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POETIC LANGUAGE AND SUBALTERNITY IN YVONNE VERA'S *BUTTERFLY BURNING* AND *THE STONE VIRGINS.*

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A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts.

Johannesburg, 2006

ABSTRACT

The primary aim of this dissertation is to trace the ways in which Yvonne Vera's final two novels, *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins,* provide a discursive space for the enunciation of subaltern histories, which have been silenced in dominant socio-political discourse. I argue that it is through the deployment of 'poetic language' that Vera's prose is able to negotiate the voicing of these suppressed narratives. In exploring these questions, I endeavour to locate Vera's texts within the theoretical debates in postcolonial scholarship which question the ethical limitations of representing oppressed subjects in the Third World, as articulated by Gayatri Spivak, in particular. Following Spivak's claim that subalternity is effaced in hegemonic discourse, I focus on the ways in which Vera's inventive prose works to bring the figure of the subaltern back into signification. In order to elucidate how this dynamic operates in both novels, I employ Julia Kristeva's psycholinguistic theory of 'poetic language'. I argue that Kristeva's understanding of literary practice as a transgressive modality, which is able to unsettle the silencing mechanisms of dominant monologic discourse, critically illuminates the subversive value of Vera's fictional style for marginalised subaltern narratives.

DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

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Sofia Lucy Kostelac

15th day of September, 2006.

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INTRODUCTION

> If speaking is still difficult to negotiate, then writing has created a free space for most women – much freer than speech. (Yvonne Vera, Preface 3)

In her preface to an anthology of contemporary African women's writing, entitled *Opening Spaces*, Yvonne Vera argues that literature provides a discursive space for subjects otherwise silenced by dominant socio-political practice. She focuses, in particular, on the transgressive value that literature holds for African women who, "without power to govern, often have no platform for expressing their disapproval" (Preface 2).[1] Vera argues that writing provides a forum for such women to articulate forbidden views; a "free space" that is not available to them in spoken discourse: "The written text is granted its intimacy, its privacy, its creation of the world […] It retains its autonomy much more than a woman is allowed in the oral situation" (Preface 3). The literary text is, in Vera's argument, unequivocally a transgressive and transformative modality, able to redress the oppressive silences enforced by the dominant system: "Writing," she asserts, "offers a moment of intervention" (Preface 3).

In the five novels which Vera published during her lifetime, she consistently sought to realise the potential of literature to 'open spaces' for the articulation of previously suppressed narratives. She steadfastly endeavoured to imagine the emotional and psychological lives of Zimbabwean women and to disclose the histories of violation and brutality responsible for their silences. Her novels represent an unwavering confrontation with traumatic and "taboo" (Preface 2) subject-matter, such as rape, incest and abortion; experiences that "all too often remain unspoken and unspeakable" (Primorac, "Borderline Identities" 86). While there is a central focus on women's relationship to discourse and agency in Vera's writing, her texts are also crucially concerned with tracing the suffering of a broader subaltern community, whose narratives have been excluded from the

[1] Vera acknowledges that the term 'African women' is a problematic generalisation that does not account for female diversity and heterogeneity in the continent's many countries: "Our reference to African womanhood is a mere trope, a way of ordering, much too limiting" (Preface 2).

dominant versions of Zimbabwe's history. The characters that populate her novels are subordinate, disempowered men and women, whose suffering is disregarded by the dominant system, and Vera seeks to imaginatively reclaim their histories of struggle and survival. Her fiction is thus often regarded as "[speaking], in a specific manner, for the Zimbabwean voiceless" (Primorac, "Borderline Identities" 86).

It is this process of reclaiming marginalised discourse in Vera's prose that I am centrally concerned with in this study. The primary aim of this dissertation is to trace the ways in which Vera's final two novels, *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins,* provide a discursive space for the enunciation of subaltern[2] narratives, which have been expunged from dominant socio-political discourse. I argue that it is through the deployment of 'poetic language'[3] that Vera's prose is able to negotiate the voicing of these suppressed narratives. I explore how her inventive use of the novelistic genre enables Vera to illuminate the complex subject-positions of Zimbabwe's displaced and often brutalised subaltern subjects, and suggest that her fiction can be read as an engagement with the transgressive potential of poetic language to (provisionally) afford agency to their narratives. Before pursuing these theoretical questions, however, it is necessary to locate Vera's writing within its historical and cultural context.

At the time of her death in April 2005, Vera was already considered one of her country's foremost authors, distinguished from other prominent female Zimbabwean writers like Tsitsi Dangarembga and Nozipo Maraire by the sheer regularity and number of her publications (Primorac, "Iron Butterflies" 101). Her first work of fiction, a collection of short stories entitled *Why Don't You Carve Other Animals?*, was published in 1992 while she was completing her doctoral thesis in comparative literature at York University in Toronto. The following year she returned to Zimbabwe and wrote her first novel,

[2] I use the term 'subaltern' as it is theorised by Gayatri Spivak. I discuss Spivak's understanding of the subaltern subject-position, and its relevance to a reading of Vera's fiction, later in this introduction and extensively in chapter one.

[3] I use the term 'poetic language' in Julia Kristeva's sense, which denotes literary practice that is concerned with disrupting the inertia of language, as it is habitually deployed in dominant socio-political discourses. I elucidate Kristeva's theory of 'poetic language', and its relevance to my analysis of Vera's literary style, later in this introduction and extensively in chapter one.

Nehanda, which was followed in quick succession by *Without a Name* (1994), *Under the Tongue* (1996) and *Butterfly Burning* (1998). Her final novel, *The Stone Virgins,* was published in 2002 and won the Macmillan Writer's Prize for Africa that year, one of many prestigious international literary prizes which her writing has earned.

Vera belongs to a generation of Zimbabwean authors, who grew up during the tumultuous years of the anti-colonial struggle (the second *Chimurenga*), and later witnessed the failure of decolonisation to improve the conditions under which the majority of the country's impoverished and subjugated citizens exist.[4] Like the work of several of her contemporaries, including Chenjerai Hove and Dambudzo Marechera, Vera's writing is critical of both colonial and post-independence forms of oppression, and her prose consistently disrupts the discursive spaces of colonialism and post-colonial nationalism. Vera is, furthermore, centrally concerned with the ideology of patriarchy that underpins both colonial and nationalist systems of domination, and her protagonists are all women who courageously venture to defy its oppressive laws. Like Tsitsi Dangarembga before her, Vera explores women's struggles to gain autonomous identities within a world that is hostile to their dreams of independence.

These concerns are articulated and developed in a number of different ways in Vera's writing. In her first novel, *Nehanda,* Vera deploys what Terence Ranger has called a "matrilinear mode of history-telling" ("History has its ceiling" 205), in order to challenge both European historicism and male dominated narratives of Zimbabwean history (Bull-Christiansen 38). The novel articulates a version of the 1896 anti-colonial rebellion (the first *Chimurenga*) that asserts the triumph of the spirit-medium Nehanda, who was hanged by the settler government for her participation in the uprising. In Vera's narrative, Nehanda transcends her physical death to take her place amongst the *mhondoro*,[5] who guide the struggle for freedom from the colonialists. As Vera suggested in one interview, *Nehanda* was written as a conscious defiance of colonialist historiography and its reductive representation of Zimbabwean history:

[4] In his 2003 study, Horace Campbell states that 65% of Zimbabweans are living either in poverty or extreme poverty (300).

[5] *Mhondoro* are the spirits of the chiefs of the past. See Lan 31.

> History begins in 1896 when the Europeans came here, and it continues like this: the spirit medium Nehanda did this, in such and such a year, in such and such a year she was hanged on 27 April… And I realised, No, no, no! Our oral history does not even accept that she was hanged, even though the photographs are there to show it, because she refused that, she surpassed the moment when they took her body, and when they put a noose upon it, she had already departed. Her refusals and her utterances are what we believe to be history. What was the nature of that departure, and why we believe in it so much as a nation, when the history books say something else, were questions which were very important to me. (Vera in Bryce, 221)

Nehanda can thus be understood as a form of "counter-history" (Bull-Christiansen 22) of the truncated narratives of European historicism, and the novel exemplifies Vera's concern with restoring the manifold and complex narratives which make up her country's past. As Nana Wilson-Tagoe argues, this restorative imperative is directed, not only at re-shaping European perceptions of Zimbabwean history, but also, crucially, at reconfiguring dominant notions of what constitutes history itself ("Narrative" 155). In *Nehanda*, Vera seeks to assert the validity of an oral history, which has been ignored in the "history books", because it cannot be verified by the systems of Western empiricism. This "discredited" (Vera in Bryce, 221) oral history resonates, for Vera, with a "spiritual" truth that official historiography does not. She claims that it is an "intuitive" understanding of her country's past which she seeks to communicate in *Nehanda*, and she compares her role as writer of the novel to the spirit-medium who acts as a vessel for the wisdom of the *mhondoro*: "[*Nehanda* was written] almost intuitively, out of my consciousness of being African, as though I were myself a spirit medium […] I wrote it from remembrance, as a witness to my own spiritual history" (Vera in Bryce, 220).

