the *"volksmoeder* ideal found resonance among middle-class women because it gave legitimacy to their role in society as wives, mothers and voluntary workers" (Brink, 1990:291). The result is that women become complicit in the reinforcement and perpetuation of stereotypes that portray women as passive, helpless and in need of protection. In South Africa, white women can thus be said to be "both colonised and coloniser, ambiguously complicit in the history of African dispossession" (McClintock, 1997:105). In Zimbabwe, women also enthusiastically supported nationalist movements even though these movements do, on closer analysis, prove to be highly patriarchal and misogynist. The comparison between Afrikaner and Zimbabwean women's involvement in nationalist projects should, however, not be seen as an equation of the two types of nationalist movements. Afrikaner nationalism served to mobilise a nation to participate in an appropriatory project of stealing African land, while Zimbabwean nationalism served liberatory purposes in that it sought to reclaim the stolen land. These Zimbabwean women did not anticipate the extent to which they would be marginalised in the aftermath of the struggle. This is evident in a comment made by Jane Ngwenya in 1979 when she said "we are fighting side by side with our men, we are not left behind" (1983:83).

In times of war violence, specifically violence perpetrated by men, is not only legitimised but, in fact, valorised. Govender points out that soldiers who are programmed and encouraged to kill and rape during conflict situations, do not automatically "switch mode on [re]entering their own homes" (2003:16). This would help to account for the empirical evidence indicating that the gender violence women are subjected to before and during periods of war is actually exacerbated in the aftermath of conflict (Meintjies et al., 2001:4). Although women were severely disempowered as participants in Zimbabwe's wars of liberation, they did, nevertheless, actively contribute in these wars. They participated physically as well as symbolically, by "deploying the power of motherhood" (McClintock, 1997:105). When considering the official version of Zimbabwean nationalism, the master narrative that emerges is permeated by elements of patriarchy and misogyny. The discourse of nationalism is a distinctly totalising one that demands the foregrounding of black liberation and the concomitant submergence of issues of gender and sexuality (Davies, 1994:50). The women who participated in the liberation movement realised the extent of their marginalisation by nationalist movements only in the aftermath of the struggle. This, however, does not erase their complicity in the construction of Zimbabwean nationalism. To deny the role women played in their own disempowerment would only perpetuate their image as passive victims.

Many women actively supported nationalist movements in which gender concerns were subsumed in the war for freedom. Men and women are always "gendered subject[s] with overlapping identities" (Hendricks and Lewis, 1994:61). At a time of rampant racial oppression, many women considered their racial identity to be more important than their identity as women. They concentrated their considerable efforts on "subvert[ing] the colonisers' view of the cultural and biological inferiority of black people" (Hendricks and Lewis, 1994:68). Womanism has emerged as an important variant of feminism that regards racial solidarity as paramount, even at the expense of subordinating gender issues. As a proponent of this feminist theory, the Nigerian critic, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi has

argued that the womanist must "incorporate racial, cultural, national, economic and political considerations into her philosophy" (1985:63). It is, according to Ogunyemi, necessary for the black woman to recognise the reality of "black impotence in the context of white patriarchal culture" (1985:63), and to empower the black man. It is, therefore, erroneous to assume that African women naively allowed themselves to be duped by the false promises of nationalist movements. On the contrary, women actively chose to foreground race in order to secure the liberation of their countries from white minority rule.

1.4. Land and landscape

The liberation wars that overthrew the colonising powers and white minority rule were, essentially, wars about land and freedom from oppression. These wars continue to form the foundation of Zimbabwean nationalism. One needs to acknowledge the complex, ambiguous nature of the relationship between Zimbabwean women and land in order to understand the extent to which women's interests have been marginalised in the nationalist project. For men, the liberation of the land is symbolically and practically equated with the reclamation of their freedom. The historical and contemporary politics of land ownership in Zimbabwe, however, means that this is not the case for women. In an interview with Eva Hunter (1998:80), Vera points out that land belonging to a couple does, in fact, belong to the man rather than the woman. Even though women spend approximately 80% of their time working on the land, awards for farming excellence are consistently given to men (cited in Hunter, 1998:80). This means that, even when nationalist struggles to regain black control of the land succeed, women remain caught up in the same, oppressive domestic structures. The freedom promised by nationalist rhetoric is thus an exclusively male freedom. In this regard, Enloe quite accurately contends that "nationalism typically has sprung from masculinised memory, masculinised humiliation and masculinised hope " (1989:44).

In order to ward off terminological confusion, it is necessary to distinguish between the concepts of land and landscape. Land, as a social, historical and highly politicised construct, refers to the solid sections of the earth's surface. It is land that can be "divided up according to the geometric coordinates of the map, to be sold and traded on the property market" (Bender, 1993:331). Connotations of ownership are thus strongly associated with the concept of land. Landscapes, on the other hand, are aesthetic constructions that are "created by people – through their experience and engagement with the world around them" (Bender, 1993:1). Landscape is a broader concept than land in that it encompasses much more than the earth's surface. It is "subjected to poetic and hermeneutic interpretation and [it is] a place where value and emotion coincide" (Morphy, 1993: 205). While land is certainly an emotionally evocative entity, that emotional engagement between person and place is not an integral part of the definition of land. Emotion is, in other words, connotatively rather than denotatively linked to the concept of land. A landscape is a phenomenon that a particular person perceives and experiences and it includes, but is not necessarily limited to, the surface of the land, what lies beneath and above the land, as well as the memories, dreams and imagination that are centered on that place. The fact that "'land' exists *a priori* is obvious, but the 'scape' is a projection of human consciousness, an image received" (Rae Greiner, 2000:228). At the process of identity formation, land and landscape both function, since identities are "inscribed through experiences, subjectivity and social relations" (Brah, 1996:123). De Laurentis argues that identity is "an active construction and a discursively mediated political interpretation of one's history" (1990:333) and is thus influenced by one's politicised connection with land as well as one's emotional attachment to landscape. The conceptual clarification is significant because, even though the land has been appropriated by the misogynist discourse of Zimbabwean nationalism, Vera explores Mazvita's intricate and meaningful relationship with the Zimbabwean landscape.

As a Zimbabwean woman, Vera herself struggles with the contradictory feelings arising from her connection with the African land and her own perceptions of the Zimbabwean landscape are telling. After completing a truly "cosmopolitan" (Larson, 2001:87) education with a PhD in literature at Canada's York University, Vera opted to return to Bulawayo, her hometown in the Southern region of Zimbabwe. In discussing this decision in an interview with Ish Mafundikwa for *Skyhost*, Vera spoke lyrically about the unique beauty of Bulawayo (85). Her descriptions of the distinct landscape, the vegetation and the "sky [that] was so low you could lick it" (85) reveal her profound love and affinity for the country of her birth. She speaks of feeling incomplete under the alien skies of Canada (85). From these comments it is evident that Vera regards her relationship with the Zimbabwean landscape as integral to the shaping of her own identity. The fact that Vera describes her relationship with the Zimbabwean landscape by invoking the image of a tongue licking the sky, reveals a great deal about the nature of the connection between author and place. The tongue recurs as a metaphor throughout Vera's novels. It is an organ that enables speech as well as the sense of taste. By licking the sky, Vera claims the Zimbabwean landscape with her body. Her relationship with the landscape is emotional and physical and it cannot be thwarted by the politicised, patriarchal rhetoric associated with land in Zimbabwe and the rest of the world. The image of the major speech organ claiming the landscape also signals Vera's vocal and intellectual appropriation of the landscape and challenges the language of nationalism that regards the land as the exclusive property of men. Vera's description of her engagement with the Zimbabwean landscape thus seems to suggest a dissolution of the Cartesian dichotomy between mind and body. Through the tongue, she claims a connection to the Zimbabwean landscape with both her mind and body.

However, even while affirming the centrality of the landscape to her sense of self, Vera acknowledges that "the question of land for women in [her] country is a still contested and unresolved issue" (cited in Hunter, 1998:81). For, as Boehmer points out, despite the equation of women with the African landscape in the

"symbolic economy of nationalism" (1992:233), African women continue to constitute a disproportionately large number of this continent's marginalised, poor and illiterate population. The symbolic valorisation of the African woman seems to be matched only by her material dispossession.

Another contributing factor to the patriarchal nature of nationalism is the symbolic identification of the female body with both nation and landscape. Women occupy the powerful symbolic role of mothers of the nation. As such, they, or more accurately, their image, play a crucial part in the construction and perpetuation of the group identity that sustains the idea of the nation. It is expected that these symbols of the nation put the collective good and honour of the nation first (Green, 1999:86). Female sacrifice is demanded from the good mother and any attempts to further their own gender issues are inevitably met with accusations of disloyalty and the internalisation of imperialist norms. A patriotic woman is a silent, docile one who accepts the traditional dictates of her society. By challenging oppressive traditions, the woman is seen as challenging and disrupting the very foundations of the nation. There is, in other words, a profound ideological pressure on women to acquiesce to their own marginalisation.

1.5. Colonialism, nationalism and representations of the gendered body

The equation of the female body and landscape has a long history spanning the periods of colonisation as well as liberation and post-independence nationalism. A familiar trope in imperialist discourse has been the conflation of images of the African woman and the African continent. This "dark" continent was regarded by European invaders as an exotic, threatening woman that had to be conquered and controlled through penetration and pacification (Davies, 1994:79). For the colonisers, the political control of the indigenous African population went hand in hand with controlling the sexuality of the African women who symbolised the African landscape. Once Africa was embodied in the figure of a woman, the imperialist narrative extended this metaphor by conceptualising the African

continent as a virginal woman. Since virginity is equated with emptiness and a lack of "sexual agency", Africa was now constructed as "passively awaiting the thrusting, male insemination of history, language and reason" (McClintock, 1995:30). The trope of Africa as a "dark", "empty", female continent is infused by contradictions. On the one hand, the African woman is regarded as sexually promiscuous and in need of being "tamed". On the other hand, she is seen as synonymous with the African landscape and is constructed as a passive virgin awaiting colonial penetration. In both cases the comprehensive "gendering of imperialism" (McClintock, 1995:31) served to disempower women and facilitate their victimisation.

It was in the interest of the imperial project to sexualise the colonised people as a whole. The entire African population was feminised and, because of the patriarchal equation of "womenandchildren" (Palmary, 2003:7), this also meant that African people were infantilised. Whether the African population was feminised and infantilised and thus needed to be controlled, or whether they were bestialised and needed to be "civilised" and "tamed", these representational constructions reinforced the masculinity of the white imperialist endeavour. The gender construction that is at play here is one of the European male as superior and active. Women and the colonised are relegated to the margins – they are the passive, powerless bystanders to white male endeavours.

The dismantling of imperialism did not bring with it a concomitant dismantling of disempowering representations of women. The Mother Africa trope continues to be utilised by the discourse of nationalism and it remains "deeply entrenched in the [African] male literary tradition, [with] the sexual imperatives it encodes shaping the writing of such diverse authors as Senghor, Soyinka, and Ngugi" (Stratton, 1994:39). For African women writers, this implies the need to combat the destructive, gendered metaphors that pervade the writing of their male counterparts. It is incumbent upon them to "work[ ] towards a demystification of

certain male stereotypes of African women as goddess, as Supreme Mother, self-sacrificing and suffering willingly and silently" (Egejuru and Katrak, 1997:10).

The power that resides in such a representational strategy can only be fully appreciated when one considers the central organising tenet of the Western epistemological tradition, namely that of thinking in terms of binary oppositions. Felman asserts that Western thought is marked by "the metaphysical logic of dichotomous oppositions" (1975:8). In any binary opposition, hierarchisation takes place whereby one term is privileged while the other is marginalised. Felman also points out that, when two terms are perceived as polar opposites, the privileged term is associated with the masculine while the marginalised concept tends to be linked to the feminine. Traditional dualisms such as man/woman, white/black, culture/nature, European/African and coloniser/colonised are, in other words, anything but neutral. They function in terms of a "subtle mechanism of hierarchisation which assures the unique valorisation of the positive [masculine] pole" (Felman, 1975:7) while perpetuating the subjugation of the "negative" (feminine) pole. By representing Africa and the African continent's people as feminine, the British invaders thus invoked all the power relations inherent in the above mentioned binaries. They appropriated the right to represent Africa and it must be kept in mind that "representation or interpretation always implies a power relationship: the interpreter inevitably inscribes her [and his] power at the cost of the subjectivity and autonomy of what is represented" (Hendricks and Lewis, 1994:70). The feminisation of Africa therefore consolidated the image of the colonial power as the superior, masculine force (Mohanty, 1991:16). This meant that the colonisers' repression of Africans was not only legitimated, but that they actually regarded themselves as morally justified in their attempts to penetrate and tame what they saw as an unruly, threatening continent.

Even in contemporary conflict situations, the masculinisation of "us" (the hero) and the feminisation of "them" (the enemy) remain a popular way of undermining

the authority of enemies and of justifying their brutal subjugation by the "heroes". This type of gendered strategy is neatly summed up in a message that was inscribed on an American bomb used in the Gulf War. The message read "Bend over Saddam" (Goldstein, 2001:359). In order to disempower Hussein, he was represented as sexually passive and as a potential victim of male rape. The sexual passivity that has traditionally been associated with women is regarded as the ultimate indication of the enemy's weakness and inferiority. In war, men's success is measured by their ability to symbolically penetrate and subdue the enemy. This use of "gender to symbolise domination" (Goldstein, 2001:356) finds its literal corollary in the military strategy of mass raping the women from the enemy population.

The penetration and conquering of the African continent by colonising powers have made way for the conquering of the African woman's body in post-colonial Africa. The discourses of colonialism, nationalism and war have set the stage for a post-colonial environment in which the violation of the female body has become *de rigueur*. In Zimbabwe's liberation war, the national territory was reappropriated with violence and brutality. On a micro scale, the female body has become the landscape on which the emasculated colonised subject reappropriates his masculinity and power as citizen of the nation. This is not to imply, however, that colonialism is solely responsible for the oppression of women in Africa. The idealistic conception of pre-colonial Africa as some prelapsarian Eden of gender equality is a gross oversimplification that disregards the extent to which African women were silenced and victimised long before the advent of colonialism. Although contemporary feminist historians generally agree that the amalgamation of pre-colonial patriarchal ideologies and European patriarchal ideologies served to exacerbate the subjugation and exploitation of African women, these discriminatory practices were also rife in pre-colonial Africa. Belinda Bozzoli argues that the result of this merger of patriarchies "from a variety of historical

and social contexts" revealed a "patchwork quilt of patriarchies" (1983:149) in Africa.[1]

1.6. Women and language

The interwoven nature of nationalist ideology, descriptions of the female body, and depictions of the national landscape complicates the efforts of Zimbabwean women, who support the project of national liberation but also insist on the importance of gender equality, to conceptualise their own female identity. Vera explores the way in which the protagonists in her novels need to navigate their way through these crises of identity. She problematises the association of land and the female body by examining the extent to which Zimbabwean women have been victimised both by the land and by its proposed liberators. It is only through a comprehensive interrogation of the symbolic linkage of women and land that African women can hope to overcome their "sense of displacement and cris[e]s of identity" (Nash, 1994:238).

The representational and ideological obstacles confronting African women in general, and Zimbabwean women in particular, help to explain the sexist gaps that permeate Zimbabwe's nationalist narrative. In the aftermath of the struggle, the female combatants believed that the "position of women ha[d] really changed through the armed struggle because now [they had] equal positions and equal education with men" (Nyasha and Rose, 1983:106). These contributions made by women, however, seem to have been erased from the historical record as post-independence countries tended to "neither defend the spaces women create[d] during struggle nor acknowledge[d] the ingenious ways in which women [bore] new and additional responsibilities" (Meintjies et al., 2001:8). In her attempts to articulate the suppressed female experience, Vera interrogates the inherently patriarchal and misogynist nature of the language of nationalist discourse. Since

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[1] For a more comprehensive analysis of women's status in precolonial Africa, see Qunta (1987) and Obbo (1981).

this language has been instrumental in perpetuating the voicelessness of women, she questions the possibility of speaking when the only language at one's disposal has so comprehensively been appropriated by one's oppressors. Vera tackles this problem by deconstructing the traditional binary oppositions that pervade language.