Vera's fourth novel, *Butterfly Burning*, is also set in Zimbabwe's colonial past, but this text moves away from the mysticism of *Nehanda* in its exploration of the theme of colonial domination. It is concerned with the formation of individual identities and inter-

personal relationships within the restrictive confines of the colonised terrain, and vividly depicts the complex dynamics which operate in the subjectivities of the colonised. In this regard, the novel seeks to transcend what Homi Bhabha refers to as the "stereotypes" (70) of colonial discourse, which, he argues, "construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest" (70). The novel re-maps the power relations in the colonial setting to foreground instances of agency and resistance operating within its margins, thus providing the discursive space in which alternative identities for Rhodesia's colonised can be imagined.

While Vera's re-articulation of her country's colonial past comprises an important aspect of her work, it is her rewriting of its more recent liberation and post-independence history that is increasingly gaining critical attention. Her work is regarded as forming an important part of an emergent Zimbabwean literature, which is contesting the suppressive narratives of ZANU (PF)'s official nationalism (Kaarlsholm 13-15; Bull-Christiansen 26-31). Vera is amongst authors like Shimmer Chinodya and Charles Samupindi,[6] who have sought to rewrite Zimbabwe's war of liberation from a critical perspective, revealing the traumas and sufferings belied by ZANU (PF)'s glorification of the second *Chimurenga*. In her final novel, *The Stone Virgins*, Vera extends her critical perspective to the political crisis after independence, and the novel represents arguably the most substantial attempt to deal with the atrocities perpetrated in Matabeleland during the 1980s in a literary form (Kaarlsholm 14).[7] By voicing this silenced period of her country's post-independence history, Vera's novel critically contests the truncated narratives of 'patriotic history' currently disseminated by ZANU (PF)'s third *Chimurenga* discourse.

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[6] Shimmer Chinodya's *Harvest of Thorns* (1989) and Charles Samupindi's *Pawns* (1992) provide critical portrayals of the liberation war (see Kaarsholm 11; 14). Vera's *Without a Name* shares with these novels their bleak representations of the liberation war and their concern with disclosing the agony it entailed for Zimbabwe's people.

[7] Only Peter Godwin and Chenjerai Hove had explicitly dealt with this period of Zimbabwean history before Vera. Godwin's memoir, *Mukiwa*, published in 1997, five years prior to *The Stone Virgins*, included large passages concerning the atrocities perpetrated in Matabeleland. As Kaarsholm notes: "It created a stir internationally and in the British press but in Zimbabwe fell into a genre of white memoir' whose belongings within the literature of the new nation could be questioned, and whose local impact was therefore limited" (14). Chenjerai Hove's 1991 novel, *Shadows*, primarily concerns post-independence 'dissident' violence and only touches on the violence of the Fifth Brigade in its last few pages.

ZANU (PF)'s proclaimed third *Chimurenga* is an increasingly powerful rhetorical tool, effectively stifling political dissent in the ailing autocracy. It is designed, as Terence Ranger has argued, "to proclaim the continuity of the Zimbabwean revolutionary tradition" ("History of the nation" 30). The term, 'third *Chimurenga*', persuasively associates current political unrest with the anti-colonial struggles of the first and second *Chimurengas*, which refer to the uprisings of 1896 and the guerrilla war of the 1970s respectively. According to the discourse of the third *Chimurenga*, the fight against colonial forces did not end with independence from the Rhodesian Front government in 1980. On the contrary, it asserts that various neo-colonial forces continue to operate and threaten the Zimbabwean state. These include members of the opposition MDC party, white commercial farmers, the international free press, the church and intellectual critics, all of whom are designated as 'agents of colonial oppression' (see Meredith 192-193). As Lene Bull-Christiansen has argued, the discourse of the third *Chimurenga* thus defines Zimbabwe's political agents as either ZANU (PF) 'liberators of the nation' or as neo-colonial enemies of the state (10-15); a binary that does not allow for the existence of political debate and dissent. This discursive strategy is exemplified by Mugabe's comments concerning the 'hidden motives' of the MDC party:

> The MDC should never be judged or characterised by its black trade union face; by its youthful student face; by its black suburban junior professionals; by its rough and violent high density (urban) elements. It is much deeper, whiter and wider than these human superficies; for it is immovably and implacably moored in the colonial yesteryear and embraces wittingly or unwittingly the repulsive ideology of the return to white settler rule. […] It is a counter-revolutionary Trojan Horse contrived and nurtured by the very inimical forces that enslaved and oppressed our people yesterday. (ctd in Meredith, 192)

The binary reductionism of the third *Chimurenga* discourse thus effectively sanctions ZANU (PF)'s monopolisation of power, and its brutal suppression of political opposition, as governed by a moral imperative to finally rid the Zimbabwean people of their neo-colonial burden.

Through the discourse of the third *Chimurenga,* ZANU (PF) has effectively rewritten Zimbabwe's history into a univocal narrative that supports its moral supremacy and exhaustive claims to power. In his essay "Rule by historiography: the struggle over the past in contemporary Zimbabwe", Terence Ranger describes this as the emergence of "patriotic history" (220). The narratives of patriotic history install a 'grand narrative' of national unity at the centre of post-independence politics, asserting that the country has enjoyed a state of peaceful solidarity since attaining freedom from the Rhodesian Front government. In this version of 'history', any 'differences' that existed between ZANU (PF) and ZAPU were resolved by the Unity Accord in 1987. This narrative of patriotic history is exemplified by N.M.Shamuyarira, the ZANU (PF) Secretary for Information and Publicity, in his 2002 report, "The false allegations of tribalism in Zimbabwe: Report of British intelligence":

> One of the outstanding achievements of ZANU-PF rule in the period after independence has been the attainment of peace and stability. That was made possible by the attainment of unity between ZAPU and ZANU in 1987. The Party has been and still is committed to the principle of unity among all the social classes that are oppressed by a combination of capitalism and colonialism. These are the indigenous people of Zimbabwe, the Shonas, the Ndebeles, and others […] The principle of unity of the Zimbabwe people cuts clean across all the divisions of tribe, region, or race.[8]

Thus, ZANU (PF)'s patriotic history intentionally excludes the *Gukurahundi*; a campaign of terror unleashed by the ruling party in the early 1980s in Matabeleland, which was designed to eliminate any form of 'dissent' from the newly independent Zimbabwean state. *Gukurahundi*, a Shona word originally meaning "early spring rains" (see Werbner 161-162), was used by Mugabe during Zimbabwe's first democratic election campaign to signify the dawn of a new era for the country's liberated citizens. Under the increasingly authoritarian discourses adopted by ZANU (PF) after their electoral victory, the term

[8] As it is reproduced on ZANU (PF)'s official website, Shamuyarira's report is without pagination.

likened the indiscriminate killing of 'dissidents' to the spring rains that renew the land and "sweep away the rubbish" (Werbner 162).

The violence that broke out in Matabeleland during the early 1980s had its roots in the hostility and distrust that existed between ZANU and ZAPU during the country's liberation war. Their respective guerrilla armies, the Zimbabwe National Liberation Army (ZANLA), led by Mugabe, and the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA), led by Joshua Nkomo, fought the liberation war together, but were uneasy allies. Historians cite a number of ideological differences responsible for the animosity between ZANLA and ZIPRA, including radically opposed fighting strategies, as well as their rival sources of support; ZIPRA received considerable support from Russia, while ZANLA had a more militant support base in China (see Alexander et al 180-185; Werbner 158-160). The tendency of ZANLA and ZIPRA to recruit on a regional basis during the 1970s would, however, prove to be the most divisive factor between the two powerful guerrilla armies. ZIPRA recruited guerrillas primarily from Matabeleland and its immediate surrounds and quickly formed a support base in this area of the country dominated by Ndebele speakers. The rest of the country, dominated by various Shona-speaking tribes, provided ZANLA with its large guerrilla army. This recruitment process polarised Zimbabwe's citizens, who were soon identified by language as either Shona or Ndebele; a designation which implied respective political sympathies for either ZANLA or ZIPRA.

The polarisation of ZIPRA and ZANLA guerrillas along ethnic lines exacerbated existing historical tensions between the Matabele and Shona tribes. Before 1840, the land which comprises present-day Zimbabwe was inhabited primarily by Shona-speaking tribes, who had occupied the area for almost 500 years. In 1840 the Zulu chief, Mzilikazi, leader of the newly formed Matabele tribe, invaded the country from the south, beginning in present-day Bulawayo. Thousands of Shona people were slaughtered during the invasion and their continued suppression was ensured under the rule of Mzilikazi's heir, Lobengula. The historical tension between the Shona and Matabele thus fuelled the

struggle for power in the newly independent Zimbabwean state and would lead to the rise of what Richard Werbner has usefully termed "quasi-nationalism" (93).

Werbner uses the term to describe the rise of state-made ethnic violence in the decolonised African state. "The brutalised in quasi-national violence," argues Werbner, "are the people who seem to stand in the way of the nation being one under one leader, being pure as one body, being truly free of alien rule and foreign intervention" (93). The quasi-nationalist discourses practised by ZANU (PF) after independence effectively branded members of ZAPU as dangerous threats to national unity. Ex-ZIPRA guerrillas were viewed with particular suspicion and were soon blamed for the many instances of violence which frequently broke out in the unstable assembly points, where all ex-guerrillas were ordered to disarm. The escalation of violence in Matabeleland between 1980 and 1983 was wholly attributed to the 'dissident' or 'insurgent' activities of ex-ZIPRA guerrillas determined to overthrow the newly elected government.[9] Under the Shona quasi-nationalism practised by ZANU (PF), Zimbabwe's Ndebele-speaking ZAPU members were assumed to be supporters of ZIPRA 'dissidents' and collective guilt was fixed upon them as "the dehumanised enemy within" (Werbner 173).

In January 1983, the most devastating effects of quasi-nationalism were felt by the civilians of Southern Matabeleland, when Mugabe unleashed the Korean trained 'Fifth Brigade' to eliminate 'dissident activity' in the area. The elite unit, consisting primarily of Shona-speaking ex-ZANLA guerrillas, took orders from, and were directly responsible to, Mugabe, thus circumventing the usual chain of command in the rest of the army. Their killing of Ndebele civilians was indiscriminate, and the identities and number of those tortured, raped and murdered by members of the Fifth Brigade will never be known.[10]

During 1984, the atrocities occurring in Matabeleland garnered a modicum of international interest, primarily through the investigative reports published by journalists

[9] For pro-ZANU (PF) accounts of this period, see Makambe *The Dissident Factor and Politics of Violence in Zimbabwe, 1980-1987*.
[10] For a detailed account of the problems of determining the number of victims, see Stiff 224-6.

and writers like Donald Trelford and Peter Godwin. In one of the most controversial articles to be released during this time under the headline, "Mass Murder in Matabeleland", Godwin reported "first hand" accounts of the "widespread killing and torture" (ctd in Stiff, 218) of Matabeleland civilians. In April 1984, the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP) presented Mugabe with a document detailing several atrocities which had taken place in selected areas of Matabeleland. This confidential dossier was followed by a report from Bishop Henry Karlen of Bulawayo, which provided evidence of the government's "policy of starvation" in the area (see Stiff 219). Pressure was mounting for the government to acknowledge and end the human rights violations that were being perpetrated under *Gukurahundi*. Mugabe placated these demands by sending a commission to investigate the allegations of violence, torture and mass killing in Matabeleland. Several ZANU (PF) ministers were despatched to the area, but their report was never published.

The limited international interest concerning the atrocities occurring in Matabeleland gradually waned after 1985 and ZANU (PF) successfully suppressed the details of the genocide for over a decade. The horrors of *Gukurahundi*, however, became the subject of renewed interest in1997, when a document compiled by the CCJP and Zimbabwe's Legal Resource Foundation (LRF), entitled "Breaking the Silence: A Report on the 1980s Disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands", was leaked to the press. "Breaking the Silence" is the result of the CCJP and LRF's exhaustive investigation in Matabeleland's southernmost districts of Nyamandlovu and Matobo, and it includes the gruesome testimonies of several survivors of the massacres. To date, there have been no comprehensive investigations into the atrocities perpetrated in Matabeleland's seven remaining districts (see Stiff 225).

Mugabe refused to respond officially to allegations of genocide detailed in "Breaking the Silence", but unequivocally communicated that dialogue about *Gukurahundi* or the "misguided report" (Mugabe ctd in Stiff, 228) would not be tolerated: "If we dig up the country's history in this way," Mugabe warned in one of his few allusions to "Breaking the Silence", "we wreck the nation and tear our people apart into factions" (ctd in

Weatherall, 21). The only public acknowledgement Mugabe made of *Gukurahundi* emerged during his memorial speech for Joshua Nkomo in July 2000, in which he admitted that atrocities had occurred in Matabeleland in the 1980s, but denied responsibility for the violence, arguing that both parties were to blame:

> It was an act of madness, we killed each other and destroyed each other's property. It was wrong and both sides were to blame. We have had a difference, a quarrel. We engaged ourselves in a reckless and unprincipled fight. (ctd in Stiff, 228)

Mugabe's glib comments here belie the hostility with which ZANU (PF) views any public commentary about *Gukurahundi*. The continued suppression of open dialogue about the Matabeleland atrocities has ensured that thousands of its survivors remain too afraid of ZANU (PF) to bear witness to the events of the 1980s. "Though [*Gukurahundi*] is not forgotten," remarked one survivor, "we act as if we have forgotten" (qtd in Werbner, 167). Accordingly, silence and fear continue to surround the history of *Gukurahundi*.

What role can the writer of fiction play in reclaiming such censored histories? Vera's own comments regarding the obligations of the author to redress historically silenced narratives are unequivocal: "as a writer, you don't want to suppress history, you want to be one of the people liberating stories" (Vera in Bryce, 226). This comment reiterates an argument that she pursues in her doctoral thesis, which is attentive to the ways in which literary texts are able to negotiate spaces of resistance under authoritarian regimes. "To write," she argues, "is to engage possibilities for triumphant and repeated exits, inversions and recuperations of identity… Writing is resistance… to write is to banish silence" ("Prison" 93). For Vera then, literature must bear witness to the suppressed histories of brutalised subjects within an oppressive system. It is a privileged site from which transgressive interventions can, and *must,* be articulated.

The operations of oppression in the decolonised state are, however, particularly complex and do not allow for any straightforward opposition to its laws, systems and ideologies. While the war of *Gukurahundi* was a direct product of power struggles within the newly independent state, the logic of impunity which enabled its emergence was inherited from colonial forms of government. Achille Mbembe argues that the forms of governance, which African regimes adopt, are not the innovations of its new leaders, but are partly a product of the "colonial rationality" (Mbembe 25), which validated the authority of their European predecessors. Instituted and authenticated by violence, colonial governance did not require external justification, but was a self-validating system which asserted its authority through the use of indiscriminate force. As Mbembe argues,

> …this violence was of a very particular sort, immediately tangible, and it gave the natives a clear notion of themselves in proportion to the power that they had lost […] It eliminated all distinction between ends and means; depending on circumstances, this sovereign violence was its own end […] Anything that did not recognise this violence as authority, that contested its protocols, was savage and outlaw. (26)

Colonial sovereignty was thus both "arbitrary" and "unconditional" (Mbembe 26); able to operate with impunity, despite its illegitimacy. Mbembe argues that postcolonial states have inherited this unconditionality in their forms of governance, appropriating the colonial rationalisation of violence as a necessary means, whilst remaining unaccountable for its end.

Thus, while proclaiming the advent of a new and liberated era, the postcolonial state ironically manifests the relations of subjection which validated colonial domination. It is therefore difficult to speak of oppression in the decolonised state as a practice distinct from colonial subjugation. The operation of oppression in the postcolony must be understood, not as a homogeneous or unitary practice deriving from a single tyrannical source, but as a web of interpenetrating systems, produced and appropriated at different historical moments. The laws, theories and ideologies, which constitute these systems,

function hegemonically to ratify state domination; that is, they are not merely a set of notions imposed on society, but systems of meanings and values, which saturate society to such an extent that they constitute "a sense of reality" for its subjects (Williams 36). Moreover, these systems are by no means static, but have "continually to be renewed, recreated and defended" (Williams 38) to maintain their dominance.

This understanding of the operation of oppression in the postcolony as "active and adjusting" (Williams 38), rather than singular or static, brings into focus the complexity involved in taking up a position of resistance against the dominant hegemony. As Raymond Williams has suggested in his Marxist analysis of social structures, oppositional formations can be accommodated and tolerated by the dominant culture (39), because the flexible structure of the ruling hegemony can assimilate meanings and practices which place themselves in obvious contradistinction to it. In defining itself against the dominant culture, oppositional practice succumbs to a static, bivalent logic, which effaces its transgressive value. The question which emerges then is whether it is possible to attend to the condition of marginalised subjects within an oppressive system, without simply producing a practice available to incorporation by the dominant system.

In my reading of Vera's novels, I contend that her fiction continuously acknowledges that there can be no stable or unitary position from which resistance against the dominant system can be articulated. Her characters, who are multiply marginalised by the dominant system through being black, female, rural and traumatised, cannot speak back to this system in a homogeneous or univocal voice. They are positioned, as Mae Gwendolyn Henderson has noted in a different context, to speak in a "plurality of voices" (119). Throughout this dissertation I use the terms 'subaltern' and 'gendered subaltern', as they are formulated by Gayatri Spivak, to suggest the multiply marginalised status of Vera's characters. I propose that the subaltern subject-position, as theorised by Spivak, provides a valuable point of entry into Vera's texts, as it acknowledges the multiplicity of socio-political relations across which marginalised subjects are constructed and signified. The terms allow us to speak simultaneously about the constructions of race, class and gender, and how they interact to silence subjects outside of the dominant structure. My central

contention throughout this dissertation is that Vera's poetic style creates the alternative, dialogic paradigms through which these multiply inscribed subaltern voices can be 'heard'.