The necessity of such a subversive approach to language becomes clear when one considers the rapidity with which representations "shift from being secondary to being primary in their truth-claims" (Beer, 1989:64). The ubiquity and mutually reinforcing nature of disempowering representations of black women ensure that such representations become cemented as actual objects that are capable of maintaining themselves as concrete phenomena with a very real impact on the material reality of women. A deconstruction of the hierarchised binary oppositions that sustain such representations thus becomes a crucial part of the female liberatory project.

In an epistemic tradition that "binarises into theory and example, or mind and body" (Homans, 1994:408), the African woman is repeatedly equated with the example or the body. By rejecting or disrupting the subject-object binary, the black woman writer manages to liberate her female protagonists from the constraints of the body and enables them to articulate their own stories and theories. A comprehensive dislodging of "dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness" (1987:767) is also advocated by Anzaldúa as the way to eradicate gender violence and war. She argues that this foundational rupture between men and women and Black and White needs to be healed as a matter of urgency. Although Anzaldúa (1987:766) focuses specifically on the *mestiza* consciousness, her tolerance for, and even embrace of, ambiguity, contradictions and plurality could aid black women in transcending the traditional dualisms that have silenced their voices and caused them to remain identified only with their bodies. *La mestiza* is derived from an Aztec term "meaning torn between ways" (765) and it can be defined as "a product of the transfer of the cultural and

spiritual values of one group to another". The consciousness of *la mestiza* is a new one that shifts away from "analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move toward a single goal (a Western mode), to divergent thinking" (766). Like *la mestiza*, Vera eschews the familiarity and security of conventional ways of thinking in order to enable the Zimbabwean woman to claim the power of her mind and voice without having to deny or reject her body. The difficulty of this endeavour cannot be overestimated since, to "blur the rigidity of the 'gender-line' between people, in most of our communities, is to risk social ostracism, family disgrace [and even] the collapse of the nation" (Bennett, 2000:8).

The problems confronting the female writer are exacerbated by the fact that she needs to convey the experiences and emotions of female characters in language, which is a social construction that is inherently patriarchal. Lewis argues that, "when dealing with the magnitude and intensity of gender-based violence . . . words and language frequently elude us" (2001:8). The question of whether it is possible to articulate female suffering though the medium of a man-made language, is also addressed by Antjie Krog in *Country of my Skull*, which is her account of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings. When recalling a woman breaking down while testifying, Krog says "to witness that cry was to witness the destruction of language" (1998:42). For Krog, a new language is constructed when the woman manages to convey her suffering in language, albeit a language that is broken, haltingly spoken and infused with sobs. She argues that "to get that memory, to fix it in words, to capture it with a precise image, is to be present at the birth of language itself" (Krog, 1998:42). Krog here draws on the work of Elaine Scarry who theorised that "[p]hysical pain does not simply resist language, but actively destroys it" and in doing so brings about a "reversion to a state anterior to language" (1985:4). Vera's ability to articulate the suffering of her female protagonists can be seen as her attempt to create a different language, one in which the patriarchal metaphors of woman as mother and landscape are replaced by women–centered metaphors of rivers and the tongue.

In deconstructing linguistic and representational legacies to give silenced women a voice, Vera constructs an alternative to the generally accepted history of Zimbabwean nationalism. She interrogates and rejects the distinctly partial version of Zimbabwe's history that has been so extensively disseminated as to become hegemonic. According to Muponde, she "erects an oppositional narrative" (2002:4) that fills in the discontinuities and gaps in conventional nationalist discourse with the erstwhile suppressed stories of women.

In an interview with Jane Bryce (2000:221), Vera explains her perception of history and the role that history plays in the lives of African people. She asserts a powerful belief in the possibilities of history being recreated. This reconstructed history needs to take cognisance of the oral stories, myths and legends that inform the Zimbabwean people's sense of identity. Such a history is not restricted to the facts that are documented in anthropological or historical texts. These texts, with their disempowering representations of women, contribute to the victimisation of the female. By insisting that history is not some ossified, exclusionary preserve of male experience, Vera manages to carve out space for women's voices to be heard.

This new history, in order to claim inclusivity, must record the female experience in all its rich diversity. It is, in other words, imperative to allow for the articulation of women's brutalisation as well as their triumphs. If women are allowed entry into the annals of history only as victims, the misrecognition of their resilience and courage will simply be perpetuated. Mohanty (1991:56) has warned of the danger of lumping all third world women together as some homogeneous group of disempowered, passive victims. When women are solely represented as victims, there is, no matter how inadvertently, a reinforcement of the image of the woman as the eternal object. This means that agency continues to reside with men. The man (whether he is a white coloniser or a black liberation fighter) is the active agent who perpetrates violence on the passive female object. In order to avoid such objectification, it is necessary to acknowledge the internal

heterogeneity of the category "women" in general, and of the category "third world women" in particular.

All Zimbabwean women do not experience male oppression and violence in the same way and they certainly do not respond to it in any uniform manner. By disregarding the multiplicity of women's experiences and the complexity of their coping mechanisms, the one-dimensionality of conventional representations of women is strengthened. This is a profound disservice to women who have, in fact, shown resistance to victimisation in myriad ways. This is the alternative historical narrative that Vera draws on in her novels: a comprehensive history of all the divergent facets of the female experience in Zimbabwe. Such a history chronicles the extent and depth of female suffering but also pays homage to the tenacity of women's will to survive. For, as Vera points out, "people did live, as well, and fall in love" (cited in Bryce, 2000:26) even in the midst of war and violence.

In an environment where women very rarely have access to the institutions of government and where their relative powerlessness tends to stifle their cries of dissent, the task of showing that "women from Africa have not been swallowed by history" (Vera, 1999:2) is a daunting one. As a novelist, Vera's weapons of choice are words. It is through writing, as a medium "of intervention" (Vera, 1999:3), that Vera attempts to set the skewed African record straight. The beauty of the poetic, lyrical prose with which Vera documents the most appalling instances of violence and human depravity, leads to a consideration of Vera's perspective on language.

1.7. Vera's perspective on language

A crucial aspect of Vera's disruption of accepted, "academic" history is to be found in her recognition that African history is significantly informed by the oral tradition of story telling. A comprehensive "recuperation and rewriting" (Mohanty,

1991:36) of the African narrative must necessarily draw on the stories that have been so extensively marginalised that they are completely absent from the scholarly tomes that document Africa's past. Vera's incorporation of orality into her writing allows women's stories from the margins to be told and it also has a radical impact on the style in which these stories are articulated. The rejection of a conventional linear narrative in favour of magic realism and prose infused with poetry can be seen as a reflection of Vera's sensitivity to the "pervasiveness of the spoken word" (Irele, 1990:95) in the African culture.

The visceral intensity of Vera's writing can be traced back to her contention that history and survival are "created in the mouth" (cited in Bryce, 2000:221). According to Irele, the most distinctive characteristic of a literature that has assimilated the tradition of orality, is "its organic mode of existence" (1990:55). This kind of literature is embedded in the very body of its producer. What is written down on the page are words that are an amalgamation of voice, bodily gestures, a tradition of myths, proverbs, legends and aphorisms that has been kept alive and vital through generations of oral transmission, and memory. It is, in other words, the product of a profoundly embodied writer. The intimacy that the reader experiences with Vera's characters is a direct result of her absolute refusal to impose any kind of distance between herself and the women she creates in her novels. The dynamics of such an authorial process are encapsulated in Vera's comments about the writing of *Nehanda*. In her investigations of the eponymous spirit medium, Vera's engagement with the ancestral world was so intense, that she felt as if the entire novel "came out of a state of possession" (cited in Bryce, 2000:222). The physicality of her writing is such that this creative endeavour left her "physically exhausted" (cited in Bryce, 2000:222).

In addition to contributing to the immediacy and physicality of writing, the incorporation of the tradition of African orality also poses a significant challenge to conventional Western notions of literature in general, and literary genres in

particular (Irele, 1990:55). The oral tradition of story telling is characterised by a fusion of diverse linguistic styles. The denotative use of language for communication purposes is freely intermingled with its rhetorical and imaginative usage modes. This, together with the centrality of bodily gestures and performance in the oral transmission of stories, means that the traditional distinctions between the genres of prose, poetry and drama are, essentially, rendered defunct. Irele also points out that "[o]rality operates with a different scale and category of apprehension, the temporal" (1990:55), thus challenging the generally accepted privileging of linearity and spatiality in Western literature. The seminal influence of the oral tradition on the African imagination is, therefore, manifested in both the style and content of Vera's work. The enormous scale of this accomplishment becomes apparent when one considers that Vera is, in fact, an African writer who utilises an European language and manages to give expression to an oral culture (Irele, 1990:61).

The controversial issue of using an European language to articulate the African experience prompts a further consideration of Vera's perspective on language. Vera is fluent in Shona, Ndebele and English. Although she recognises that English "arrived in [her] country as an act of violence in that it was enforced" (cited in Hunter, 1998:82), she sees languages as phenomena that are free and thus does not feel removed from, or alienated by, English. Indeed, she regards English as a particularly flexible language that is uniquely able to capture a great diversity of concepts, activities and experiences (Bryce, 2000:223). For her, what is signified in the African experience can adequately be captured and explored through the signifiers of the English language. Such a contention would, however, be questioned by Arnove, who argues for a comprehensive investigation of the "specific social function of literature" (1993:285). In Africa, language has functioned as a highly efficient instrument of colonial domination. The "symbolic capital" (Arnove, 1993:278) that inheres in the use of English in a formerly colonised context means that the danger of perpetuating a linguistic neo imperialism is acute. African authors' utilisation of European languages is an

issue that continues to divide Africa's most pre-eminent authors and theorists. In his seminal work *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngugi bids "farewell to English as a vehicle for any of [his] writings" (1986:xiv) as he regards European languages as a means through which cultural neo colonialism is perpetuated. Chinua Achebe, on the other hand, "feel[s] that the English language will be able to carry the weight of [his] African experience" (cited in Ngugi, 1986:8). Vera's radical subversion of the English language and her dexterous interweaving of an European language and the African tradition of orality signal her inversion of Audre Lorde's contention that the "master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (1980:essay title).

The issues confronting the African author writing in English can be seen as parallel to a debate that has long occupied feminist scholars, namely the problem of expressing the female experience in language which, "as a symbolic system, [is] closely tied to a patriarchal social structure" (Kolodny, 1980:174). Language is not the product of some gender neutral vacuum. On the contrary, language as such, is a social construction that reflects and reinforces both the social forces that constructed it, as well as the social environment within which it was constructed. Even the most cursory glance over historical and contemporary forms of social organisation will reveal environments that are extensively characterised by power relations between men and women that are distinctly asymmetrical. It is, therefore, inevitable that "language [is a phenomenon] of men and their grammar" (Cixous, 1975:356). The fact that Vera articulates women's experience in a "man's" language and African experience in an European language, justifies the necessity of her subversive treatment of language.

At this point, it is necessary to situate myself as a researcher. I am a white, middle-class South African woman writing about the experiences of black Zimbabwean women. Theorists such as Lumka Funani contend "that one can talk only from experience ie (sic) when one has lived such experience" (1992:64) and that the "time has come for [black women] to speak for [them]selves"

(1992:57). I agree that white women's research about the lives of black women "should not occur at the expense of self-presentation" (Gouws, 1992:68) but I also share Gouws's view that it is possible for white women to speak "about" (1992:68) the situation of black women and vice versa. I thus recognise my privilege and continue to believe that it is possible for me "to be involved in a movement which speaks from and to the commonality as well as diversity among women" (Russo, 1991:299). Since I am writing about the experiences of black Zimbabwean women, I, as a white middle-class feminist, "acknowledge [my own] complicity in relations of power and control" (Lewis, 1996:96) in the spirit of Harding's argument that the "class, race, culture, and gender assumptions, beliefs, and behaviours of the researcher her/himself must be placed within the frame of the picture that she/he attempts to paint" (1987:9).

1.8. Theoretical framework

Throughout this introductory chapter I have identified and discussed key concepts and issues such as colonialism, nationalism, patriarchy, landscape and the violation of the gendered female body. These concepts will be central to the following analysis of Vera's novels. This thesis falls within the ambit of both gender and literary studies. My focus will be on a textual analysis of three of Vera's novels that deal extensively with the issues mentioned above. I will be working with issues of language, representation and power. These issues have long been central concerns of feminist theorists in the discipline of language studies. Vera's subversive approach to language has prompted me to utilise post-structuralist theories. At the same time, my analysis is also firmly located within a post-colonial context.

1.9. Thesis overview

The next chapter will consist of an analysis of *Without a Name* in which the protagonist, Mazvita, attempts to reconstitute a psyche that has been damaged

to the point of fragmentation. Mazvita is severely traumatised after being raped by a soldier and subsequently killing her baby that has resulted from an unwanted pregnancy. The chapter will explore the way in which Vera problematises the language that casts men as the heroic protectors and liberators of the national territory while women are cast as the vulnerable "good mothers" of the nation. The novel clearly shows how these elements of nationalist discourse contribute to Mazvita's victimisation and how she needs to renegotiate her relationships with both the Zimbabwean land and landscape in order to construct an identity that does not facilitate her own disempowerment.

In chapter 3, a discussion of *Under the Tongue* enables a consideration of the issues of speech, silence and language. Vera recognises that the inability to give a voice to suffering can prevent the effective healing of trauma. Both Zhizha and the father who rapes her struggle to articulate their pain. Vera suggests that conventional modes of articulation prove to be inadequate when Zhizha, her mother and grandmother, attempt to speak of the violence to which Zhizha is subjected. In order to overcome this linguistic obstacle, Vera develops a new discourse to counter the silence and suppression of trauma that the men in Zhizha's family have imposed on their female relatives.

In chapter 4, an examination of *The Stone Virgins* shows how Vera's characters are exposed to a level of violence that far exceeds the violence described in her previous novels. She explores the way in which people are shaped by their interaction with the land and landscapes of which they form a part. While the rapist is alienated from the land, Vera's female protagonists manage a much more constructive engagement with the landscapes they find themselves in. Their connection with the landscapes and the nurturing bonds they experience with other women facilitate the development of a different language. The language that the women create in their female spaces is one that allows them to articulate their suffering and work towards healing.

Chapter 5 consists of a conclusion of the issues that were explored in this thesis.

Chapter 2

Without a Name: Vera's subversion of land and motherhood as nationalistic constructions.

In *Without a Name*, Vera chronicles the experiences of Mazvita, a woman tenaciously searching for a new beginning in pre-independence Zimbabwe. Her efforts at escape are, however, repeatedly thwarted and all she manages to achieve are poor approximations of the freedom that she so desperately craves. After being raped by a soldier fighting for Zimbabwe's liberation from white minority rule in her rural home of Mubaira, Mazvita gravitates toward the appealing anonymity of the city Harari. Her journey towards the elusive freedom she seeks, exposes Mazvita to escalating exploitation, victimisation and brutality, eventually culminating in a desperate act of infanticide. The fact that Mazvita is raped by a soldier in the liberation struggle signals Vera's intention of subverting the "uncritical glorification of the male hero-liberator" (Hunter, 2000:229) in Zimbabwean nationalist discourse. The act of infanticide allows Vera to problematise the nationalist rhetoric that equates the African woman with the good mother. Mariama Bâ captures the importance of challenging disempowering literary images of women when she comments that women writers in Africa should "no longer accept the nostalgic praise of the African Mother who, in his anxiety, man confuses with Mother Africa" (cited in Arndt, 1996:44). The symbolic identification of the African woman with Mother Africa has been to the political detriment of women. In the introductory chapter, the analysis of the representational dynamics of nationalism has shown that "the routine nationalist strategy through which women are ennobled [as mothers]" leads to women being "simultaneously depoliticised and dehumanised" (Lewis, 1999:40). In telling Mazvita's story, Vera chooses not to utilise a language that is imbued with metaphors that facilitate the marginalisation of women. According to Nuttall, Vera creates "different modes of writing" (2001:397) in order to overcome

the limitations of an inherently patriarchal language so that the suffering of women can be spoken.