In a 2001 interview with Ranka Primorac, Vera suggested that she adopts an 'experimental' poetic style for political, and not simply aesthetic, reasons:

> If you write in a language that is lyrical, or that suggests a certain sophistication in phrasing…and maybe that challenges the reader, there's an immediate resistance to what you're writing…You are not behaving yourself, basically. You are hysterical […] If your technique carries with it the notion of an experiment, somehow you are not allowed to do that, as a woman writer. ("Imagination" 158; 160)

For Vera, choosing to write in a style that disrupts the conventions which govern mainstream discourse is, in itself, an act of defiance. She privileges this question of style above the more common concern in African literary scholarship which questions the author's choice of language. Ngugi wa Thiong'o famously highlights this concern in his 1986 study, *Decolonising the Mind*. In this influential work, Ngugi stresses the need for African writers to produce texts in indigenous languages, arguing that a break from the colonial mindset cannot be achieved in the language of the colonial master. He insists that writings by African authors in European languages serve to enrich foreign cultures, even when these texts make radical pronouncements against the oppressive systems of the West. In discussing her choice to write in English, Vera offers a different perspective on the debate. While acknowledging English as "a language that came to us as an act of violence" (Vera in Primorac, "Imagination" 158), she suggests that it has tremendous capacity to be appropriated and reinvented to 'speak' the lived experiences and individual histories of the subjects it once marginalised (see Vera in Bryce, 223). In her poetic prose, the racial and gendered assumptions, which underpinned a colonial English, are deconstructed and appropriated; a process Vera has referred to as inflicting "harmonious damage" (in Bryce, 223) to the language.

I argue that this process of revision and reinvention, of "harmonious damage", which occurs in Vera's prose, is a productive one, capable of generating multiple positions from which to contest the closed systems of colonialism, patriarchy and patriotic nationalism. It is Julia Kristeva's notion of 'poetic language' that provides the primary model for this approach, in its insistence that aesthetic experimentations in literature can disrupt the existing unities upon which (oppressive) orthodoxies rest:

> If there exists a 'discourse' which is not a mere depository of thin linguistic layers, an archive of structures, or the testimony of the withdrawn body, and is instead the essential element of a practice involving the sum of unconscious, subjective and social relations in gestures of confrontation and appropriation, destruction and construction – productive violence, in short – it is 'literature', or, more specifically, the text. (Kristeva, *Revolution* 16)

Kristeva's description of literature as "productive violence" interestingly echoes Vera's own notion of literary experimentation as "harmonious damage". Both notions suggest that aesthetic experimentations in literary texts are productive and transformative, able to yield new meanings from existing ossified forms. Although expressly theorised within an occidental context, I argue that Kristeva's psycho-linguistic theory can be productively applied in a postcolonial context to elucidate the value of literary transgression for oppressed subaltern subjects. As I explain in chapter one of this dissertation, it is through the disruptions and violations of what Kristeva calls the 'symbolic function of language' that literature becomes the interstitial space from which marginalised subjects can 'speak back' to the dominant system.

The interpretative model I propose therefore seeks to account for the dynamic processes which occur in literature to redress censored subaltern narratives. This approach is, however, imbricated in a number of theoretical debates which question the ethical limitations of representing marginalised subjects within the Third World and, moreover, of the applicability of Western psychoanalytic theory to a postcolonial context. In the

following chapter, I elaborate the theoretical debates which inform my reading of Vera's work as an engagement with the transgressive potential of poetic language to (provisionally) afford agency to subaltern narratives, taking into careful consideration the difficulties involved in allying Kristeva and Spivak's politics in a reading of a postcolonial text.

<u>CHAPTER ONE:</u> Poetic Language and Subalternity: A model for reading Yvonne Vera's *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins.*

Although Gayatri Spivak's work is not exclusively concerned with subaltern criticism, her commentary on the ethical dilemmas presented by the disempowered and voiceless subjects of the Third World constitutes the most influential aspect of her writings. Indeed, since the publication of her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in 1985, the term 'subaltern' has become synonymous with her politics. This essay is an integral part of Spivak's broader political project, which seeks to develop a critical vocabulary capable of enunciating the experiences of brutalised minorities in the Third World, whose histories have been effaced in dominant historiography.

Throughout her writings, Spivak foregrounds the ethical and methodological dilemmas that such a project entails. Her method of analysis is characterised by a deconstructive approach towards Western theoretical models which, according to her, are used too easily by First World intellectuals to comment on the condition of disenfranchised Third World subjects. Several of her essays, including "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and "French Feminism in an International Frame", have famously censured prominent Western intellectuals for their benevolent and reductive representations of oppressed minorities. Spivak's sustained argument against these occidental writings is that the lives of disempowered Third World subjects are so complex and unsystematic that they cannot be represented by the logical and causal relationships posited by Western critical theory. Spivak's argument here finds support in the very etymology of the term, as derived from writings of the early twentieth century Italian Marxist thinker, Antonio Gramsci.

In *The Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci defines the subaltern classes as social groups whose history is "necessarily fragmented and episodic" (54). Gramsci argues that the subaltern classes do not comprise a fixed, unified group that presents an organised system of resistance against ruling hegemonies. He argues instead that the insurgent practices of subaltern groups can only be identified when viewed with historical hindsight, which recognises the often discrete activities of the subaltern classes as emergent practices

capable of "transforming, disrupting and destructuring the apparatuses of a specific hegemony"(Lowe 18). The term 'subaltern' is thus singularly appropriate to Spivak's politics as discussed above, as it is able to suggest the condition of oppressed minorities without homogenising their historical experiences.

However, the term 'subaltern' introduces a particularly difficult methodological dilemma. Gramsci's classification of subalternity as "always emerging and in flux" (Lowe 193) has crucial ramifications for any attempt to describe or discuss subaltern history. The discontinuous and episodic character of subalternity means that it is not easily available to historiography, which works to structure and organise experience. The process of historical narration itself inevitably effaces the very quality that, for Gramsci, defines the subaltern; that is, their necessarily fragmented and episodic histories.

If subalternity is indeed at odds with historiography, the project of the enunciating subaltern history is left at a critical impasse. Spivak's writings disclose a surprising response to this predicament through a sustained critique of literary works. She regularly consults literature as a means of exploring the problem of subaltern silence. As we shall see, through her detailed commentaries on the works of Bengali author, Mahasweta Devi, Spivak's writings gradually reveal literature as a rhetorical space in which subaltern histories can be enunciated. This aspect of Spivak's analyses is of singular importance to the relationship this dissertation wishes to develop between subalternity and literature. As I will go on to discuss, it provides the central impetus for my reading of Vera's work as an engagement with the transgressive potential of poetic language for the (gendered) subaltern subject.

In "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Spivak unequivocally places the subaltern in a silent impasse, demonstrating how attempts to politically represent subalternity often result in the crude appropriation of marginalised voices. These views are significantly contrasted by Spivak's numerous analyses of aesthetic representation and of literary texts in particular. Spivak's literary criticism frequently offers a noteworthy complication to her assessment of subaltern silence by suggesting that fiction has the capacity to "move the

subalterns into hegemony" ("More on Power/ Knowledge" 165). Her commentaries and translations of Mahasweta Devi's short stories provide what is, to my knowledge, her most rigorous assessment on the question of subalternity in literature.[11] I will look at selected aspects of Spivak's discussions of Devi's work, in order to discern the relationship that Spivak figures between literature and subalternity. As I will show, these readings suggest that literary practice can provisionally resolve the uneasy relationship between narrative and subalternity, as outlined above. I will, furthermore, consider a question that is never made explicit in Spivak's critique, but one which is raised by the terms of her argument, namely: *why* literature, unlike political or historiographic discourses, can 'inhabit' the space of the displaced subaltern.[12]

Like all Devi's writings, "Stanadayini" (or "Breast Giver" as it is titled in Spivak's translation) is preoccupied with postcolonial India's brutalised women, who have not been redeemed by the emancipatory promises of national liberation. Its protagonist, Jashoda, is forced into servile labour as a wet-nurse for a wealthy Brahmin family. The story describes the decay of Jashoda's maternal body, finally depicting the image of her corpse ravaged by breast cancer:

> Again injection and sleepy numbness. Pain, tremendous pain, the cancer is spreading *at the expense of the human host*. Gradually Jashoda's left breast bursts and becomes like the *crater* of a volcano. The smell of putrefaction makes approach difficult. (Devi 240; translator's emphasis)

For Spivak, the achievement of stories like "Breast Giver" lies in their ability to offer a sympathetic representation of the gendered subaltern, which does not crudely appropriate or homogenise her voice. Devi, Spivak argues, does not attempt to speak *for* the subaltern, nor does she "speak *as* them or *to* them"("More on Power/Knowledge" 49;

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[11] Spivak has translated a variety of Devi's short stories into English and commented on the theoretical implications of her work in several essays, including "More on Power/ Knowledge" and "A Literary Representation of the Subaltern from the Third World".

[12] Spivak makes this claim for Devi's fiction in her essay "More on Power/ Knowledge." "The space that Mahasweta Devi's fiction inhabits is rather special […] it is the space of the subaltern…" (48).

original emphasis). On the contrary, Devi's subaltern protagonists "are singular, paralogical figures of women (sometimes men, mad men) *who spell out no model for imitation*"("More on Power/Knowledge" 49; my emphasis). Thus, Devi's fiction does not construct a falsely coherent subaltern consciousness, but rather, Spivak suggests, "restores and releases subaltern heterogeneity" ("Woman in Difference" 79).

Spivak's writings on Devi's fiction thus reveal a very significant relationship between fiction and subalternity. Her argument that Devi's prose "invokes the singularity of the gendered subaltern" ("A Literary Representation" 252) suggests that literary practice is able to preserve the episodic and heterogeneous character of subalternity, as defined by Gramsci. The preservation of subaltern heterogeneity is of singular importance for Spivak, as it can, under certain circumstances, contest and dismantle the totalising narratives of colonialism and post-colonial nationalism. She argues that: "In a decolonised national context, the strategic deployment of subaltern heterogeneity can make visible the phantasmic nature of a merely hegemonic nationalism" ("Woman in Difference" 79). As such, literary narrative can work to 'open a space' in which subaltern histories can be enunciated.

Spivak is, however, always cautious in her assertions about the oppositional value of literary narrative. Her comments on the potential fiction offers for the subaltern subject should not be misread as an argument supporting literature as a *solution* for the political and historiographic problem of subaltern silence. Aesthetic representation, in Spivak's theorising, cannot be equated with political representation and she is wary at all times of making exaggerated political claims on behalf of postcolonial texts. Instead, she attempts to develop an ethical model of reading, which does not naïvely assume that "literary representation will necessarily lead to the political representation" (Morton 128) of subaltern groups.

Spivak's vigilance against naïvely equating aesthetic with political representation, while certainly an important ethical consideration, regularly impedes her analysis of the transgressive value of the literary text for the subaltern subject. Erring on the side of

caution, some of Spivak's most promising pronouncements concerning the articulation of subalternity in literature are truncated by her assertion that such transgressions do not have material implications in a socio-political realm. For Spivak, fiction can provide tentative, imaginative solutions to the philosophical predicament of subaltern silence, but there remains a considerable gap between "solutions as they are enacted in the text and their transportation to an extra-textual realm" (Spector 100). While I strongly support Spivak's view that aesthetic transgressions in the literary text cannot directly cause or ensure the political emancipation of oppressed subjects, I find it problematic that her theorising delimits the subversive value of literary representations of the subaltern to a strictly textual realm. I argue instead for a theory of literary transgression, which more carefully interrogates how literature may implicate the extra-textual; not as a product which can overturn socio-political totalities, but as a process which contains within itself the conditions for socio-political rupture. This notion of literature finds support in Julia Kristeva's theorising about 'poetic language', a body of work to which I now turn to explicate how the dynamics of aesthetic experimentation may provide a starting point for subaltern speaking beyond the text.

While Kristeva's writings embrace a range of contexts and foci, they share a sustained interest in the subject's relationship to language and develop a psycho-linguistic theory which, I argue, potentially augments Spivak's explication of subaltern silence. Kristeva's ongoing interest in the ways in which difference and alterity are barred from 'the social' forms interesting parallels with Spivak's claims about the effacement of the subaltern from dominant socio-political practice. Kelly Oliver, in her discussion of Kristeva's theorising concerning the ethical treatment of marginalised, 'othered' subjects, inadvertently suggests the possible significance of Kristeva's theorising for Spivak's politics. Oliver argues that:

> In order to think about ethical and political theory, we have to be able to think about the relationship between identity – individual, group, and national – and difference. We need to formulate a theory of difference that accounts for oppression, marginalisation, and exclusion in order to theorise how to reformulate

> difference so that it does not lead to oppression, marginalisation and exclusion. (Oliver 12)

Oliver suggests that Kristeva provides precisely such a theory; one that reformulates traditional notions of difference, to enable us to imagine a way of living with the 'other' while acknowledging her difference. Oliver argues that for Kristeva, "this is the ethical-political struggle of all oppressed people. Oppressed peoples want their difference recognised and respected without that recognition becoming the basis for exclusion" (Oliver 13). For Kristeva, such an ethical relationship with the other can only be forged when we recognise the 'otherness' within ourselves; that we are not unified, homogeneous subjects but, instead, that alterity exists within and is constitutive of identity.

Throughout her extensive body of work, Kristeva identifies the subversive discourses which display and amplify alterity within the subject, poetic language comprising her first object of analysis in this regard.[13] As I shall go on to discuss in more detail, Kristeva offers poetic language as a model for ethics because, she argues, its inclusion of alterity challenges the fixed unities which buttress dominant socio-symbolic law. I therefore suggest that Kristeva provides a theory which explicates how literature can be ethical in its involvement with the other and how it can accordingly heed Spivak's call for a "focus on the gendered subaltern as subject rather than as allegorical seme" ("A Literary Representation" 246). Before pursuing such a relationship, it is necessary to elucidate Kristeva's theory of poetic language in some detail.

In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva levels harsh criticism against structuralist theories of language which, she contends, treat it as a static, stagnant entity: "Our philosophies of language, embodiments of the Idea, are nothing more than the thoughts of archivists, archaeologists and necrophiliacs" (*Revolution* 13). For Kristeva, structuralist

[13] Oliver identifies three discourses in Kristeva's theorising which "infuse identity with alterity": namely, psychoanalysis (because it postulates the fundamentally split subject, both conscious and unconscious); maternity (as the maternal body calls into question the unified subject by the presence of the 'other' within); and poetic language. See Oliver 13.

theorists and their predecessors rendered language a "dead artefact" (McAfee 14) devoid of the dynamic charge of the subject who speaks. A basic impetus behind Kristeva's early work was to challenge this formulation of language and the subject as discrete, disparate entities and instead to develop a theory of a dynamic "signifying process" in which the subject who speaks, and the language which is spoken, are treated as inseparable. For Kristeva, subjectivity is constructed through, and hence inextricable from, language. In this regard, her ideas are crucially influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis and its insistence that culture, language and unconscious desires produce subjectivity (McAfee 30).

Kristeva argues that the 'speaking being' discharges bodily energy into language, thereby infusing language with meaning which exceeds its syntactic and logical organisation. In its simplest form, this energy can be recognised in the rhythms, intonation and modulations which infuse speech with meaning. For Kristeva, this expulsion of bodily or drive energy into language is a crucial aspect of the signifying process, which she terms the 'semiotic'.[14] The semiotic is distinguished in Kristeva's thesis from the 'symbolic'; the domain of unity and coherence in which the chaotic impulses characterising the semiotic are subordinated to the laws of representation and identity. These ideas inherit a psychoanalytic understanding of the subject's development from both Freud and Lacan. They become crucial in developing an understanding of the transgressive value of literary experimentation, as there is a direct correspondence in Kristeva's thesis "between the heterogeneity of subjectivity and that of textual relations" (Grosz 50). As we shall see, Kristeva locates the transgressive value of the literary text in its ability to manifest the disruptive charge of the semiotic within signification. In order to fully grasp the concept of both the semiotic and symbolic, and their operation in the literary text, it is therefore

[14] Kristeva's use of the term 'semiotic' is idiosyncratic and distinct from Ferdinand de Saussure's employment of the term to denote the scientific study of signs. Kristeva uses the term to suggest the psychosomatic content of signifying practices absent from Saussure's linguistic theory. In Kristeva's un-translated texts, the distinction is denoted by the alteration of the definite article. *La semiotique* refers to semiotics or the study of signs while *le semiotique* is Kristeva's neologism, which refers to the extra-verbal way in which bodily drives and affects make their way into language. Unless otherwise stated, I use the term 'semiotic' in Kristeva's sense.

necessary to briefly outline the psychoanalytic theories of development from which Kristeva derives her theory.

Lacan describes the subject's development in three stages, which he terms the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic.[15] According to Lacan, the Real is the first stage of development and it is into this realm that the child is born. In this stage, the child occupies an undifferentiated relationship with its mother; it has not yet recognised itself as distinct from its mother. The Real thus precedes any subject-object distinction and the subject does not yet experience lack or desire. For Lacan, the Real is outside of both the Imaginary and the Symbolic; it cannot be symbolised and is always anterior to language. As Alan Sheridan explains, the Real "…became that before which the Imaginary faltered, that over which the Symbolic stumbles, that which is refractory, resistant. Hence [Lacan's] formula: 'the Real is the impossible'" (x). In its primal relationship with its mother in the Real, the infant experiences plenitude without differentiation. In Freudian terms, the child is experiencing primary narcissism. In the third and final stage of development, which Lacan calls the Symbolic, this primary bond with the mother will be severed with the child's accession into the social. The separation between child and (m)other[16] is, however, already anticipated in the Imaginary or second phase of its development, during which it experiences what Lacan refers to as the "mirror stage".

For Lacan, the child's recognition of its reflection in the mirror as a representation of itself is a defining moment in its psychological development. The reflection in the mirror offers it an image of itself as complete and unified, signalling a state of unity and homogeneity which the subject will always strive for, but will never attain. It is thus during the mirror stage that the subject forms its ego-ideal: an image of itself as whole, coherent and unified. Lacan claims that this apprehension is a delusion or "misrecognition" (*meconnaisance*). The subject in the mirror may appear unified and

[15] As I explain in detail later in this chapter, Kristeva's theory of the 'symbolic' is related, but not identical to, Lacan's understanding of the 'Symbolic' order. Throughout this dissertation, I use the capitalised 'Symbolic' to refer to Lacan's theory and the lower-case 'symbolic' to indicate Kristeva's concept.