Vera grants the reader intimate access to Mazvita's thoughts by employing a narrative technique that dissolves the distance between reader and character. The sheer vividness with which Vera describes Mazvita's observations lends her narrative stream a tactile quality and allows colours, textures and natural elements to become "characters in her novels" (Martin Shaw, 2002:26). The intensely visual nature of Vera's prose is evident from the first pages of *Without a Name*, where the heat constitutes such a visceral presence that it "mauled the upturned faces" (Vera, 1994:1) of Mazvita and her fellow travellers. Together with the visual immediacy of her writing, Vera uses lyrical, poetic prose to articulate the violation of Mazvita's body by the rapist. The combined effect of these literary techniques is the creation of a narrative style that enables a radically intimate relationship between character and reader. The quality of the relationship between Mazvita and her reader is particularly important when one considers the degree of brutality that is inflicted on her body. Even though the reader is horrified by the atrocities to which Mazvita is subjected, it is this relationship that will prevent the imposition of an alienating distance between the reader and Mazvita.[1]

The insight into the surreal inner-world of her protagonist enables Vera to explore the increasing fragmentation of Mazvita's sense of self (Van Vuuren, 2003:9). Through Vera's "exteriorisation of internal monologues" (Martin Shaw, 2002:25), the reader can begin to understand how Mazvita experiences the Zimbabwean environment in the midst of the liberation war that was raging in 1977. Mazvita's vantage point is clearly influenced by the fact that she experiences this war in a female body and her interactions with the male characters in the novel reveal the extent to which war affects men and women in a very distinct, gendered way. A

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[1] In *Slagoffers* (2001), author Dine van Zyl articulates the experiences of women in Angola by offering a record of the abuses to which they are subjected. The alienating effect on the reader stands in stark contrast to the engagement that Vera manages to facilitate between her readers and characters.

crucial aspect of this gendered nature of war is to be found in Mazvita's complex, torturous relationship with the land that lies at the heart of Zimbabwe's national liberation movement.

Mazvita's search for a new beginning is taking place within the context of the struggle to liberate Zimbabwe from the white minority rule of Ian Smith's party and her relationship with the land, as well as the vulnerability of her body, are significantly affected by this particular political and historical location. The violence that has been inflicted on her body is concomitant with the violent efforts to gain Zimbabwe's independence. The interwoven nature of issues of personal identity, land and nationhood has ensured that Mazvita's body is inextricably caught up in the fight for independence. Quayson has suggested that "the human body has to undergo a form of violence and dismemberment for the body politic itself to come into being" (2001:200). For this reason he argues that a postcolony such as Zimbabwe is "a place of violence" (192). Even the most cursory glance at the socio-political history of Africa in general, and Zimbabwe in particular, makes it clear that it is the female body that has borne the brunt of the "violence and dismemberment" (200) that accompany the process of nation formation.

Mazvita's intimacy with the landscape is clearly apparent in her reflections on the mushrooms she encounters on a walk with her lover, Nyenyedzi. The almost rhapsodic terms in which she describes the "floating beauty" (Vera, 1994:5) of the landscape is reminiscent of Vera's own lyrically appreciative descriptions of her native Bulawayo. Like Vera, Mazvita's relationship with the landscape is very different from her relationship with the land. Even as Mazvita thinks of the radiance of the scene, the threatening potential of the land is omnipresent. Vera utilises contradictory imagery to emphasise the complexity of Mazvita's relationship with the land. The "brightness" of the mushrooms that resembled "drops of daylight" has sprung forth from a "dark soil [that] grew threateningly over [its] feathery shelter". The "lush greenness" and fertility of the earth are never accepted in an unproblematic or complacent way. Rather, the juxtaposition

of images of light and growth with those of "cold black shadow [and] decay", reveals that Mazvita is acutely, and as it turns out prophetically, aware of the capacity of the land to bring harm.

The vulnerability of the mushrooms that get "crushed" (6) in Nyenyedzi's palm reflects Mazvita's own highly fragile position. Ironically, "he had not broken the neck [of the mushroom]" (7). This final act of destruction will be carried out by Mazvita herself as her internal fragmentation culminates in her act of infanticide, which is commited by breaking her baby's neck. Nyenyedzi's uncomplicated relationship with the land which, according to him, had "claimed [them] for its truth" (34) is thus simply not an option for Mazvita whose experiences have taught her that the "land had no fixed loyalties" (34). She recognises that the "strangers" who had appropriated the land through colonialism had successfully "grown tobacco where [they] once worshipped and prayed" and that, despite the illegitimacy of the colonial occupation, the "land ha[d] not rejected them". For Mazvita, Nyenyedzi's assertion that the "land recognises only those who work upon it" must ring particularly hollow. Male ownership of land is so deeply entrenched that Nyenyedzi is not aware of even a hint of irony when he makes this comment in a context where women, whose "breath" and "sweat" constitute the bulk of the labour expended upon the African soil, very rarely enjoy the fruits of their labour in the form of property rights. In addition to the exploitation of women's labour, the disloyalty of the land towards women culminates in the merging of the land and Mazvita's rapist.

The land that Mazvita has "loved" and seen "through passionate and intense moments of freedom" (34) has, in fact, become "complicit in the rape of women" (Martin Shaw, 2002:30). Mazvita herself seems, in this quotation, to have fallen prey to the conceptual obfuscation that results from using the terms "land" and "landscape" interchangably. When Mazvita describes a "horizon prolific with caressing yellow rays" (Vera, 1994:13) and a "blue [that] pulled her up into the sky", she is actually expressing a love of the Zimbabwean landscape rather than

the land. She is free to perceive the landscape as she wishes as it cannot be owned by the coloniser or the nationalist movement. Her connection with the landscape is aesthetic, spiritual and physical as her body is caressed and pulled by the elements of the landscape.

Mazvita's recognition of the disloyalty of the land, and even its outright hostility to women, is revealed by her explicit equation of the land and her rapist. By transferring her hatred from the rapist to the land, Mazvita is making a highly complex connection between gendered identity, land, nationalism and violence. She locates the source of this brutalisation in the environmental details "that she could see, that had shape and colour and distance" (30). The "dew-covered grass" that she feels "press[ing] beneath her back", the mist that concealed the presence of the rapist and the "forlorn call of the strange bird" that swallowed her own cries of anguish become the primary perpetrator. The gendered representational legacies of colonialism and nationalism have alienated Mazvita from the land to such an extent that it has become impossible for her to distinguish between the rapist and the land.

She blames the land that had "allowed the [rapist] to grow from itself into her body" (31). The land, and the patriarchal rhetoric of nationalism that mobilise men to fight for the land, have given birth to Mazvita's rapist. Mazvita's realisation of the complicity between the land and her rapist clearly exposes the artificiality of the symbolic construction that equates the African land with women and mothers. The land has comprehensively been appropriated by men to serve them and their violence.

The land, upon which men like Nyenyedzi construct their personal identity as men, has robbed Mazvita of her sense of self and left her with an all-encompassing "emptiness" and "silence". The trauma has led to a profound psychic fragmentation which has infused Mazvita's very name with "barrenness and silence" (30). It is significant that Mazvita refers to her "silence" as

"redeeming". Ibrahim contends that a "victim's silence is also a 'voice' and a 'mode of uttering'" (1997:151). In Vera's writing silence is not necessarily equated with voicelessness. This is also evident in *Butterfly Burning*, where Phephelaphi asserts that "the most enduring truth is not always spoken with words" (1998:112). Mazvita's inability to "tell of her own suffering" (Vera, 1994:31) allows her the temporary refuge of denial as she insists that the rapist "had never been inside her". Even as her denial of this "unalterable encounter" helps her to survive the moment, she realises the need to "hear her own suffering uttered [and] acknowledged". This is a further example of Vera's refusal to regard speech and silence as polar opposites. She utilises both speech and silence in order to convey the experience of Mazvita's rape.

Mazvita's dispossession is not limited to her loss of personal identity. In addition to being left without a name, Mazvita has also been alienated from her body. After the rape, she fails to recognise that "her legs [are] still hers" (29). The "psychic disintegration" (Martin Shaw, 2002:32) thus physically manifests itself in a severe distancing and disassociation from her own body. This is particularly evident in Mazvita's reflections during her journey back to Mubaira with the dead infant strapped to her back. Her alienation from her body has culminated in her killing of the child that was born of that brutalised body. The haunting image of Mazvita's own neck, which she perceives as having "been broken" (Vera, 1994:3) indicates that the infanticide was, essentially, an act of self-destruction. The harm she inflicted on her baby is physically felt on her own body. The transference of the brokenness of the baby's body to herself is indicative of her complete identification with the child. Her inability to name and accept her baby thus signifies much more than her rejection of this child that had "cre[pt] into her life"(74). It is also a denial and rejection of "the parts of her body [that the rapist] had claimed for himself" (29).

Mazvita's body has been taken from her and she is left with only the highly distorted "component parts" (Nuttall, 2001:397). Her neck, that has been "twisted"

(Vera, 1994:3) to an unnatural angle and the surreal image of her body moving into a "lump [that] lay between her ear and her shoulder" (4) indicates that Mazvita is unable to maintain the common survival strategy of victims of rape "to leave the body – to tune out – to experience out-of-the-body consciousness" (Tal, 1996:173). The trauma is not limited to her psyche and for this reason, Vera does not allow the trauma to be "psychologised" (Nuttall, 2001:397). It actually resides in her violated body. There is, in other words, no way for Mazvita to continue denying that the rapist had been inside her.

In order to claim the new "beginning" (Vera, 1994:42) that she sees as crucial to her survival, Mazvita must disown her body. The land had committed the ultimate betrayal by spawning the rapist and, since rapist and land are now indistinguishable for Mazvita, she must also disown the land. Her impulse to move from the rural home she shares with Nyenyedzi to the urban space of Harari, signifies Mazvita's escape from the land that had already disowned and betrayed her. The alienation and dehumanisation that result from such a comprehensive disavowal of the corporeal part of the self are dramatised by the the image of Mazvita's "skin peel[ing] off [and] parting from her body" (4). Like a snake, she must leave behind part of herself if she is to begin anew.

The violence to which the female body is subjected is comprehensive in the sense that it functions in the woman's interior as well as exterior spaces. Mazvita's inner-world is infused with violence. Her very psyche has been "shattered [like] glass" (3) and she articulates this sense of disintegration by referring to the "fragments of her being" that she carries on her tongue. The fact that she associates these pieces of herself with the organ of speech is highly significant since Mazvita's voice has effectively been silenced. The tongue is central to Vera's work and it repeatedly functions as "a metaphor for voice, language and [the] power to articulate inner presence" (Muchemwa, 2002:9). Although Vera does, as previously noted, recognise the capacity of silence to speak, she is also aware that, when silence is the only mode of articulation

available to women, the result is severe disempowerment. In *Butterfly Burning*, the effort of living with tremendous pain makes Phephelaphi's "tongue grow[ ] heavy as lead" (1998:117) and in *The Stone Virgins*, Nonceba's "tongue is silent" (2002:100), but her rapist's "name [remains] on it". At the moment of rape, Mazvita may experience her silence as "redeeming" (Vera, 1994:30), but her inability to cry out also makes her feel "as if she had lost the world". This silence extends far beyond her "suppress[ion] [of] her own cry" (30) during the rape. Vera seems to be suggesting that silence becomes disempowering and destructive when it is enforced on women. What is crucially important, is "why and how the prohibition upon [women's] speech is imposed and maintained" (Rajan, 1993:83).

Any attempt to examine the "context that renders [women] 'voiceless'" (Mama, 2000:7) must consider the enduring impact of colonialism and nationalism. For Mazvita, significant obstacles to speaking are to be found in the the linguistic and representational legacies that have been bequeathed to women by the discourses of both colonialism and nationalism. Colonialism and nationalism have essentially been male endeavours. It is, however, important to recognise that men have not only been the actors in these dramas, but that they have also had the power to determine the meanings of actions (Boehmer, 1992:233). The familiar colonial and nationalist tropes of equating the female body with landscape become relevant here. By representing women in this way, men have appropriated for themselves the role of actors while relegating women to the passive role of being the landscape upon which men act. In their capacity as the subject-actors in the process of making meaning, it is men who determine what it means to be a man or a woman. Their power to make meaning is so comprehensive that it also gives them the power to make worlds. Mazvita thus lives in a world that has literally been man-made and, even if she does manage to speak, her words will be interpreted according to man-made models of making meaning.

Mazvita experiences the impact of man-made gender constructions when the man she loves refuses to accompany her to the city because Nyenyedzi believes that he "could not leave the land, and be a man" (Vera, 1994:39). It is also telling that Mazvita's rape occurs on an early morning walk to "carry water from the river" (23), a task that has traditionally been regarded as "a woman's work" (53). For the rapist, a soldier who fought for the reappropriation of the land, Mazvita appears to be little more than part of the spoils of war. Within the representational and "symbolic economy of nationalism" (Boehmer, 1992:233), Mazvita's body *is* the land the soldiers are fighting for. The taking of her body in the act of rape thus becomes a symbolic reclamation of the land, a goal that is not only justified, but actually valorised in the rhetoric of nationalism. Mazvita, as a person, is erased in the rapist's fight for national liberation as she seems to function as an arbitrary presence in his broader narrative of nationalism. Her body exists for the use of the rapist, physically to still the sexual hunger of his body, and symbolically to assert his ownership of the land. Beyond the usefulness of her body, he sees Mazvita as nothing: she is an entity that has neither a name nor value as a person. These representational and linguistic legacies of colonialism and nationalism thus do much more than merely silence the voices of women like Mazvita. Indeed, it works to deny them their very personhood by rendering them "two-dimensional emblem[s]" (Boehmer, 1992:233). Mazvita's equation of the rapist and the land can therefore be read as highly subversive in that she inverts a representational practice that has contributed to her disempowerment.

The ubiquity of patriarchal and misogynist gender constructions in Mazvita's life is reflected in the snippets of conversations she overhears on the bus trip back to Mubaira. The speakers are fellow passengers who are never specifically identified by the author. The resultant effect is of a cacophany of disembodied voices surrounding Mazvita. The nature of the comments leaves the reader in no doubt that Mazvita's journey home in search of some kind of atonement and resolution will prove to be futile. After all she has been through, the same

oppressive gender structures that allowed her victimisation in the first place, remain firmly intact. The representational practice of equating women with home and hearth is expressed in a passenger's assertion that Mubaira is their "home because [his] wife is there" (Vera, 1994:52). In nationalist rhetoric, the woman represents the family home and the homeland. She participates in the project of nationalism primarily as an image while the man is the actor who fights to protect the territories that are symbolised by women. Once again, the gender stereotypes insisting on female passivity and male activity are perpetuated.

Another passenger invokes the time-honoured stereotypes of women as emotional, irrational creatures who need to be protected when he says that he "cannot let [his] wife join [him]" in the city since a "woman can lose her head" in such a place. He condemns city women for any assertions of independence or autonomy and encapsulates his idea of a "proper" woman as one "whose breasts are free and waiting". Sexual reciprocity is not expected from "proper" women who, even in the act of intercourse, are regarded as passive bodies on which men act out their sexual desire. There is no recognition of the woman as an actual person. Rather, she remains the two-dimensional sexual object and emblem of the home. Boehmer contends that the woman as a symbol is "either tainted or sacrosanct" (1992:233). However, whether the woman is idealised as the mother of the nation or the symbolic repository for all that is associated with the home, or whether she is villified as the tainted, immoral city "whore", she is never regarded as a real actor with a real, multi-dimensional life.