[16] Lacan parenthesises the "m" in (m)other as, according to his thesis, the first of the child's many differentiations occurs in relation to its mother.

complete, yet the plenitude the child enjoyed in its undifferentiated relationship with its mother in the Real has already been lost. In its apprehension of its image in the mirror, the child has recognised itself as distinct from other subjects and becomes increasingly separated from its environment with each new differentiation. There are now 'others' which are distinct from the self. With the loss of the immediate gratification provided by the unmediated mother-child relationship arises the experience of lack and the beginning of need. In a differentiated world in which desired objects are distinct from the self, the child learns that language can be used to demand things in order to have its needs met. Thus, through the mirror stage, it begins to substitute signs and representations for the immediacy of its lived experience (Grosz 45). This signals the child's accession into the Symbolic order, which marks the third and final stage of the subject's development in Lacan's thesis.

The Symbolic is the realm of language and law, which ensures the socialisation of the subject. It is in the Symbolic that the individual is formed as subject. The processes of differentiation, which occur in the mirror phase, are necessary for the child's accession into this Symbolic order. Language can only come into being where there is lack and a desire to have this lack filled. Thus, in order to gain an enunciative position in the socio-symbolic order, the child's primal attachment to the mother must be severed. The Oedipus complex and its threat of castration guarantee the sublimation of this bond. Here the child affords primacy to the "integrity of its body over its desire to access the mother's body" (Grosz 48). The repression of the pre-Oedipal maternal bond is thus a precondition of the Symbolic order.

The accession into the Symbolic promises the subject coherence and stability, as the uninhibited libidinal drives which traverse the child's body in the Real and Imaginary phases are organised according to a phallic sexual economy and, importantly, to a "normative and generative linguistic structure" (Grosz 48). The child must organise and repress the formless, primal and unregulated drives associated with its bond to the mother if it is to claim the coherent and unified subject position 'I' within the socio-symbolic order. The Symbolic is thus a highly regulative system, organising the corporeal drives

according to the requirements of signification. The sacrifice of the unmediated mother-child bond, and submission to the grammar, syntax and logic of the Symbolic position, guarantee the child access to discourse and enable it to appropriate discourse as its own. It can refer to itself as a discrete, autonomous subject, thereby securing a subjective and social identity. The cost of this position of mastery for the subject is high: the renunciation of its maternal pleasures or, in Kristeva's terms, of its *jouissance*.[17]

For Kristeva, the unregulated corporeal drives associated with the Real and Imaginary, as well as the unbridled *jouissance* which characterises these stages of development, are never wholly mastered by Symbolic relations, but continue to operate *within* the subject and emerge as "distinctive mark, trace, index, precursory sign, proof […] imprint, figuration" (*Revolution* 25) within signification. As I noted earlier, Kristeva refers to this as the semiotic, which is always already operating within the subject and within language. The semiotic is thus figured in Kristeva's thesis as a highly disruptive modality; its operation in the Symbolic a reminder of the "subject's difficult passage into the norms of psychic and sexual life" (Rose 144).

Kristeva elaborates her notion of the semiotic by theorising what she calls the '*chora*', a term she borrows from Plato's writings to denote the locus or 'space' [18] of the semiotic: "Plato's *Timaeus* speaks of a *chora*, a receptacle, unnameable, improbable, hybrid, anterior to meaning, and consequently maternally connoted" (*Desire* 133).[19] For Kristeva, the *chora* is the locus of the drive energy underlying the semiotic (Lechte 129). It generates the infantile polymorphous impulses which traverse the infant's body during

[17] The French term *jouissance* remains un-translated in both Lacan's and Kristeva's texts because there is no English term which shares its ambiguous connotations. In French, *jouissance* is both orgasmic pleasure and non-genital pleasure. In both connotations, the term implies a transgression of Symbolic law.

[18] The term 'space' should be used with some caution in describing the semiotic *chora*, although Kristeva does make recourse to it to elucidate her notion. The *chora*, as will become evident in the remainder of this discussion, is more than simply a 'space'; it is also an 'articulation' or a 'rhythm' which precedes language.

[19] Plato employed the word *chora* to assist in his theorising about the origin of the universe. The *chora* in Plato's terms is both the origin and receptacle of the universe, the ineffable locus of creation and, as he idiosyncratically phrases it, the "wet-nurse of becoming". In other words, the *chora* is the origin of the universe, as well as the condition which enables it to flourish. Extracts of *Timaeus* related to Plato's discussion of the *chora* are reprinted in McAfee 18-21.

the Real phase and, importantly, continues to energise the subject, even as it is regulated by the Symbolic:

> Discrete quantities of energy move through the body of the subject who is not yet constituted as such and, in the course of his development, they are arranged according to various constraints imposed on this body – always already involved in the semiotic process – by family and social structures. In this way the drives, which are 'energy' charges as well as 'psychical' marks, articulate what we call a *chora*: a non-expressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated. (*Revolution* 25)

In her theorising about the semiotic and the semiotic *chora*, Kristeva makes two significant departures from Lacan, which enable us to identify transgressive ruptures within the socio-symbolic order. First, she argues that the dynamics that operate the Symbolic are already present in the pre-Oedipal stages of the subject's development. The "raw materials" (Grosz 43) of signification do not develop solely out of differentiations made by the child during the mirror stage, but are already present in the "echolalias, glossolalias, rhythms and intonations of an infant who does not yet know how to use language to refer to objects" (McAfee 19). The *chora* thus provides the 'materiality' of the symbolic: the rhythm, gesture and vocal timbre, which infuse language with meaning. The semiotic motility derived from the *chora* is, along with the mirror stage and the Oedipus complex, a precondition of signification. By "bringing the speaking body back into signification" as Oliver argues, Kristeva "provides a way to conceive of saying something new within a language and culture inherited from patriarchal forefathers" (13).

Second, in Kristeva's thesis, the pre-Oedipal phenomenon of the Real is not an irretrievable territory, but continues to be discernable within the semiotic mode of signification:

> It does seem to me that the semiotic – if one wants to find correspondences with Lacanian ideas – corresponds to phenomena that for Lacan are in both the Real

> and Imaginary. For him the Real is a hole, a void, but I think that in a number of experiences with which psychoanalysis is concerned – most notably, the narcissistic structure, the experience of melancholia or of catastrophic suffering and so on – the appearance of the Real is not necessarily a void. *It is accompanied by a number of psychic inscriptions that are the order of the semiotic*. Thus perhaps the notion of the semiotic allows us to speak of the Real without simply saying that it's an emptiness or a blank; it allows us to try to further elaborate it. (Kristeva in Guberman, 22-23; my emphasis)

Importantly then, experiences anterior to symbolic language can emerge in the semiotic modality. The semiotic enables us to attend to areas of experience intolerable to the rational imperatives governing socio-symbolic relations; instances which the language of socially useful discourse cannot grasp. The capacity for the semiotic to bring repressed, suppressed and censored content into signification makes it a highly volatile and transgressive modality, capable of exceeding the univocal meanings produced by symbolic relations.

Thus, Kristeva's theorising about the semiotic seems to hold considerable potential for subjects marginalised under dominant Symbolic law. As an embodied and disruptive dynamic, the semiotic seems to provide the modality through which interventions into the unified structures of the Symbolic can be staged. However, the transgressive value of the semiotic is a contentious point amongst critics, several of whom doubt the usefulness of pre-Symbolic heterogeneity in the production of counter-hegemonic practice (see Rose 149; Penney 125).[20] In this regard, several feminist theorists have emerged as Kristeva's sternest critics, accusing her of biological determinism in her positing of the *chora* as an expressly maternal, feminine space, as 'opposed' to a paternal Symbolic realm (see Jones

[20] While Penney convincingly argues for the political relevance of Kristeva's later work like *Strangers to Ourselves* and *Nations Without Nationalism*, he agrees with Jacqueline Rose's contention that "Kristeva's criticism of symbolist poetic discourse was always that aesthetic experimentation cannot directly affect social institutions" (Penney 125). I agree with Penney and Rose that aesthetic experimentation is not a direct cause of socio-political change, but propose that a more nuanced and complex relationship exists between the two realms in Kristeva's theorising.

60-65; Butler, *Gender Trouble* 80).[21] Judith Butler argues that this distinction "safeguards notions of culture as a paternal structure and delimits maternity as an essentially pre-cultural reality"(*Gender Trouble* 80), thereby foreclosing any subversive potential which the semiotic disposition may possess. However, Kristeva stresses that the maternal semiotic is not outside of language or culture, but is "always already tied to signification" (Oliver 7). Accordingly, the semiotic is not at a remove from the Symbolic as it is understood in Lacan's terms. Moreover, although the *chora* is maternally connoted, it is not the domain of woman; it is a precondition of subjectivity and signification, traversing all subjects and all discourses.

Butler's dismissal of Kristeva seems to be based on a conflation of the symbolic modality Kristeva describes and the Symbolic as it is conceived in Lacan's terms. The two notions are closely related, but are not identical. Kristeva uses the term 'symbolic' to describe the element of signification which adheres to the grammar and syntax of linguistic systems, in order to produce meaning: "The symbolic, as opposed to the semiotic, is the inevitable attribute of meaning, sign, and the signified object" (*Desire* 134). The symbolic element in signification, with its emphasis on univocal, coherent meaning thus buttresses Symbolic law. However, the symbolic is not a discrete modality which operates in isolation to the semiotic. On the contrary, Kristeva envisages a dialectical relationship between the semiotic and symbolic operating within the signifying process:

> These two modalities are inseparable within the signifying process that constitutes language, and the dialectic between them determines the type of discourse (narrative, metalanguage, theory, poetry etc) involved; in other words, so-called 'natural' language allows for different modes of articulation of the semiotic and the symbolic […] Because the subject is always *both* semiotic *and* symbolic, no signifying system he produces can be either exclusively 'semiotic' or exclusively 'symbolic', and is instead necessarily marked by an indebtedness to both. (Kristeva in Moi, 92; original emphasis)

[21] For a detailed discussion of Kristeva's relationship to feminism, see McAfee 75-90 and Oliver 1-15.

The semiotic and the symbolic are thus both always operating *within* the signifying process and, hence, within the Symbolic order. For Kristeva, all discourses and all texts are products of the heterogeneous interplay of these two modalities: "Language as a social practice necessarily presupposes these two dispositions, though combined in different ways to constitute *types of discourse,* types of signifying practices" (*Desire* 134; original emphasis).

Although the symbolic and semiotic are theorised as simultaneous modalities within the signifying process, the semiotic must be subordinated to the symbolic to ensure the socialisation of the subject. To this extent Kristeva concurs with Lacan: the subject must gain mastery over the intractable impulses characterising the semiotic *chora* (or the Real and Imaginary) if he is to participate in socio-symbolic structures. Were the semiotic to operate ungoverned by the Symbolic, the subject would inhabit a state of psychosis. Similarly, linguistic and textual practices would be unintelligible without the grammar imposed by symbolic operations.

However, although the subject, representational systems and social institutions all rely on the systematic unity provided by the symbolic to secure intelligibility, Kristeva is wary of instances in which the symbolic has become ossified to support authoritarian discourses and practices. She warns that the "unity, of state and family, is achieved at the price of a murder and a sacrifice – that of the *soma*, the drive and the process" (ctd in Grosz, 53). Thus unified discourses and the monologic texts they produce should be viewed with some suspicion. Kristeva argues that the univocal or "thetic" text is a conservative construct, wholly reliant on convention. The meanings it produces are pre-determined by existing codes, which are always interested in maintaining the status quo. She argues instead for the production of texts, which problematise the univocality that symbolic relations impose on representation, and which foreground the processes of signification. She claims that the avant-garde[22] literary text is exemplary of such a signifying practice,

[22] Broadly speaking, the term 'avant-garde' refers to experimental artistic practice developing in Europe from the end of the nineteenth century until the outbreak of the Second World War. Kristeva uses the term to refer to the work of a select number of transgressive writers: Artaud, Mallarmè, Lautréamont, Joyce and Beckett. These authors are, for Kristeva, exemplary artists of the avant-garde.

which transgresses the autonomy of the symbolic to acknowledge the inherent plurality and ambiguity of all textual practices. By shattering the norms and conventions which govern signification, Kristeva argues that avant-garde literary practice is able to create a space in which our dominant discourses and traditional representations are questioned and re-negotiated. For Kristeva, this constitutes the "revolution in poetic language".[23]

In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva argues that the logic which operates in poetic language is radically different from that which governs our conventional 'monologic' discourses. Her ideas here are crucially influenced by the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin and his readings of the novel as a 'dialogic' discourse; an idea I will return to shortly. In Bakhtin's terms, a monological text operates within a closed structure, according to the laws of representation and identity. It may be reduced "to a single (mono-), homogenous, and relatively uniform logic" (Lechte 106). Accordingly, monologic structures cannot assimilate alterity, negation or otherness. They function according to an exclusionary logic, which rejects falsity and opposition. This 'bi-valent' logic (*either* one *or* the other) is distinguished in Kristeva's writings from ambivalence (*both* one *and* the other) which, she argues, characterises literary production.

For both Kristeva and Bakhtin, the literary text, unlike monologic discourse, does not expunge difference, but rather "includes the other of itself within itself" (Lechte 106). Bakhtin refers to this as a dialogic structure; that is, a discourse which is penetrated by the voice of 'the other', which conventional (monologic) representation seeks to exclude.[24] In Kristeva's terms, this transgressive dynamic operating within the poetic text

[23] Importantly, literature is not the only discourse which transgresses the autonomy of symbolic relations in Kristeva's thesis – she argues that other forms of artistic practice, including painting and music, are similarly positioned to draw on the subversive value of the semiotic. The avant-garde literary text is, however, her privileged object of analysis.

[24] In this regard, Kristeva argues that poetic language functions according to a similar logic, which underpins the carnivalesque (as it is understood in Bakhtin's terms). Kristeva borrows much of Bakhtin's theorising about the carnivalesque in order to formalise her notion of poetic language. The carnivalesque, as understood in Bakhtin's terms, is not simply a transgression of the law, but *includes the law within itself*. Both carnival and poetic language constitute genuine acts of transgression, as they contain within themselves their implicit negation. For more on Kristeva's use of Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque, see Lechte 105-109.

is explained as the discharge of semiotic elements into the socio-symbolic; a process she describes as "the semiotization of the symbolic":

> This semiotization of the symbolic […] represents the flow of *jouissance* into language […] Art specifies the means – the only means – that *jouissance* harbours for infiltrating that order. In cracking the socio-symbolic order, splitting it open, changing vocabulary, syntax, the words itself and releasing from beneath them the drives borne by vocalic or kinetic differences, *jouissance* works its way into the social […] [What] poetry shows is that language lends itself to the penetration of the socio-symbolic by *jouissance*… (*Revolution* 79-80)

Poetic language then, in its liberation of semiotic energy, disrupts the unity of the Symbolic and accordingly "disrupts the unity of the subject of/in language" (Oliver 13). As such, Kristeva argues that poetic language is a discourse which puts the "subject on trial" (*le sujet en process*), thereby calling all the unities which secure the subject's socio-symbolic identity into crisis. In "cracking the socio-symbolic order", as Kristeva puts it, poetic language releases difference and alterity, those disruptive semiotic elements kept at bay by the Symbolic, into identity. In its release and preservation of difference, poetic language not only facilitates a relationship with the 'other', but displays and amplifies the aspects of 'otherness' which exist within the self.

In its discursive recognition of the 'other', I propose that poetic language is positioned to heed Spivak's call for an ethical relationship in our dealings with the subaltern; one that will recognise her independent 'otherness', without reincorporating her voice into the dominant structures which ensure her subordination. Accordingly, poetic language is able to provisionally realise what Spivak considers to be the precondition of changes in the socio-political; that is, the recognition of the subaltern's autonomous difference. In this regard, however, Spivak emerges as one of Kristeva's sternest critics, unequivocally refuting the political relevance of Kristeva's theoretical project. Before examining Spivak's argument in some detail, the precise nature of the relationship which Kristeva posits between poetic language and a socio-political realm should be qualified. It is

important to note that Kristeva does not equate aesthetic disruptions with revolutionary political change. Rather, as a process which foregrounds and privileges locations of dissent and rupture, poetic transgression implicates the socio-political in its ability to 'clear a space' for the articulation of emergent narratives.

In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva argues that:

> The text is a practice that could be compared to a political revolution: the one brings about in the subject what the other introduces into society. The history and political experience of the twentieth century have demonstrated that one cannot be transformed without the other. (17)

Poetic language puts the "subject on trial", thereby initiating a transformation at the level of the subject, which is the precondition for changes within the socio-political realm. Literature is thus inseparable from politics in Kristeva's thesis. This is not to say that the relationship between literature and politics is linear or causal: experimentation in the poetic text is not a direct cause of political change. On the contrary, simultaneity characterises relations between poetic language and politics: aesthetic experimentation is generally concomitant with and symptomatic of (often as yet unarticulated) social and political upheavals:

> The literary avant-garde experience by virtue of its characterisation, is slated to become the laboratory of a new discourse (and a new subject) thus bringing about a mutation […] it rejects all discourse that is either stagnant or eclectically academic, pre-empts its knowledges where it does not impel it, *it stimulates and reveals deep ideological changes that are currently searching for their own accurate political framework* . (Kristeva, *Desire* 92-93; my emphasis)

In its capacity to disrupt existing unities, poetic language can grasp 'deep ideological changes' operating within society, which current symbolic forms cannot yet articulate. For Kristeva, the poetic text does not assume a fixed oppositional ideological position

(which would render the text monologic), but 'pulverises' the rigid forms which support current orthodoxies. Poetic practice is the plural, dialogic space in which alternative discourses can be imagined or, as Kristeva puts it, the "laboratory of a new discourse". Thus, as John Lechte explains, the text

> … is not a political force at the level of a univocal (ideological) message which would be communicated to an addressee. On the contrary avant-garde texts fulfil their 'ethical' and thus ultimately political function when signifying mechanisms are themselves put into question in a practice. Hence the ethical function of a text has nothing to do with ideological purity, but with a semiotic practice which 'pluralises, pulverises, musicates' all ossified forms. (140)

As a discourse which protects the subject's heterogeneity and rejects a totalitarian logic, poetic language has, to my mind, considerable potential for marginalised subjects within a decolonised context. In its disruption of the symbolic order of signification which buttresses all totalising narratives, including those of colonialism and postcolonial nationalism, I propose that poetic language provides the conditions under which censored and marginalised narratives can be enunciated.