On this same bus trip, Mazvita's fellow travellers define what they perceive to be a "woman's work" (Vera, 1994:53). Their comments reflect the gendered pattern of land ownership and farming in Zimbabwe. Even though women do not own the land, they are assigned the role of working the land. This arrangement is so pervasive and commonly accepted that the male speaker seems to regard it as natural. For this man, the exploitation of a woman's labour has been pre-ordained since "a woman's back is made for work". Women do not even receive

acknowledgement for their work as a "large harvest" is attributed to "the rain" rather than to "wom[e]n's strength" and toil. This means that a woman's material contribution in tending to the land is simply not recognised and it constitutes a further example of the utter negation of the value of a woman's body. The active labour of women is not acknowledged so that they can remain the passive symbol of the land. This representational practice and the female passivity that is implied by it, greatly exacerbate the vulnerability of the woman's body as it is constructed to be at the mercy of men who are free to act upon it as they wish. Mazvita is subjected to these same gendered conceptions of "wom[e]n's work" (53) in her life with Joel. Her role in his home is that of an "efficient housekeeper" (51). It is accepted without question that she should "iron[ ] Joel's white shirts till they shone".

This consideration of Mazvita's social reality seems to confirm the opinion of Janie Starck's grandmother in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes were Watching God*. In this frequently quoted phrase she tells her granddaughter that "[d]e nigger woman is de mule uh de world" (1986:29). In a discussion of the layered marginalisation of black women in a South African context, McClintock argues that the "[African] homestead was based on the systematic exploitation of women's labour and the transformation of that labour into male social and political power" (1995:254). Even though the value of female labour is negated, it is that labour that frees men to participate in the political sphere while the woman's reproductive labour is strongly associated with the man's social power and status. These comments can be seen as a recognition of the fact that an African woman, like Mazvita, "suffers multiple dispossessions" (Samuelson, 2002:94). Mazvita is unable to escape gender victimisation, whether she is being raped near her rural homestead or ironing Joel's shirts, since the nature of her oppression is "all-pervasive" (Muponde, 2002:121). She occupies the subordinate sphere in the binary oppositions of White/Black and Male/Female. According to Janie's grandmother, "de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man to pick it up" (Neale Hurston, 1986:29). The black man, in turn,

passes the burden on to "his womenfolks". The extent of Mazvita's marginalisation and silencing can only be fully appreciated when one realises that she is victimised by both colonialism and patriarchy, on account of her race and her gender.

The influence of this layered oppression on Mazvita's life pervades both her internal and external reality. In addition to affecting the way Mazvita conceives of her own identity as a woman, denigratory and exploitative representations of the African female also has a significant impact on Mazvita's material circumstances. Hortense J. Spillers makes an important observation about the "captive body" that is equally applicable to the black female body. According to her, such a body becomes a locus of "social realities as well as a metaphor for value so thoroughly interwoven in their literal and figurative emphases that distinctions between them are virtually useless" (1987:388). This means that, even when the African woman is ostensibly free in that she enjoys equality under the law, substantive freedom and equality can remain elusive. This is as true of Mazvita's life as it is of the lives of millions of South African women who have theoretical access to one of the most progressive constitutions in the world. As long as the prevailing symbolic economy continues to be infused with elements of misogyny, the very "dynamics of naming and valuation" (388) will operate in a way that negatively affects the real life chances of women. Since men, "as the dominant group, have produced language" (Spender, 1990:106), they have unrivalled power to encode the "process of naming" with their own biases. If these biases include the oppression of women in order to "legitimate their own primacy", their power over the production of language grants them the power to construct reality to the detriment of women.

Vera interrogates these "dynamics of naming and valuation" (Spillers, 1987:388) in all her novels. A consistent leitmotif throughout *Without a Name* concerns the question of who has the power to assign names, meanings and values. Even as Mazvita's body is brutally appropriated by the soldier during the rape, it is her

name that she struggles to "recover[ ]" (Vera, 1994:30) from him. The power of naming is also a right that Nyenyedzi unquestioningly claims as his own during a sexual encounter of great tenderness between himself and Mazvita. By naming her *Howa* and "evok[ing] that name when he wanted to hold her close" (8), Nyenyedzi succinctly demonstrates "the power [of men] to mediate reality" (Muchemwa, 2002:10) through the process of naming. Mazvita recognises the centrality of names "to our sense of identity" (McLeod, 2000:167). Mazvita is never able to name what happened to her body during the rape. Spender contends that "without a name it is difficult to accept the existence of an object, an event, a feeling" (1990:107) and this is why Mazvita is unable to name her child. For Mazvita, a name would be indicative of "acceptance [and] grace" (Vera, 1994:75) and these are the very things that she could not offer her baby. The "promise to growing life" that a name would imply, is a promise Mazvita knows she cannot make.

On her arrival in Harari, Mazvita's desperate desire to create a new reality of her own is reflected in her assertion that her "name was only hers, she could change it at any time" (46). Mazvita's attempt to appropriate the power of naming for herself does, however, ring hollow. The fact that she eschews Shona names in favour of very traditional, English ones is significant. These British names sound distinctly alien in the context of a Zimbabwe that is immersed in the struggle for independence from the colonising power. By experimenting with names like Mildred and Margaret, Mazvita seems, on a subconscious level at least, to be imposing some measure of distance between herself and the nationalist movement that produced her rapist. She is, however, inextricably caught up in this movement and she acquiesces to the fact that "she would remain [Mazvita]" (46). Once again, freedom and escape prove to be elusive.

A futher reason for Mazvita's inability to name her child is to be found in her realisation that a "name binds a mother to her child" (75). Mazvita's extensive alienation from her body that was caused by the rape as well as her sexual

exploitation by Joel has also left her alienated from this living product of her body. She has, essentially, become a bystander who looks on as the rapist "breathe[s] eagerly above her" (30) in much the same, detached manner that she "close[s] her eyes and hear[s] [Joel] move quickly above her" (59). The fact that Mazvita "chose to forget Joel's face" is reminiscent of her inability to "find [the rapist's] face" (30). The repeated references to mist in both the description of the rape and in Mazvita's sexual encounters with Joel, further serve to alert the reader to the similarities between these two experiences. In both cases Mazvita has been comprehensively objectified. These men have reduced her to her body. The rapist uses her for the symbolic reappropriation of the land and his masculinity, while Joel uses her body for sexual gratification "till he tired of her" (49). This reduction of Mazvita to her body can be seen as a perpetuation of the imperialist representational strategy that requires that "black persons signify the body so that mind can be white" (Homans, 1994:407). Homans also quite accurately contends that it has been black women, much more so than black men, who have been forced to do the bulk of the "cultural work of embodying the body for white culture". Reducing Mazvita to her body slots her into the marginalised sphere of the mind/body binary. This is, in other words, another instance of the representational legacies of colonialism and patriarchy conspiring to ensure the layered victimisation of black women like Mazvita.

For Mazvita, her body has become the locus in which her trauma resides. In order to distance herself from these experiences, she thus needs to distance herself from her body. She experiences the child growing inside her as yet another instance in which "her body had betrayed her" (Vera, 1994:74). When Mazvita "lost her seasons of motherhood [s]he did not question this dryness of her body" (29). Similarly, she simply detached herself from the child "while it grew inside of her" (79). She makes no pro-active attempt to deal with the pregnancy. Rather, she seems to be powerless to do anything other than merely standing by and looking on as these dramas play themselves out on her body.

The image of her committing the act of infanticide is all the more haunting for the almost perfunctory way in which she goes about "complet[ing] this task" (94). Throughout, the reader gets the impression of a woman whose actions are pre-determined. In a particularly driven manner, she is going through the motions that is necessary to ensure her own survival. She associates the killing of the child with her "claim[ing] of her dream and freedom" (96). What she is struggling against is the type of embodied role to which society seeks to consign her. The kind of embodiment that is being imposed on her is one that reduces her to a body that is no more than an object and it is precisely this kind of embodiment that facilitates her exploitation. Mazvita's body, which is able to speak the pain that she cannot articulate with words, is clearly endowed with emotions and subjectivity. These aspects of Mazvita's self are, however, denied by the men who choose to use her body as if it were some inanimate object. The fact that she needs to kill a part of herself in order to escape this role means that any victory she achieves against the forces contributing to this limited kind of embodiment, will necessarily be a pyrrhic one. This does indeed prove to be the case, as Mazvita's killing of the baby merely contributes to her psychic disintegration.

The act of infanticide signals Vera's "deflation of idealised motherhood" (Hunter, 2000:231) as Mazvita's killing of her child indicates her complete rejection of the role of the "good mother". Mazvita's victimisation by the rapist and by Joel emerges as instrumental factors that "trigger the act of killing". Mazvita knows that Joel is "inevitable to her existence" (Vera, 1994:55) in Harari and a child would compromise Mazvita's status as a "nimble creature" (49) who "would not ask [Joel] for money like all those other girls he had gone through". When Joel finds out about the pregnancy, he wants "the baby to disappear" (74) as it would prevent Mazvita from fulfilling the uncomplicated role as sexual object for which he chose her when he "offered to take her home on his bicycle" (48). Joel becomes increasingly "violent with his words" (75) until he eventually orders Mazvita to leave with "a prompt emphasis" (83) in his voice. Mazvita, who had

unsuccessfully "been looking for employment" (75), knows that she cannot survive in Harari without Joel's patronage and, as a result, she decides to kill the child without being "sure that the decision had been entirely her own" (83). It is clear to the reader that Mazvita's "needs and desires" (Hunter, 2000:230) are disregarded and that "men's abuse of the inequalities of gender relations" has created a situation in which Mazvita sees infanticide as her only option.

The trauma and powerlessness that drive Mazvita to kill the child even though the decision to do so had not "been entirely her own" (Vera, 1994:83), are evident in the way Vera describes Mazvita's killing of the child, as well as her subsequent interaction with the baby's corpse. The description of the murder is all the more poignant for the gentleness with which Mazvita goes about the act of killing. She picks the baby up "slowly, as though not to waken it" (94) and she ties the lethal "knot very softly", all the while "whispering to the child to keep still". The look on her face is "lulling and tranquil" (96) and she longs "tenderly, for the child's hair that she had not seen". She straps the corpse to her back while reflecting that the "child liked to be carried on the back" (97). Even during the process of killing, Mazvita thus seems to be mothering the child. This indicates that what Mazvita is rejecting, and what Vera is subverting, is not "motherhood as an experience ('mothering') with its pain and rewards" (Nnaemeka, 1997:5), but "motherhood as a patriarchal institution" that is imposed on women and is manipulated in a way to perpetuate their disempowerment.[2] This man-made ideological construction of motherhood is one that does not value the tender, caring and nurturing experience of mothering. Mazvita's lack of engagement with the growing child is not only a result of the rape, since she also knows that she will not be allowed to keep the child and remain with Joel. Mazvita's financial dependence thus enables Joel to exercise complete control over her reproductive processes by pressuring her to get rid of her baby. A further factor contributing to the power Joel wields over Mazvita's reproductive function is the

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[2] For a comprehensive discussion of the distinction between motherhood as an institution and motherhood as an experience, see Adrienne Rich's *Of Women Born* (1986).

fact that, in Harari, Mazvita is isolated from other women. When she notices another woman being picked up by a man on a bicycle, she sees "no sign of recognition or sharing" (Vera, 1994:49). The sharing and sustenance that women derive from the female communities consisting of Grandmother, Runyararo and Zhizha in *Under the Tongue*, and of Sihle, Thenjiwe and Nonceba in *The Stone Virgins* are thus not available to Mazvita. The experience of shared mothering in oppositional, exclusively female spaces emerges as an empowering phenomenon in *Under the Tongue* and *The Stone Virgins*. Mazvita's lack of access to such a community of women contributes to Joel's power over her and it allows him to use and discard her.

Mazvita is left with the task of creating an alternative identity even as these myriad and pervasive forces work relentlessly to ensure her "effacement and erasure" (Govinden, 2000:120). Since the representational and linguistic dynamics that constitute Mazvita's material, cultural and emotional universe are deeply hostile to women, Mazvita must be thoroughly inventive in order to overcome the silence that she experiences as "deep, hollow and lonely" (Vera, 1994:103). The same can be said of Vera, who seeks to overcome the collective silencing of women. In her attempts to claim a voice for Mazvita, Vera thus chooses to eschew the conventional, inherently masculine modes of representation and writing and develops a new mode of articulation.

For Vera to articulate the supressed female experience, the postulation of new definitions, structures and meanings becomes crucial. She deals with this challenge by retaining the novelistic form but also modifying that form through the infusion of African orality, poetic lyricism and magic realism. Throughout her telling of Mazvita's silenced story, there is the insistence that the personal is indeed political. What happens to Mazvita does not originate exclusively in the realm of the domestic or the private. By the same token, her experiences also have far-reaching consequences that reverberate through society as a whole. The personal and the political are inextricably intertwined. Mazvita's victimisation

cannot be seen in isolation from the broader, explicitly political movements of Zimbabwean nationalism and independence. Similarly, it is clear to the reader that the trauma inflicted on Mazvita's body, which is nationalism's symbol of the private sphere of the home, reflects negatively on the political projects of nationalism and liberation in its entirety. Vera's recognition that the traditional binary of public/private contains a false dichotomy results in her writing being characterised by consistent attempts to "dissolve polarities and move towards pluralistic meanings" (Jain, 1996:16). Although Jain does not refer to Vera's texts in particular, she identifies such a deconstruction of polarities as a tool used by female authors to embrace plurality.

Within the dominant Western epistemic tradition, public and private and speech and writing are regarded as polar opposites. Vera insists that these polarities are false and one of the ways in which she dissolves them is by "embedd[ing] [orality] in the written text" (Muchemwa, 2002:5). In an analysis of the work of Ama Ata Aidoo, Holloway argues that the "shiftiness of language" (1992:147) in her writing is indicative of the influence of orality. This "shiftiness" refers to a writer's movement between prose, poetry, reflection and imagination. It is a quality that is very evident in Vera's work as the text switches between Mazvita's surreal psychic contemplation of her internal fragmentation and her poetic descriptions of the Zimbabwean landscape as well as Vera's prosaic recounting of the conversations of bus passengers.

The resultant fusion of diverse literary styles allows for the proliferation of a plurality of meanings. The accommodation of the repressed female voice and the recuperation of experiences that had been relegated to the realm of the domestic, subvert the notion that the story of Zimbabwean history, nationalism and independence can adequately be told as a single, monolithic master narrative. By granting the reader access to Mazvita's private thoughts and by foregrounding the violations that have been inflicted on her body, Vera aptly demonstrates that concepts like nationalism, history, freedom and independence

have vastly different meanings for men and women. Mazvita's experiences have ensured that she could "not agree with the vision [Nyenyedzi] held for the land" (Vera, 1994:32). The "ancient claim" to the land that informs Zimbabwean nationalist rhetoric and the struggle for Zimbabwean independence has always been, and continues to be, the exclusive preserve of men.

Vera's incorporation of orality into her written texts is, however, by no means an unproblematic endeavour. It is imperative to keep in mind that "African oral literatures – like all literatures – are shaped decisively by the cultures from which they arise" (Arndt, 1998:47). It would be erroneous to assume that patriarchy and the oppression of the female other are limited to Western societies. Indeed, Arndt has pointed out that, in oral narratives, women have tended to be "depicted either as saints or as a source of all evil" (10). A common theme in the tales and proverbs of African folklore is the moral that "caution[s] men against women's supposedly most treacherous shortcoming: their indiscretion" (Trinh T. Minh-ha, 1997:28). Men have tended to dismiss women's contributions to the oral tradition as nonsensical gossip. A group of women sharing ideas, experiences and wisdom has long been regarded by men as a threatening phenomenon since it constitutes a space where women subvert the silence that has been imposed on them. As a result, the feminist author's engagement with the tradition of African orality will necessarily be a project that is characterised by some ambivalence. An indiscriminate assimilation of oral narratives will, in other words, not lead to an automatic inclusion of women's voices from the margins. Like Vera, who strongly associates storytelling with her grandmother, African women authors tend to sift through this oral tradition in order to locate the stories of their mothers and grandmothers. According to Nnaemeka, they deal with the oral tradition in a constructive way by taking "a measured walk through their mothers' gardens" (1994:137).

In *Without a Name*, Vera recognises the central role that the reclamation of mothers' stories can play in the survival of contemporary women. Mazvita comes

to the realisation that her attempt to forget is an exercise in futility that will not bring her any closure. The key to survival lies in remembering and claiming the past rather than forgetting and denying it. The trauma of re-entering her past leads to a complete fragmentation of Mazvita's psyche, resulting in her schizophrenic reflections on her bus trip home. In her description of the scene, however, Vera makes it clear that Mazvita does not have to undertake this torturous journey alone. She is joined by a "woman [who was] constantly there, seeking to find her" (Vera, 1994:90). In Harari and in her life with Joel, Mazvita was "truly alone" (18). Now, in her moment of deepest psychological despair, Mazvita is "comfort[ed] [by the] anonymous face" (91) of a woman. It is this woman who, in her mind, unties the knots of Mazvita's apron and releases the dead infant from her back.

The woman with the grey hair is, according to Samuelson, "construct[ed] as a female ancestral presence" (2002:95) who facilitates Mazvita's process of remembrance. Vera re-iterates the importance of female ancestors by pointing out that when Mazvita returns to her decimated village, she "sees her mother, old, coming towards her, calling, 'Mazvita'!" (Vera, 1994:102). These women, who have existed and endured before Mazvita, are claiming her as one of their own. It is a reclamation that unequivocally takes place "through [the] matrilineal line" (Samuelson, 2002:95) and through a woman's reappropriation of the right to name.

The "traditional [African] belief in a cosmological order involving the unborn, the living, and the dead" (Oyegoke, 1996:272) is incorporated by Vera as an instrumental factor in Mazvita's survival. This is also indicative of the extent to which Vera has embraced the *mestiza* consciousness advocated by Anzaldúa in her analysis of Chicana womanhood. Within the Western tradition, the experience of internal fragmentation and the recognition of the porous nature of the boundaries between self and ancestors, would likely be the cause of considerable anxiety. For Mazvita, however, these experiences signal hope,

albeit a faint hope. The Western tendency to construct and define identity "in terms of inner and outer, boundaries and separations" (Cribb,1992:147), is comprehensively eschewed by Vera. Mazvita finds hope and the possibility of renewal in her re-integration "into some higher metaphysical whole". The brutalities to which Mazvita has been subjected has led to "a swamping of her psychological borders" (Anzaldúa, 1987:766) which has resulted in her psychic disintegration. It literally becomes impossible to "hold concepts or ideas [or even the self] in rigid boundaries" (766). In the true spirit of *la mestiza*, Vera seems to be arguing for an acceptance, and indeed a celebration, of pluralism, contradictions and ambiguity.

Chapter 3

Under the Tongue: A language for the violated female body.

Vera continues her development of a language that is able to articulate the experience of the violated female body in *Under the Tongue*. In this novel, the central character is Zhizha, a pre-adolescent girl who is locked in an overwhelming struggle to overcome multiple traumas. In a brutal, incestuous rape, Zhizha has been violated by her father. She is also suffering from the effects of further familial disintegration since her mother was sent to prison for the retaliatory murder of her husband. Throughout the novel Vera foregrounds the power of speech as being the single most instrumental factor in Zhizha's quest for survival. However, even as Vera acknowledges the centrality of speech in dealing with trauma, she recognises that any such endeavour will necessarily be problematised by difficulties inherent in language as such. Zhizha's interior monologues are complex, often ambiguous and always resistant to easy, straightforward interpretation. In this way, Vera makes it clear that, while words are crucial to survival, neither their meanings nor their effects are ever transparent.

Vera's repudiation of master narratives and hierarchised binary oppositions, as well as her recognition of the fluidity of meaning and the opaque nature of words, bear close resemblance to a Derridean, post-structuralist theory of language and literature. Zygmunt Bauman (1992:viii) has theorised that the thrust of the postmodern project has been the destruction of "hurdles", "ramparts" and "locks" in an effort to achieve an emancipation from "ossified versions" of the past and the truth. The result has been a "universal dismantling of power-supported structures" (Bauman, 1992:ix). Key post-structuralist enterprises, "such as critiques of the sign, of representation, and of the [monolithic] subject" (Culler, 1983:25), are central elements in Vera's work. When one considers the

inherently patriarchal nature of language, it soon becomes evident that Vera's deconstructive, subversive approach to language is not only justified, but demanded. It is clear that Zhizha will never be able adequately to articulate her trauma in the language of the "fathers". Indeed, the father(s) have been centrally implicated in her brutalisation.

Vera's insistence on the falsity contained in traditional dichotomies is another point of convergence between her thought and that of the deconstructionist Jacques Derrida. In a discussion of Derridean theory, Dundas Todd and Fisher argue that "Western culture is dominated by a series of binary oppositions which are in fact violent hierarchies" (1988:5). A central deconstructionist tenet is that such oppositional classifications impose symmetry or complete asymmetry in a way that is not supported by substantial fact. This means that, even though differences certainly do exist between, for example, men and women or among men and women, "these differences are neither enough to constitute binary oppositions – masculine versus feminine – nor unitary symmetries – man or woman" (Dundas Todd and Fisher, 1988:5). Vera's fusion of binary oppositions reflects a similar disbelief in their veracity.

A further Derridean maxim that becomes relevant here is his assertion that "there is nothing outside the text" (cited in Bauman, 1992:130). This contention must, however, not be taken to signal his denial of the existence of material reality as such. On the contrary, he is merely saying that language is the mode through which we perceive reality. In addition, everything that we speak or write "is already saturated with meaning [and] carr[ies] the accumulated weight of history and convention" (Dundas Todd and Fisher, 1988:6). Herein lies the familiar feminist problem. The aforementioned "history and convention" are products of patriarchal society and are, as such, infused with patriarchal values. Language, and the reality that is mediated through that language, cannot escape these patriarchal values. Zhizha thus learns that "her mother tongue fails her at the critical moment of her violation because it is a patriarchal instrument designed to

protect male sexual privilege" (Jita Alan, 1996:209). It is in reaction to this debilitating state of affairs that deconstructionist feminists argue for the need "to reinvent language . . . to speak not only against but outside the structure . . . to establish a discourse the status of which would no longer be defined by the phallacy of male meaning" (Felman quoted in Cameron, 1990:9). Gqola also argues that it is imperative to subvert "colonial and patriarchal systems of logic" (2001:15) since women need to create a "new language, new vision and new realities as [they] world [their] environs anew". These are the linguistic barriers that Vera needs to overcome in order for Zhizha to speak.

The language of patriarchy, and the conventional modes of articulation that are enabled by it, makes Zhizha's grandmother feel as if she is "surrounded by strange tongues" (Vera, 1996:40). Traditional linear narratives are simply not adequate to the task of giving voice to the kind of trauma that has been inflicted on Zhizha's body. Grandmother recognises this when she says that a "woman finds her sorrow in her dream". The fantastical realm of dreams "not only partake[s] in wishful and imaginary renditions of social conditions, they also actively construct new relationships and new constellations of meaning" (Warren, 1993:181). Dreams thus constitute a subversive space where women can speak unfettered by the limitations of patriarchal systems of meaning. A space where women can overcome imposed silence by constructing a different kind of language becomes crucial to their survival. Zhizha's grandmother identifies the dream as one of the locations in which this survival strategy can be exercised as she equates dreams with life since a "dream cannot be forgotten, it grows roots where silence lingers" (Vera, 1996:41).

Before turning to the way in which Vera gives Zhizha a voice, it is necessary to locate Zhizha's brutalisation within the broader system of patriarchal oppression. It is not sufficient to regard Zhizha's experiences as an isolated manifestation of one particular family's dysfunctionality. It is a central contention of this thesis that the violation of Zhizha, Mazvita, as well as Vera's other female protagonists, are

facilitated, and indeed caused, by the dynamics of a society that is inherently patriarchal and misogynist. In support of this hypothesis, studies of incestuous families have shown "father-daughter incest to be but one manifestation of a despotic paternal rule" (Herman, 1981:63).

Incest is just one specific instance of oppression that women and girl children are subjected to.[1] As with other forms of gender violence, this is an outflow of the specific manner in which power relations function to perpetuate male power and privilege in patriarchal societies. The result is that, even when legislative protective measures are installed, "the ideological hegemony of sexism creates an invisible institutional mechanism" (Women and Law in Southern Africa Research Trust, 2002:14) that continues to enable and protect male perpetrators. Again, it is clear that substantive change will only come about after a comprehensive deconstruction of this prevailing sexist hegemony.

The family, which can be seen as society's primary organising institution, is a "closed off, total institution' (Neff and Vander Mey, 1986:ix). The family, as a unit, has been thoroughly "privatised and depoliticised" (Russell, 1997:168). Consequently, it is taken as a given that any deviance and violence occurring within this self-contained unit, should be dealt with within the family itself. This is the kind of myth informing Zhizha's thoughts when she says that it is "death when such things are told" (Vera, 1996:108). Vera, however, recognises that the social taboos of rape and incest are political phenomena. The family can be seen as a microcosm of the larger society and, as such, what happens in the family becomes a metaphor for the dynamics of society as a whole.

The violence taking place within Zhizha's family can thus be seen as a reflection of the violence pervading the broader Zimbabwean society which is, at the time

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[1] While I recognise that boy children are also victimised by incestuous abuse, the fact remains that a disproportionately large number of incest victims are female. For the purposes of this thesis, the focus will be on the female experience of incest. For a comparative study of the sex of incest victims, see Neff and Vander Mey (1986).

in which the novel is set, immersed in a war of independence. There can be no doubt that Muroyiwa, Zhizha's father and rapist, is a product of a war-torn, violence-ridden environment. Childhood and innocence have long been some of the first casualties of war. Muroyiwa himself contemplates the fate of fragile and vulnerable creatures in such a violent milieu when he wonders "what happened to the butterflies during a war" (6). Children, and girl children in particular, are already at considerable risk in a "normal" family situation where the "dynamics of power and differential access to and utilisation of resources" (Neff and Vander Mey, 1986:38) ensure their continued dependence and subjugation. In times of war, they are all the more endangered. The simile employed by Muroyiwa, who feels "like an insect thrown defencelessly against the earth" (Vera, 1996:6) is, in actual fact, an apt description of the tenuous position occupied by girls like Zhizha.

Throughout *Under the Tongue*, Vera insists that what happens in the privacy of Zhizha's bed, cannot be disentangled from the public, explicitly political dynamics of the Zimbabwean liberation war. The violence that accompanies war is omnipresent and threatening like "thunder when the sky is black with rain" (7). It is the "sweetness of secrecy [that] became apparent during a war" (46) that has always been the crucial assumption allowing family violence in general, and incest in particular, to thrive.[2] In a society in which speech has so comprehensively been appropriated by men, it is simply accepted that women will acquiesce to "a silence with no wings" (39).

The Zimbabwean liberation war that has shaped Muroyiwa has been instrumental in fostering the culture of silence that allows Zhizha's rape. In a situation of war, Muroyiwa sees silence as necessary for survival. In order to survive, one had to be "unremarkable [and] silent as death" (46). With a precocious perspicacity Zhizha recognises the dangers of silence. While silence

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[2] In "Possible Explanations of Under-reporting", a study conducted by the Women and Law in Southern Africa Research Trust (2002), there is an exploration of the silence surrounding the crime of incest.

allows her father's survival, her own will depend on a reclamation of speech. She associates silence with death and decay, a realisation that is reflected in her assertion that a "word does not rot unless it is buried in the mouth for too long" (54). As was the case with Mazvita, denial and suppression of the past can bring no resolution or closure. The trauma inflicted on their bodies was so severe and its effects were so tenacious that any attempt to bury it will merely result in its "grow[ing] roots" (54). For these women to deal with brutalisation, they need to confront it by "return[ing] to a place [they] thought had become memory". The enormity of the strength and courage required to return to these "forgotten" places certainly belies the denigratory stereotypes that consign women to the subordinate spheres of the strong/weak and active/passive binaries.

The perversity and unnaturalness of a society that has been structured according to colonial and patriarchal ideologies are emphasised by Vera's use of contradictory descriptions. In the same way that Muroyiwa perceived violence as "attractive" (28), Tachiveyi focuses on the "harmonies" (48) contained by war. The suggestion is that war, and men's participation in war, is not a natural phenomenon. Rather, it becomes justified, and actually normatively desirable, by ideologies that are constructed and sustained by men. This is an example of Vera's subversion of the perpetrator/victim binary. Although men have perpetrated extensive violence on the bodies of women like Mazvita and Zhizha, men themselves have also been victimised by the very ideologies that produced them. The impact of these ideologies is so ubiquitous that they leave men with "their eyes black and dry with surrender" (92). Ideologies of colonialism, nationalism and patriarchy, together with the binaries that function as their foundation, once again emerge as being instrumental in creating the kind of society in which the female body has become a battleground.

The firm entrenchment of these ideologies has resulted in a situation wherein women are comprehensively silenced. Leclerc (1990:76) shares Vera's contention that it is silence that allows the violation of the female body to flourish.

She asserts that it is "our [female] silence and the triumphant sound of [their male] voice that authorised the theft of our labour, the rape of our bodies, . . . and our silent martyrdom". None of Vera's female characters escapes the pressure to be quiet. In her description of an early morning township scene, Vera mentions a man's repeated "shouts" (Vera, 1996:51) while a woman restricts herself to a single call in a "thin simpering voice". This brief account provides a succinct synopsis of expected, gendered modes of articulation. The stereotypes which are at work here are clear: men shout and women simper.

Zhizha, her mother and grandmother have all been subjected to silencing by the men closest to them. During the rape, Zhizha tries to cry out but the only thing that flows from her battered body is a "rigid silence" (106). For her, silence is equated with death. She sees herself as the epitome of silence and, as a result, as the "opposite of life" (104). Zhizha "long[s] to defeat the silence" (5) that has been imposed by her father who muffled her cries by holding her "breathing in his palm" during the rape. She needs to reclaim language in order to utilise "the power of the spoken word" (Muchemwa, 2002:7) for "emancipatory" and "empowering" purposes. For Zhizha to live, she knows that she must do so "with words" (Vera, 1996:82).

According to Scarry, "pain actively destroys language" (1985:172) as it forces the victim to revert to "the pre-language of cries and groans". The intensity of pain inflicted on the body can make all words seem "inadequate, worn, foolish, lifeless" (Tal, 1996:122) when survivors seek a language to express the searing intensity of their pain. The limitations of language are such that this kind of "pain cannot be carried in the mouth" (Vera, 1996:39). In a discussion of the "rupture of language suffered by Holocaust survivors" (1996:55), Tal identifies "a deep need [amongst survivors of violence] to talk about it" while they simultaneously feel that "language [is] somehow incommensurate" with their experience. When Zhizha's mother tries to confront the pain caused by her husband's actions, she finds that "her voice [is] beaten and broken" (Vera, 1996:29) and all she has

recourse to is the pre-linguistic utterance of a "piercing empty wail". After the silencing, Zhizha's torturous attempts to regain her voice are reminiscent of a baby's first tentative efforts at speech. From a silence that is "dark and still [and] vivid" (106), Zhizha emerges slowly with "one small whimper" (104) and "whisper[s]".

Zhizha's attempts to reclaim language are inextricably linked to the lessons that her mother and grandmother teach her about speaking. It is through her "discovery of the maternal lineage in the voice" (Samuelson, 2002:21) that Zhizha learns how to excavate words from "under the tongue" (Vera, 1996:110). When her voice, albeit "broken and dry", manages to "creep[ ] out of the room", it is to her mother that Zhizha calls out. After the rape, Zhizha finds that she "cannot speak" (3) and her grandmother and mother painstakingly help her to recover the voice that her father had "stolen". When Zhizha manages to repeat the vowels "a e i o u" (80) after her mother, the reader is "present at the birth, or rebirth, of language" (Scarry, 1985:172). Zhizha herself makes the association between the recovery of language and the recovery of life when she asserts that she has "found the moment of [her] birth" (Vera, 1996:80).

Vera explicitly situates Zhizha's reclamation of speech in a female space. It is her grandmother who "will teach [Zhizha] many forgotten songs" (2) and it is in her "mother's presence" (80) that she is able to voice the vowels that are being taught to her. Vera thus "demythologises" (Davies, 1994:155) the notion of phallocentric language by locating speech within a "context of female identification". As the "letters flow" (Vera, 1996:82) between Zhizha and her mother, the mother is clearly positioned as the "source of [Zhizha's] new language" (Samuelson, 2002:17). The lessons in speaking that Zhizha receives from her grandmother are the product of her grandmother's own struggle to voice the pain of baby Tonderayi's death. Grandmother has first-hand experience in the importance of excavating "hidden" (Vera, 1996:70) words that rest "at the bottom of silent lakes" and she insists to Zhizha that women "have tongues" (52).

Vera achieves a further subversion of dichotomous oppositions by bringing language "into the realm of the female body" (Samuelson, 2002:20). In Vera's work, language, mind and culture do not function as the polar opposites of speech, body and nature. Zhizha's reappropriation of language is closely identified with the physical ability of her body to speak as she watches her "mouth moving in different directions with the letters" (Vera, 1996:81). The Cartesian duality between mind and body disintegrates as Zhizha claims language with her "lips", her "chin", her "throat" and her "breath". When Zhizha feels the last letter of the word "duck . . . . scraping at the roof of [her] mouth" (96), it is clear that she regards speaking as a visceral, embodied experience.

Vera, however, does not associate Zhizha's speaking with the gendered metaphor of the mother tongue by using this metaphor in a simple or unproblematic way. By challenging the conventional usage of the image of the mother tongue, Vera signals her rejection of the "symbolic economy" (Boehmer, 1992:233) that equates the mother with land, nation and home. Neither the mother tongue nor the motherland would be appropriate metaphors to employ in the attempt to give Zhizha a voice, since these metaphors have been constructed and perpetuated by men for the purpose of reducing women to two-dimensional symbols. Rather than simply rejecting the mother tongue metaphor, Vera subverts it. She utilises the tongue as an organ that connects and empowers women. The isolating silence that Zhizha experiences after the rape is overcome when her grandmother "touches her forehead with her tongue" (53) and Zhizha is reminded of her connection with her mother when the name Runyararo "falls in drops on [her] tongue like rain in late harvest" (15).

While the tongue connects and empowers women, Vera explicitly identifies voice with the grandmother's milk rather than with the mother's tongue. When Zhizha is "crying in [her] sleep" (72), she is comforted by her grandmother's voice which "is filled with milk". By associating Zhizha's recovered voice with milk, Vera manages to link language to the female body even as she invokes the "novelty

and evocative power of [a newly created] metaphor" (Tourangeau, 1982:32). She endorses Cixous's dictum that women should write in "white ink" (1975:352) since it is to the female body that Vera turns when she needs new metaphors with which to articulate the female experience. In doing so, her work reflects the argument of Leclerc who contends that it is necessary to talk about the female body, "because only by talking about it will a new language be born, a woman's word" (1990:76). Zhizha realises that words, and by extension the capacity to articulate those words, are associated with both life and the female body. Her belief in the life-giving power of words is particularly evident when she contends that words are "like drops of rain, like milk" (58).

Zhizha's mother must also engage in a slow, painful struggle to recover her voice after the trauma of her daughter's rape. The pain has left her voice "crushed" (29). Again, silence is accompanied by the foreboding of death as Runyararo's "wounded" voice "trembles with the end of life". Even before the rape Muroyiwa had inculcated the virtues of female silence in Runyararo. Her husband had taught her silence because "a woman is not a man" (31). In the room they shared in Dangambvura, a gendered division of labour determined the allocation of household duties as "Runyararo washed the dishes every morning while her husband still slept" (85). While Runyararo's voice was stifled in her relationship with Muroyiwa, she found "symmetry" (92) and the "confident movement" of her body in the activity of mat weaving. It was Runyararo's mother "who had taught her about making mats" and this craft continued to connect the women to each other as Runyararo "could see the smoke from her mother's morning fires" as she "woke . . . early to sew her mats". The trans-generational bond between Zhizha, Runyararo and Grandmother emerges as a crucial factor in these women's survival. It enables them to create a female space where they are nurtured and sustained and where they learn that, despite pain that "follows one like a shadow" (39), a woman "endures".

The "virtue" of a woman's silence is also one of the lessons that Zhizha's grandfather had been teaching his wife and his daughter. After Runyararo kills her husband, her father attempts to cement her ostracism from the family by forbidding the speaking of her name. Even in the face of her grandmother's "pleading" (73), Zhizha's grandfather insists that they "must not talk of mother". Her grandmother begs to be heard, but her grandfather simply responds with the patriarchal maxim that "a woman cannot speak" (44). Her grandmother assumes a kneeling position of utter self-abnegation with her "head bowed" (45) and her "shoulders limp". This gesture of total vulnerability is met only with contemptuous cruelty as Grandfather re-iterates the painful fact that Zhizha's mother is in prison. This comment can be seen as an example of Grandfather invoking the familiar misogynist trope of representing women as the source of all evil and misfortune. The implicit suggestion is that Zhizha's grandmother is somehow to blame for the tragedy that has befallen their family. Grandfather's casting of blame on his wife had been much more explicit in the case of Tonderayi, the deformed child who died shortly after birth. While dealing with the loss of her new-born baby, Grandmother also had to contend with her husband's accusations that he had "married a [rotten] womb filled with termites" (62). It seems clear that even though language is a "broken tool" (Romaine, 1999:20) that women need to modify in order to speak, men continue to use language as a "loaded weapon" with which to denigrate and subjugate the female.

Vera utilises the images of water and rivers to explore the unique connection between mothers and daughters. Even while Runyararo is jailed for killing her husband, Zhizha and Grandmother manage to maintain their bond with her because, as women, they had "met in water" (Vera, 1996: 10; 95). The bond that is symbolised by water, is very different from the ties of blood that link Zhizha and Runyararo to their respective fathers. These blood connections had been violated and perverted by Zhizha's father who raped her and by Runyararo's father who rejected her so comprehensively that he does not allow her name to be spoken. Martin Shaw argues that, in "representing the spirit of woman as

water, Vera invokes an endless cycle from sky to earth, from birth to death, from suffering to healing" (2002:92). Zhizha associates the nurturing, connective bond between herself and her grandmother with a river. For her, "Grandmother is a river" (Vera, 1996:2), but her grandmother has also taught her that rivers "begin with [their] tears". Grandmother's suffering, which has turned her hair "white with the things of the world" (44), enables her to support Zhizha in the process of healing. Grandmother has absorbed "the many words a woman must swallow before she can learn to speak her sorrow and be heard" (32). Even as she "cries about being a woman", she teaches Zhizha how a woman can survive in this world without being "conquered by a sorrow which has no name".

The "endless cycle" (Martin Shaw, 2002:92) that Vera identifies with being a woman, finds an apt metaphor in the image of the river. The nature of the connection between Grandmother, Runyararo and Zhizha is such that the boundaries between them dissolve completely as their "permeable psyches" (90) flow into one another. Zhizha's "sorrow of yesterday" (Vera, 1996:2) enters Grandmother like a river to the extent that Zhizha asserts that she is "inside Grandmother". Zhizha and her mother experience their "initiation into each other's worlds" (80) as so intense that, when the "letters flow" (82) between them, Zhizha finds that she has "turned into mother" while her mother "has become [her]". Even though society attempts to impose a "deep silence" (30) on women, the matrilineal connection allows them to create a space where there are "things that they understand between each other" and where they are able to "speak and speak, [even] in their silence". Amongst these women, Vera has rendered the self/other binary non-existent. Vera's dismantling of boundaries encourages the reader to "acknowledge the artificiality of the boundaries and dualism that usually underpin our perceptions of the world" (Lewis, 2001:111).

Vera's use of water imagery is typical of her refusal to assign single, straightforward or transparent meanings to words. In this respect, her approach to language is similar to that of Anzaldúa, who advocates an acceptance of the

fact that we are confronted with "multiple, often opposing messages" (1987:766) and meanings. Like a river, the meanings that Vera attaches to words are fluid and in a constant state of flux. Water can be an agent of life and growth and when Zhizha recovers her voice, she affirms that she is "harvest", "rain" and "river" (Vera, 1996:97). Yet, water is also the substance that makes Zhizha's "face wet with tears" (31) and it is water that "had filled [Tonderayi's head] at the moment of birth" (70). Wetness is associated with the milk and water that connect Zhizha with her mother and grandmother, but it is also the wetness of "blood" (107) and "mucus" that Zhizha's father leaves between her legs during the rape. In Vera's use of language, "[m]eanings are slippery . . . sometimes reversing themselves" (Martin Shaw, 2002:26).

In *Under the Tongue*, Vera makes it clear that the insidious effects of silence influence the lives of both men and women. She grants the reader access to Muroyiwa's torturous inner world which he experiences as "a tumult of agony which the war married with death" (Vera, 1996:6). Vera's subversive treatment of language thus not only allows her female protagonists to voice their experiences – it also provides a new mode in which to articulate the suffering of men. Even though Muroyiwa undoubtedly occupies a position of far greater power than Zhizha, it is clear to the reader that he is, by no stretch of the imagination, an autonomous agent. The violence of colonialism and the discourse of nationalism, together with the patriarchal assumptions that inform both these enterprises, seem to have written his script and the reader sees how "his destiny bears down upon him" (Frickey, 1990:6). These comments should, however, not be taken as an attempt to provide excuses for Muroyiwa's brutal rape of his daughter. On the contrary, it is the contention of this thesis that there is plenty of blame to go around. While Muroyiwa certainly bears responsibility for this violent crime, the ideologies of colonialism, nationalism and patriarchy cannot be absolved of blame. As the discussion in the introductory chapter showed, colonialism was a project that contributed to the layered oppression of women and the nationalist movement is built around disempowering representations of women. To regard

the rape as the free action of an isolated individual, would be to deny the extent to which hegemonic ideologies have facilitated the violation of the female body. Substantive change cannot be exacted, and girl children like Zhizha cannot be safe, if the problem of gender violence is tackled at an individual level. Nothing less than a comprehensive deconstruction and dismantling of the ideologies of colonialism, nationalism and patriarchy, together with their representational and linguistic legacies, will suffice.

By granting the reader insight into the mechanisms of Muroyiwa's mind, Vera thus avoids the trap of dealing in the clear-cut binary oppositions that sustain the projects of colonialism, nationalism and patriarchy. Colonialism was based on the oppositions of European/African and civilised/uncivilised, while nationalist movements are mobilised by the notion that men are the protectors and women are the victims and that men are the fighters while women are the nurturers. These ideas are informed by the patriarchal dichotomies of man/woman, active/ passive and public/private. Vera eschews the false simplicity of the perpetrator/ victim duality and thereby acknowledges the complexity of the world inhabited by her characters. It is possible to endow even the most brutal character with the subjectivity of an "I" and to make such a character "into more than a mere villain" (Sage, 1992:48). While there can be no question that Muroyiwa's actions have been monstrous, Vera never attempts to hide the fact that he has also been a victim. It is a testimony to the subtlety of her writing that she is able to give Zhizha a voice without silencing Muroyiwa.

In addition to recognising Muroyiwa's victimisation, Vera is careful to show the formative impact that violence and loss have had on him. His own vulnerability is emphasised by the image of him "being born in a calabash" (Vera, 1996:7). Muroyiwa's very survival had been regarded as a "miracle", albeit one that was not perceived as a "joyous" miracle by his community. The villagers had "wish[ed] him death" and, as a result, Muroyiwa himself "assumed that death was better than life, more to be wished for". The picture that emerges is of a thoroughly

alienated little boy who "carried a calabash inside him, where his heart should have been".

Muroyiwa grew up in a family which had not escaped the lasting effects of violence and disintegration. Chief amongst these had been the trauma of his father's blindness and the loss of his brother to Zimbabwe's war of national liberation. It was in VaGomba's "blindness which sought light" (26) that Muroyiwa grew up. The effect of VaGomba's loss of sight on his family was so severe that it is referred to as a "death". Here again, secrecy and silence hamper efforts to deal with loss and trauma. The fateful accident is only ever discussed in muted whispers by Muroyiwa's mother, who told him about "the details . . . around the cooking fire when there was no one else who would hear". Muroyiwa is thus also shown to be a victim of the patriarchal ideology that marginalises "mother's talk" (Trinh T. Minh-ha, 1997:26). Vera deftly illustrates the insidious effects of silence by repeatedly describing the atmosphere in Muroyiwa's home as being "laden with silence" (Vera, 1996:26). Silence is constructed as ominous and it is explicitly associated with darkness as it thrives in the "dark hum" of the family's hut and Muroyiwa experiences it as an "absence of light".

The conspicuous lack of speaking about the accident renders the trauma inaccessible and Muroyiwa recognises that there is "something deep in the blindness of his father" (28) that "he could not reach". There is, in other words, an acknowledgement that this kind of suffering has a deep and pervasive impact on the entire family, but the all-encompassing cloak of silence thwarts any possibility of dealing or coming to terms with it. The destructive result of this silencing is that the trauma will eventually erupt in manifestations of violence. Vera makes the link between the suppression of trauma, silence and violence by making it clear that violence threateningly simmers just beneath the surface of this wounded family. VaGomba handles his loss by nurturing "an intimacy of hostility" between himself and the root that caused his blindness. His son, in turn, "envied this intimate aggression [and] its attractive violence". The excavation of loss from "under the

tongue" that enables Zhizha's survival is thus simply not part of Muroyiwa's repertoire of coping mechanisms. What makes Muroyiwa's internalisation of trauma all the more poignant, is that he seems to want to articulate his loss and pain but that he remains desperately, and as it turns out, tragically, unable to do so. Muroyiwa "longed to find the root" that caused his father's blindness and he wanted to expose it to the light so that it could "grow and bloom". Despite his desire to penetrate the stifling walls of silence and secrecy, however, he fails to do so.

A further instance of Muroyiwa's victimisation is to be found in the loss of his brother, Tachiveyi, who "vanished" (47). Again, the destructiveness of the loss is reflected in its association with darkness. Muroyiwa experiences the loss of his brother as a "point of light dying in the distance" and all "[d]etails of his departure" are enclosed in a "dark cloud". The making of his decision is a process infused with an "agony thick like flame" and he contemplates his options amidst "shadows". He is propelled into the "blinding black cloud" of war by the pervasive pressures of a nationalist rhetoric that demands "sacrifice on the alter of war". Gender identity has long been utilised as a "tool with which societies induce men to fight" (Goldstein, 2001:252). The cultural construction of masculinity requires men to prove their manhood by embracing violence and confrontation for the good of the nation and the land. It is the power of these prevailing ideologies that prompts men like Tachiveyi to go to war with "no illusions of a return" (Vera, 1996:48).

The "silence" (104) and "death" that has entered Zhizha's "dreaming" and turned her "growing . . . into mud", has forced her to "struggle in the darkness" in order to survive. While Muroyiwa had not managed to overcome his own silence and thus remained "blinded by a surging darkness" (57), Zhizha was finally able to experience her "voice grow[ing] from inside" (110) her, and she felt it "ris[ing] soft like smoke". The silence and secrecy that are protected and perpetuated by the male characters are overcome by Zhizha as she opens up the imposed taboos

on women's speech. She is able to do so in a language that Vera has created to transcend the "father's silence" (26).

Chapter 4

The Stone Virgins: The female community as alternative space for engagement with language and landscape.

In *The Stone Virgins,* Vera moves between the city of Bulawayo and the rural area of Kezi as she traces the violence that two sisters, Thenjiwe and Nonceba, are subjected to in the aftermath of the independence Zimbabwe gained in 1980. Throughout the novel, Vera confronts the importance of the Zimbabwean land and landscape with a level of subtlety that never degenerates into a mere description of the "killing fields" (O'Brien, 2003:5) that Matabeleland became in the early 1980s. The murderer and rapist Sibaso is shown to be a product of the "hills of Gulati" (Vera, 2002:107) where he fought as a guerrilla soldier in the civil conflict that characterised post-independence Zimbabwe. Thenjiwe and Nonceba are inextricably intertwined with the Kezi landscape that, for them, represents "life itself" (15). Amidst the haunting beauty of the Zimbabwean landscape, Thenjiwe and Nonceba are exposed to "atrocities that defy the imagination of even the most macabre novelist" (Ranger, 2002:209). After the attack by Sibaso, Nonceba finds herself "trapped by her silence" (Vera, 2002:84) and it falls to Vera to develop a "language of all wounded beings" (82) with which Nonceba can articulate her pain.

Vera's sensitivity to the interaction of landscape and language is evident from the opening lines of the novel which begins with a listing of the names of streets in Bulawayo. From Jameson and Rhodes to Byron and Keats, Bulawayo's roads are named after prominent colonial agents and "English poets" (5). The imposition of foreign names on the Zimbabwean landscape reflects the traditional trope in imperial discourse where the white coloniser appropriates the right to name and define the colonial subject and the colonial territory. As was the case with Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys, Vera is acutely aware that,

specifically in a post-colonial context, "[n]ames matter" (1966:147). Names "reflect the obscure relations of power between self and society" (McClintock, 1995:269) and the linguistic legacy of foreign occupation endures even after liberation.

Sibaso's assertion that it is "an easy task to forget a name" (Vera, 2002:74) strikes the reader as words of self-delusion as it is clear that Sibaso had been shaped by the colonial forces that left an entire "continent in disarray". When he "penetrates" (65) Nonceba during the rape, he "enters her body like a vacuum" (62). This description of the rape reveals the extent to which Sibaso has internalised the imperial discourse of penetrating the "empty" African continent. In a post-colonial environment he re-enacts the colonial appropriation of Africa on Nonceba's body. The nationalist rhetoric that mobilise men to fight has, in the aftermath of war, left Sibaso "with either an eroded sense of manhood or the option of a militarised masculine identity with the attendant legitimisation of violence" (Sideris, 2000:44). The violence he inflicts on Nonceba and Thenjiwe becomes his only "way of maintaining a sense of power and control". In nationalist discourse, the female body functions as an empty symbol, whether it be of the nation, home, or land. Sibaso perpetuates this nationalist tradition by appropriating Nonceba's body as a "receptacle for his dreaming" (Vera, 2002:64). She is nothing more than an "inanimate" object onto which he projects his own sense of manhood as he pours his semen into her body. Even though the names of streets can be changed, and Rhodesia has become Zimbabwe, the linguistic and representational practices of colonialism and nationalism endure and their effects continue to be felt on the bodies of women like Thenjiwe and Nonceba.

The language Vera uses to describe the relationship between Thenjiwe and Cephas reveals that even the language of a kind, gentle man is characterised by images of acquisition and ownership. Thenjiwe "lets [Cephas] follow her" (33) and she regards his attentions as "spectacular and welcome". Already on the path leading to Thenjiwe's home, Cephas finds himself "wanting to possess" her.

He wants to "preserve" and own "each part of her". When making love, Cephas refers to Thenjiwe's "elbows which he keeps and claims". He describes her as the most beautiful thing that he "can hold" and he likens her to the inside of a "bark" that "no one has ever laid eyes on" but he. Part of Thenjiwe's value lies in her newness as Cephas wants to access and own those parts of her that only he has "ever laid eyes on". This desire is reminiscent of the patriarchal convention of fetishising virginity in order to control female sexuality. The lure of this virginal quality is emphasised when Cephas remarks that he "loved her breasts" (33) which looks "just as when she was fourteen or whenever it was she first woke to the scent of her own flesh". By treating Thenjiwe "as though she is a new creation" that only he has had access to, Cephas reveals his typically "male desire for a guaranteed relation to origin" (McClintock, 1995:29). McClintock argues that men seek certainty about their "relation to origin" since it aids them in securing "male property and power". Cephas discovers and "claims" (Vera, 2002:34) Thenjiwe's body in a way that reminds the reader of imperial agents discovering and appropriating the "virgin" African continent. The imperial imposition of foreign street names on the roads of Bulawayo can also be seen as a manifestation of the colonisers' desire to affirm a "privileged relation of origin" (McClintock, 1995:29) to the African territory that they "discovered".

Thenjiwe has come to "represent[ ] the environment of Kezi" (Ranger, 2002:209). Cephas's wish that they "must meet and love in the grass" (Vera, 2002:39) is indicative of the extent to which he has equated her with the landscape of Kezi, a place he traveled all the way from Bulawayo to see. Thenjiwe is aware of this as she knows that his desire to anoint her "earth brown skin" (36) with milk, "is his way . . . of turning her into that soft bark" (39) he compares her with. She foresees the day when "he tires of her and wakes one morning and catches [the] Kezi – Bulawayo – Kezi bus" (34). She suspects that Cephas is not able "to love her as absolutely as she desires to be loved, as knowingly" (41). He loves "her fingernails", "each of her bones", "her heels" and her "waiting thighs", yet "she cannot imagine him staying and his love lasting unless he has understood her

place" (Ranger, 2002:210). She needs him to love more than her body and she feels that he cannot know her unless he understands her connection with the Kezi landscape and with her sister Nonceba.

By juxtaposing the relationship between Cephas and Thenjiwe with the bond between Thenjiwe and Nonceba, Vera is able to suggest an alternative form of connection where claiming and ownership play no part. Nonceba is so much a part of Thenjiwe, that she feels as if her sister "had already been holding her hand quietly and forever" (Vera, 2002:42). There is no need for one to claim the other because, in their relationship, boundaries have been dissolved by love and intimacy. Although Thenjiwe recognises that they are different, she regards "her sister [as] nearer to her than her own shadow". While Cephas "encircle[s]" (33) Thenjiwe with his "cool breath", Nonceba's breath is "her own breath flowing into her body" (42). Nonceba also experiences this closeness as she asserts, even as she sees Thenjiwe's decapitated body, that she "is part of her" and they "are one" (65). Even though Nonceba has survived the attack, she "knows how to follow Thenjiwe all the way to the sky, beyond death" (87). Vera seems to be postulating a specific kind of connection that exists among women and that renders hierarchies and boundaries irrelevant. Zhizha, Grandmother and Runyararo also experience this bond as their personal borders become so porous that their identities "flow" (Vera, 1996:82) into one another like a "river" (22). In *Without a Name*, boundaries between life and death are also transcended among women as Mazvita is reclaimed by her mother on her return to Mubaira. After their brief affair, Cephas "leaves her and loves her still" (Vera, 2002:43) but even in death, Nonceba refuses to leave her sister as "[n]othing can separate them from each other" (87). Nonceba is left with the "wounds of war which no one can heal" (86) but her enduring bond with her sister leads her to a place where she finds herself "starting to laugh, again, like Thenjiwe". In all three of Vera's novels analysed in this thesis, the community of women emerges as a phenomenon of healing, nurturing and sustenance for the violated female characters.

Another member of the community of women that contributes to Nonceba's survival is her aunt Sihle, a woman "Thenjiwe and [she] both loved" (102). It was around "Sihle's fires" that Thenjiwe and Nonceba listened to Sihle's stories that gave them their "histories, like treasures". In the absence of their mother, their aunt became the central figure through which they became acquainted with their "pasts". The role that women play in their telling of stories, "recognises the power of women as preservers and disseminators of oral traditions" (Spencer-Walters, 1996:127) while it also "engenders solidarity among women and firmly situates women as significant socialising agents in the community". In *Under the Tongue*, it is also Zhizha's grandmother who tells her the story of her birth and describes it as the "remembering of journeying" (Vera, 1996:11) and as something that "is not to be forgotten". After the brutalisation of the rape, Grandmother ensures that Zhizha knows she is not alone by telling her that they, together with "Mother-of-Zhizha", "belong together in an ancient caress of the earth".

Even the power inherent in the telling of stories is, however, limited for women. Men tend to denigrate the value of women's stories by dismissing it as "silly women's stories or 'womanish wisdom'" (Nnaemeka, 1997:12). When Nonceba's father tells Sihle to "take her foolishness away from his daughters" (Vera, 2002:102) it is clear to the reader that he "is not unaware of [or unthreatened by] the power, and knowledge-in-wisdom of mother's talk" (Nnaemeka, 1996:13). Vera acknowledges the importance of the relationship between these women through Nonceba's assertion that she "must live" (Vera, 2002:104) because she does not want Sihle "to be blamed for [her] missing voice, for Thenjiwe, dying".

Vera's description of Sihle reveals the kind of pressures women experience in a "normal" family situation. In patriarchal societies, the status of women is "mediated through [their] social relation to men" (McClintock, 1995:269), whether it be the woman's father, husband or son. Since "all the mothers in Kezi are called by the names of their children, especially if these children are sons" (Vera,

2002:102), Sihle is often referred to as naZenzo, in accordance with the "name of her first son". Sihle's brother called her by this name "only when he was chastising her, telling her not to answer back". The woman is thus silenced by reminding her of the power relations that determine her social position according to her ability to bear sons. Nonceba's mother is also shown to be a victim of the importance that a patriarchal society attaches to sons as she "went back to her village because she had tired of [her husband's] desire for a son". What little status a woman is afforded, is "directly linked not only to the womb as agent of reproduction but . . . also . . . [to] the socio-political function/benefits ascribed to the womb" (Makuchi Nfah-Abbeneyi, 1996:105). This means that women without children, and to a lesser extent women without boy children, are "consciously excluded and positioned as inappropriate Others". Within the rhetoric of nationalist discourse, a woman without children cannot fulfil her emblematic roles as Mother Africa or Mother of the nation. It is, in other words, a kind of discourse that reduces women to their bodies or to "objects of production and reproduction". When women are so comprehensively reduced to their bodies, even by the men who love them, it becomes apparent why a man like Sibaso would appropriate the right to act out his sense of rage, disillusionment and alienation on female bodies.

Vera is also careful to illustrate the contradictory position that women have been assigned to in the symbolic and representational practices of patriarchy. When women are not being idealised for their ability to symbolise the "good mother" of the nation, they tend to become the scapegoats onto whom the blame for all of society's problems is projected. The "men in [Nonceba's] family" (103) ensure that it is "Sihle who is blamed for anything the women in the Gumede family fail to do or do improperly". In *Without a Name*, Joel blames Mazvita for the pregnancy that may well have been the result of rape. He regards her "deception" (Vera, 1994:74) as "final and inexcusable" and callously orders her to leave his home. Even though the language and ideology of patriarchy that shaped Sibaso are the products of men, Nonceba realises that the blame for his

actions is likely to be projected onto Sihle because they remain "embedded in a culture which blamed women for what happened to them" (Meintjies, 2000:6).

Vera makes the reader aware of the contradictions inherent in the language of men and then proceeds to postulate an alternative to this language. This alternative language is spoken in the community of women consisting of Sihle, Thenjiwe and Nonceba. It is a language that comforts without casting blame and it is also a language that transcends binary oppositions. Sihle's "whispers" (Vera, 2002:104) comfort Nonceba on the excruciating drive to the hospital and she perceives Sihle's "lullaby" as something that "flows from the sky to the earth". Nature and culture cease to function as mutually exclusive polar opposites as the cultural activity of language production becomes intertwined with the natural landscape of "sky" and "earth". In Sihle's speaking, the distinction between speech and silence becomes meaningless as Nonceba "feel[s] the silence, of [Sihle's] voice" and decides that she "must live". Nonceba "sink[s] into the comfort of [Sihle's] voice" while she experiences her uncle Mduduzi's voice as being "sharp against all the other voices". Sihle, who "has the tiniest voice possible", ensures that her nieces "listen carefully whenever she talks". The "steady rhythm" of Sihle's soft voice is clearly able to say much more than uncle Mduduzi's "sharp" voice which Nonceba likens to a "whip".

In Vera's language, silence can speak. While Thenjiwe and Nonceba learn a great deal from Sihle's silence, silence also becomes a space where Nonceba begins to reconstitute her damaged psyche after the attack. She describes her silence as "a perfect dwelling place" (128) where she can come to terms with her "grief" and her "pain [that] is higher than the hills". This chosen silence is very different from the imposed silence that Nonceba experiences during the rape. Even though she "would like to speak" (62), there are no words to express the "anger" that "rises furiously" in her. Rather than attempting to articulate Nonceba's pain in words describing abstract feelings and emotions, Vera focuses on what is happening to Nonceba's body during the rape. Nonceba "closes her

eyes" and it is with her entire "body [that she] listens as his movements pursue each of her thoughts". She "can do nothing to save herself" and Vera ensures that the reader is acutely aware of Sibaso's every action as he "presses", "pulls", "drags", "forces" and "mould[s]" Nonceba's body according to his will. The "anger" that Nonceba cannot express in words is spoken by her body in which her "saliva is a sour ferment of bile". In *Without a Name*, the fragmentation that Mazvita experiences in her psyche is also spoken by her body as she feels that whatever "she swallowed moved to one side of her body" (Vera, 1994:3) because she "had lost her centre". Before Zhizha is able to reclaim speech, her pain manifests itself in her body, where her "legs" and "fingers" feel "broken and crushed, white with bone" (Vera, 1996:106).

Sibaso's "fingers part [Nonceba's] lips" (Vera, 2002:64) and move "over her tongue", telling her to "hold" him, "look" at him and "touch" him. Although Nonceba knows that she "dares not contradict him" if she is to live, she is still able to deny him access to her "thoughts". Even though this stranger has invaded "the pit of her being" and she feels utterly "without worth", she is able to shield some of the non-corporeal parts of herself from his incessant probing by asserting her silence. Sibaso attempts to cement her silence by cutting off her lips before leaving her with Thenjiwe's bloody body. By mutilating Nonceba's face and cutting off Thenjiwe's head, Sibaso targets the parts of their bodies where the brain, voice and subjectivity reside. His denial of their subjectivity as actual human beings enables him to use their bodies as he wishes.

Sunder Rajan contends that "[s]ilence, by the same token that regards speech as the expression of the self, may become a barrier to a knowledge of the self, to its penetration by a perceiver" (1993:87). Vera's use of language displays a similarly complex approach to silence. In her writing, we find echoes of Sunder Rajan's argument that the "expressiveness of silence cannot be invariably resistant, just as its muteness is not inexorably negative". Although Mazvita was "silenced . . . . when she needed to tell of her own suffering" (Vera, 1994:30) during the rape,

she is later able to assert that "silence cleansed her" and the silence became a place where she felt "sheltered". The rapist "had initiated it", but now the "silence was hers". She claimed this silence as a way of retaining what little measure of autonomy she could, as her silence became "a deafness to the whispering that escaped from the lips of the stranger". Mazvita thus appropriates silence as a tool of self-defence that becomes a bulwark that the rapist cannot penetrate. She utilises silence to refuse him complete "knowledge of the self" (Sunder Rajan, 1993:87). In this case, silence is able to speak resistance and defiance.

When Nonceba must decide whether to accompany Cephas to the city, she chooses to remain "quiet, knowing full well that this ha[d] nothing to do with questions to be answered, but about her own intuition, her own claim to life" (Vera, 2002:143). Although she knows that "she is free to ask [Cephas] any questions", her refusal to do so becomes an assertion of her own agency. She does not enter into a question and answer dialogue with him and thus does not become part of the script he had written. Cephas has come to "help" her leave the "naked cemetery" that Kezi has become. In a discussion of women's silence in Gayl Jones's *Eva's Man*, Lionnet argues that a woman's silence can be "the only way she has of resisting the dominant discourses that emprison [sic] her inside certain labels" (1997:218). Nonceba uses silence as a way of resisting the patriarchal discourse that casts man as the saviour and woman as the victim. Cephas is a stranger and Nonceba knows that "the presence of someone who will harm her [can be] equally intimate" (Vera, 2002:143). Any words that pass between them cannot help her decide whether to take the enormous risk of going with him. She retreats to the space of "silence", where she chooses to rely on "her own intuition", in order to make her decision. Even though Cephas "pleads as though to accept his offer would be to grant him life", Nonceba's thoughts make it clear that the choice is not only hers, but also about her and "her own claim to life".

The language Vera creates to articulate the experiences of Nonceba and Thenjiwe is a language that transcends hierarchised oppositions and embraces ambiguity. The binaries of speech/silence, culture/nature and self/other are rendered defunct. Speech is not privileged at the expense of the marginalisation of silence. Both speech and silence can, in different contexts, operate as assertions of both power and powerlessness. Lebaddy argues that a language that is capable of expressing the suppressed female experience would "require dismantling the logic either/or and adhering to a different logic; it could involve conforming to the logic neither/both" (cited in Gqola, 2001:17). Nonceba and Thenjiwe see that Sihle is both a transmitter of culture in her capacity as storyteller and part of the natural Kezi landscape of which Nonceba has "loved every particle" (Vera, 2002:82). In *Under the Tongue*, Zhizha's grandmother is both a teacher of "forgotten songs" (Vera, 1996:2) and a "river". Nonceba is both a powerless victim on whose passive body Sibaso acts and a powerful agent who actively pursues healing.

The language that Vera develops is also one that allows women to speak without silencing men. Nonceba realises that Sibaso has been formed by the war for Zimbabwean independence and that he "has lived . . . to recreate the war" on her and her sister's bodies. By granting the reader intimate access to Sibaso's thoughts, Vera allows him to articulate how he experienced the "beginning of war" (75) as the "end of creation". For Sibaso, it is war that turns a man into "a stalker, always a step behind some uncanny avenue of time, and he follows all its digression, its voyage into tragic places". He finds himself in a situation he "cannot escape" and the impact that war has had on this man becomes clear when he asserts that, if "he loses an enemy, he invents another". The end of Zimbabwe's liberation struggle has left Sibaso without a designated enemy, but the place war has consigned him to is so "dark and grim" that his only possible "purge" lies in the invention of a new enemy. According to Sibaso, "violence is part of the play of opposites" and the "post-war spider" that comes to represent Sibaso, is a spider that is "hungry" for that violence even during the "brief but

sweet liaison" that is "mating". Nonceba knows that the status of enemy had been arbitrarily projected onto her body in order to provide Sibaso with a terrain on which to exercise the violence that has been ingrained in him. She perceives his movements as those of "a hunter who kills not because he is hungry but because his stomach is full, therefore, he can hunt with grace" (69). Sibaso's movements with Thenjiwe's lifeless body resemble a "dancing motion so finely practiced it is clear it is not new to the performer". Like the "poisonous spider" that threatened Sibaso's life in the "bushes of Gulati", he has become a "deranged dancer" of death. The comparison between Sibaso and a "deranged dancer" is a particularly apt one if one considers just how grotesque his attack on Nonceba and Thenjiwe is. The level of violence perpetrated against the sisters, Mahlathini and the woman who shares Nonceba's hospital ward, is a comment on the effect that the war for Zimbabwean independence has had on the country. Sibaso describes Africa as "a continent which has succumbed to a violent wind, a country with land but no habitat" (74). The war that has succeeded in reappropriating the land has wrought irreparable damage on the people and "social fabric" (Haysom, 2000:2) of the country.

Sibaso, Thenjiwe and Nonceba have all been decisively influenced by the landscapes of which they form a part, albeit in very different ways. Both the land and the landscape are "part of the way in which identities are created and disputed, whether as individual, group or nation-state" (Bender, 1993:3). Sibaso's relationship with the Gulati Hills where he fought as a guerrilla soldier is one that is characterised by pain, violence and deprivation. His difficult relationship with the landscape has clearly had an impact on his sense of "identity [that] is uneasy in his own mind" (Ranger, 2002:212). He has seen "a type of spider which turns to air, its life a mere gasp" (Vera, 2002:75) and this reminds him of what life is like in the midst of a war where one simply "perishes like a cloud". It is clear that Sibaso feels insecure and alienated in the land he fought for. The nebulous nature of his identity is confirmed when he says that he feels "out of bounds in [his] own reality". He regards any name as "assumed, temporary like grief" and

argues that, in a war, "you discard names like old resemblances". In a context where the "safest dwelling place is the bomb crater, which death has already visited" (94), it is hardly surprising that there is a profound sense of disconnection between Sibaso and his environment. While "rocks continue in their immortal strength", Sibaso feels "separate" and "transient".

For Thenjiwe and Nonceba, the landscape of Kezi is a place they associate with their warmest childhood memories and with each other. It is a place that makes them feel connected to one another rather than separate. At "the thought of her only sister Nonceba" (41), Thenjiwe always "hears an antelope leap across full streams". Thenjiwe associates Gulati with the "hornbills" she and Nonceba watched "swoop beneath tree branches and rise", with them "hold[ing] hands" and with "their laughter" that was "so high it reach[ed] the hills of Gulati". The landscape, and her sister whom she identifies with the landscape, is such a constitutive part of Thenjiwe's identity that she feels Cephas could only "know all of her being" once he knew Kezi and Nonceba. After Sibaso's attack, Nonceba clings to the little bit of the landscape that is visible from the window of her hospital room. She is "grateful" for the "presence" (83) of the "red flowers outside the window" and she is comforted by their "shape" and "form". She also "brings her eyes back to the flowers where [Cephas] is not", as she is not ready to deal with the presence of this stranger. These elements of the landscape with their "large petals" help her to escape from the "shape" of a "man outside a window". Nonceba "does not like red flowers" because they "fill up the entire space in the mind". Now, however, it "is better to look at the flowers than to let a thought shape, settle, find a comfortable spot in her mind". She prefers these flowers that look like "blood" to the image of Sibaso invading her thoughts. Like Mazvita who "transferred the hate" (Vera, 1994:30) to parts of the landscape "that she could see", Nonceba focuses on the landscape to avoid confronting the thought of her rapist before she is ready to do so. For both these women, the landscape provides a place of temporary protection and shelter for a severely battered and traumatised psyche.

Nonceba's continuing connection with the landscape of Kezi is never separated from her emotional survival. After leaving the hospital, she stands "watching the changes of the sky" (Vera, 2002:128) and when she asserts her acceptance of her "grief" and "pain", she notices the "dark blue sky [as] light breaks in the horizon, like a slow growth into blindness". She sees the "yellow rays of the sun merge" and realises that "creation occurs often and visibly". This realisation signals that Nonceba shares Mazvita's belief in the "ability to begin" (Vera, 1994:55) anew. The landscape remains an integral part of the self as Nonceba acknowledges that the "scent [of Marula] is everywhere, penetrating each dream, each decision" (Vera, 2002:131). She decides to accept Cephas's offer of a "journey out of Kezi" (146) because, in Kezi, there is no longer "even a faint line between life and death". The "men loose in the bush" and the "soldiers" are "both equally dedicated to ending lives", and Bulawayo is relatively safe since "the war is mainly in the villages". Nonceba's decision to move to Bulawayo is not indicative of alienation from the landscape of Kezi but a rejection of the death that the soldiers are spreading across this place she loves. She chooses to continue "her journey" (155) in the urban landscape of Bulawayo. Amidst the "distinct panorama" and "dazzling scene[s]" of Bulawayo, she forges a new life that cannot be separated from Thenjiwe, who remains a part of her, or from Kezi, which is "the centre of [Thenjiwe's] pulse".

Unlike Nonceba, Mazvita's decision to move to Harari was informed by a rejection of the land and, as a result, she finds that she needs to return "to the place of her beginning" (Vera, 1994:103) and reconcile herself with the land in order to heal. On her arrival in Mubaira, she reflects that new "grass grows over the burnt grass" and she is finally able to release "the baby from her back". The circular structure of the text mirrors Mazvita's journey during which she returns the dead baby to the land from which it came. Although the paternity of the child is never established, Sibaso had grown "from the land" (31) and Mazvita and Nyenyedzi had made love "beneath the rocks which had been warmed by the sun" (12) beneath a canopy of "white and lucid cloud". The child, who was

conceived without Mazvita having "some knowledge in the matter" (64) is thus strongly associated with the land in Mazvita's mind. Mazvita thus comes full circle, back to the land where the rape took place in an attempt to attain some measure of closure.

The strength that Vera's female protagonists derive from their unique connection with the Zimbabwean landscape is re-iterated in the description of Sibaso touching the images of "long-breasted women" (Vera, 2002:94) that are painted on the rocks of Gulati. Even as Sibaso feels utterly "alone, a carcass immured", he is confronted by paintings of "women stand[ing] together". While he is feeling "immured", the women on the rocks seem to be claiming this landscape as they "spread their legs outward to the sun". Images of breasts and legs that are spread are usually representations that contribute to the objectification and disempowerment of women. Here, however, Vera utilises these images to signal the strength and power of women who are described as the "keepers of time" in search of "something eternal". Their connection with the landscape is both absolute and transcendental as their "legs branch from their bodies like roots" (95) while they seem to "float, away from the stone" on which they are painted.

These eponymous stone virgins "who walk into their own graves before the burial of a king" prompt Sibaso to contemplate whether their "suicide" allows them to be "saved from life's embrace". Vera's description of the women suggests that they seek rather than eschew life as they "raise their arms" to the "light falling from the curve of the rock". In her consideration of the title of Vera's novel, O'Brien speculates "whether experience has transmogrified her virgins into stone or whether they must be stone to endure their fate" (2003:2). Nonceba's courageous journey to Bulawayo in search of life, where Cephas notices her "astounding capacity for joy" (Vera, 2002:157) seems to contradict both of O'Brien's contentions. Rather, the title can be read as a comment on women's refusal to acquiesce to the demands of a society that attempts to consign them to two-dimensional emblems painted on rocks or to symbols of sacrifice. All

indications point to Nonceba seeking "life's embrace" (95) even in the face of tremendous obstacles.

Chapter 5

Conclusion.

In *Without a Name*, *Under the Tongue* and *The Stone Virgins*, Yvonne Vera explores the way in which representations of landscape and the language of nationalist discourse conspire to create an environment in which the violation of female bodies flourishes. The residue of colonialism, with its patently disempowering gender policies, continues to inform discourses of nationalism in Zimbabwe. Both colonialism and nationalism are ideologies that are structured according to patriarchal notions of masculinity and femininity. In African countries that have been exposed to policies of colonialism and nationalism, women thus find themselves in a situation of layered oppression. The violence that was legitimised in the colonial enterprise of taming the "savage" African populations and in the nationalist movements that sought to bring an end to colonial occupation, is now, in post-independence Zimbabwe, primarily transferred to the bodies of women.

Vera's novels show how these patriarchal ideologies serve to disempower women and how their lack of power renders their bodies vulnerable to brutalisation. It is also clear that violated women struggle to speak of their suffering because conventional modes of speech and articulation are structured by men for the purpose of protecting male power and privilege. In order to enable women to speak, Vera experiments with a different kind of language that can adequately give a voice to women's experiences. This language is one that challenges and deconstructs the misogynist representational legacies of colonialism as well as the sexist representational practices that continue to operate in nationalist movements. One of the ways in which Vera goes about this project, is to problematise the "idealised" (Hunter, 2000:231) construction of motherhood that equates the African woman with the Good Mother who reproduces, nurtures and represents the home. In *Without a Name*, Mazvita kills

her baby; in *Under the Tongue*, Runyararo becomes the antithesis of the caring wife by killing her husband in an act that powerfully confirms her choosing of her child; and in *The Stone Virgins*, Nonceba and Thenjiwe's mother abandons her family as a result of the patriarchal pressure on women to bear sons.

A further subversion that Vera achieves is to undermine the nationalist rhetoric that casts the male soldier as the liberator and protector of women. In *Without a Name* and *The Stone Virgins*, the female protagonists are raped or killed by soldiers. In all three novels, women are also engaged in attempts to renegotiate their relationship with land and landscape. The unproblematic nationalist equation of the reclamation of the land with freedom is something that Vera's female characters experience as false. Their relationship with the Zimbabwean land is highly complicated and frequently characterised by contradictions.

The language that Vera creates eschews traditional, masculine modes of language that are filled with metaphors that denigrate and disempower women. She turns to the female body and the landscape to develop new metaphors that can express women's experience. This language of milk, rivers and tongues finds its keenest expression in female spaces where women form connections that transcend binary oppositions, hierarchies and borders. In her novels, Vera explores the "stunning ability of the silenced to triumph over adversity" (1999:1). The "kinship which survives among women in the midst of betrayals and absences" (5) thus becomes a highly creative oppositional space where women can experiment with an alternative engagement with language and landscape. Circularity, ambiguity, plurality and fluidity replace linearity, certainty and rigidity in Vera's use of language. Oppositions are fused or transcended rather than maintained as Vera's novels amalgamate poetry and prose, orality and writing and innovation and tradition. The result is that the structure of the conventional novel and the English language are used in an alternative and subversive way in order to tell the stories of women who have been silenced for too long.

In all three of the analysed novels, Vera exposes the erroneous notion that Africa's liberation from the colonising powers resulted in the equal liberation of African men and women. These concerns are succinctly summed up in Vera's short story "Independence Day". In this story, a man decides to "celebrate Independence properly: with cold beer and a woman" (Vera, 2000:231). Even as the "Prince and the new Prime Minister walked to the large flagpole in the middle of the stadium", the man "pushed the woman on to the floor" and "opened her legs". It is clear that, although Zimbabwe is celebrating having "a new flag for a new nation" (229), the woman remains trapped by the oppressive patriarchal structures that reduce her to a body to be used for sexual gratification. As the "woman withdrew into the safe space in her mind", the reader is left in no doubt that women in Africa continue to struggle towards the "seemingly impossible birth" (Vera, 1999:5) of female freedom and equality.

When one considers the level of violence to which women from diverse parts of the global community are being exposed, the importance of creating a language of the violated female body becomes evident. Women who are seeking ways and means "for expressing their disapproval" (Vera, 1999:2) need to be able to articulate their experience. This thesis has attempted to demonstrate just how inadequate conventional modes of articulation are when it comes to telling women's stories. The current political situation in countries in various parts of the world indicate that women's voices of dissent will be more necessary than ever. The political and social turmoil in contemporary Zimbabwe, Afghanistan and Iraq has created an environment in which women, as the traditional "markers of cultural identity" (Palmary, 2003:6), are particularly vulnerable to "vigilant scrutiny and, at times, violent discipline". The female body once again becomes a "terrain" of contest, control and violence as emerging or struggling nations attempt to define and assert their identities.

From *Without a Name* to *The Stone Virgins*, the reader can identify a progression in Vera's engagement with the issues of language and violence. Even as the

violence to which her female protagonists are exposed becomes more gruesome, she becomes more inventive and tenacious in her project of creating a language that can articulate the female experience in all its complexity. Women from far-flung corners of the world are making it increasingly clear that they refuse to acquiesce to oppression in silence. "Like pods" (Vera, 1999:2) more and more "of these women merely explode". It is my belief that the new language Vera is creating may prove to be an indispensible tool in a gendered struggle where "[w]ords become weapons".

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