The application I propose of Kristeva's psychoanalytic theory to a Third World context is unequivocally dismissed as an unsound methodology in Spivak's theorising and constitutes a 're-colonising' of the subaltern voice by Western critical theory in her argument. Spivak has, on several occasions, denounced Kristeva for her "ferocious Western Europeanism"(in Rooney, 17), a quality which, for Spivak, renders Kristeva's theorising irrelevant in a postcolonial context. Indeed, the occidental perspective of Kristeva's work arguably places her analyses at odds with the postcolonial emphasis of Spivak's writings. I will consider the merits of Spivak's argument against Kristeva's theories and go on to suggest that her outright dismissal of Kristeva may be too hasty. Whilst any attempt to ally Kristeva's and Spivak's politics is by no means unproblematic, I would like to suggest that selected aspects of Kristeva's theoretical project could be productively deployed in a postcolonial context. I suggest that an analysis of a literary

representation of the (gendered) subaltern, in particular, can be enriched by Kristeva's particular brand of psychoanalytic theory.

Spivak's most emphatic dismissal of Kristeva's theories is to be found in her influential essay, "French Feminism in an International Frame"; a work which questions the relevance of Western feminism for the disempowered women of the Third World. Spivak's analysis of Kristeva's book, *About Chinese Women*, forms the central thrust of this critique and provides ample evidence to support Spivak's argument that Western feminism's interest in the women of the Third World is primarily self-serving. Spivak argues that Kristeva's concern with Chinese women is a disguised examination of her own condition, rather than a genuine interrogation of the predicament of the "nameless women of the Third World" (Spivak, "French Feminism" 137):

> [Kristeva's] question […] is about her *own* identity rather than theirs […] This too might be a characteristic of the group of thinkers to whom I have, most generally, attached her. In spite of their occasional interest in touching the *other* of the West, of metaphysics, of capitalism, their repeated question is obsessively self-centred: if we are not what official history and philosophy say we are, who then are we (not), how are we (not)? ("French Feminism", 137; original emphasis)

I do not wish to dispute Spivak's argument here; indeed "French Feminism in an International Frame" provides an incisive and persuasive critique of the problematically generalised representation of China in *About Chinese Women*. Considering that this dissertation proposes an application of (Kristevan) psychoanalytic theory to a text from the Third World, it is necessary to consider why such an application misfired. Moreover, I will consider whether the limitations of Kristeva's theory in this context do indeed render it an unsound methodology to adopt in a reading of a postcolonial text, as Spivak contends.

In *About Chinese Women,* Kristeva represents China as a predominantly matriarchal culture; a configuration which places it in favourable contradistinction to the paternal

order of French society. In psychoanalytic terms, China is constituted as a pre-Oedipal locality anterior to paternal Symbolic relations in the West. For Kristeva, China's matrilineal cultural heritage provides an instance to contest the repression of the feminine in Western psychoanalytic writings. Kristeva's matriarchal China is thus constituted in service of her theoretical interest in the subversive pressure of the pre-Oedipal *chora* in an occidental context, rather than as a study of the material realities and historical experiences of Chinese women.

The feminine coding of China in *About Chinese Women* produces a troubling generalisation of the historical and social position of Chinese women or, as one critic has noted, requires a great deal of "historical extravagance" (Lowe 147) on Kristeva's part.[25] As I have suggested, Spivak is astute in her criticism of *About Chinese Women* as a product of Kristeva's desire to interrogate questions pertaining to the Occident. Indeed, Kristeva could have provided a far more suggestive analysis by posing the self-reflexive questions Spivak advises, namely: "Not merely who am I? But who is the other woman? How am I naming her? How does she name me?"("French Feminism"150). However, Spivak chooses the occidental pose of *About Chinese Women* as the occasion to dismiss Kristeva's entire political project. This move seems to be particularly hasty, considering that *About Chinese Women*, I would argue, does not adequately represent some of Kristeva's more persuasive and influential theorising about the subject.

The reduction of the Chinese female subject in *About Chinese Women* is surprising, as it runs counter to Kristeva's most fervent theoretical project, which is interested in *protecting* the subject's valuable heterogeneity, despite the homogenising pressure of the dominant Symbolic. This is significant, as it is precisely Kristeva's sustained interest in the motility of the subject which, as I will show, has significant implications for subaltern theory. Moreover, Kristeva's theorising is expressly interested in deconstructing the

[25] Lisa Lowe's reading of *About Chinese Women* argues that Kristeva's "generalising narrative, undaunted by the large scope of its project, leaps quickly and simply across two thousand years of Chinese history […] Throughout *About Chinese Women* a historical extravagance, which so easily establishes a correspondence between an ancient modality and a contemporary one, lacks an adequately complex appreciation of the heterogeneous forces of history" (147).

binary reductionism she finds inherent in much structuralist thinking. The strict delineation of a matriarchal Orient against a patrilinear, monotheistic West is thus also at odds with her broader methodological approach. Thus, *About Chinese Women* is hardly exemplary of Kristeva's oeuvre, as Spivak suggests in "French Feminism in an International Frame". I argue instead that the complex inquiries made by *Revolution in Poetic Language* detailed above, which is precisely concerned with questions of irreducible difference, provide a more efficacious theoretical model for application to the heterogeneous and often contradictory relations operating in a decolonised Third World context.

Although Spivak has not provided a detailed critique of *Revolution in Poetic Language*, her general impatience with the theories developed in this text is made clear in her comments concerning "symptomatic or semiotic reading" ("French Feminism" 137), which she dismisses as a "…set of directives for class and race-privileged literary women" ("French Feminism" 137-138). As one critic has noted, these comments presuppose that an examination of the subject's relation to language can have little or no political relevance in a postcolonial, Third World context (Penney 123).[26] Contrary to this position, I would like to investigate three possible ways in which Kristeva's writings about poetic language and the subject might productively interact with subaltern theory to provide a theoretical model for application to questions of (gendered) subalternity *in literature*.

First, I propose that poetic language, in Kristeva's definition, has the capacity to preserve the episodic and singular character of subalternity, as defined by Gramsci and employed by Spivak. If we recall Kristeva's formulation of the disruptive value of the avant-garde text, it becomes clear why literature can inhabit the otherwise untraversable space of subalternity. For Kristeva, poetic disruptions of the signifying chain destabilise the sovereignty of symbolic relations. The experimental character of the poetic text thus facilitates moments of symbolic rupture, in which the trace of the repressed, anarchic

[26] Penney's article is one of the few attempts that I am aware of, which suggest an alliance between Kristeva and Spivak's theoretical interests. Penney's interest, however, is more specifically in the potential Kristeva's later works like *Strangers to Ourselves* may offer subaltern theory.

semiotic is imprinted. The "distinctive mark" of the semiotic *chora* produces an inassimilable excess, which discloses the subject's heterogeneity:

> A heterogeneous division, an irruption of the semiotic *chora,* marks each 'category' of the syntactic sequence and prevents the 'other' from being posited as an identifiable syntactic term. In this realization of the signifier, particularly as it is seen in the poetic text, alterity is maintained within the pure signifier and/or within the simply syntactic element only with difficulty. For the Other has become heterogeneous and will not remain fixed in place: it negativises all posited elements and thus syntax, threatening them with possible dissolution. (*Revolution* 108)

In foregrounding symbolic fissures in the poetic text, Kristeva makes evident "the spaces of otherness from which transforming interventions may be articulated" (Lowe 124). I propose that this construction holds considerable potential for the subaltern subject. By positing subjectivity while simultaneously disclosing its unstable and heterogeneous qualities, poetic language is peculiarly placed to negotiate the otherwise inscrutable condition of subalternity. As I will show in my analyses of Vera's texts, I propose that poetic language can inscribe subalternity while preserving its heterogeneous status.

Second, (Kristevan) psychoanalytic theory can introduce questions of desire into discussions concerning gendered subalternity. Kristeva argues that the repression of female *jouissance* is necessary for the preservation of a patriarchal order. She thus posits female desire and non-reproductive pleasure as women's embodied resistance to paternal law. Spivak generally views Kristeva's interest in female *jouissance* as politically suspect, with little or no relevance to a subject in an economically and politically oppressive Third World context. In her reading of Devi's *Breast Giver,* Spivak challenges what she considers to be the French feminists' valorisation of women's non-reproductive sexual pleasure. She argues that, in the image of Jashoda's suppurating body, "we see cancer rather than the clitoral orgasm as the excess of the woman's body" ("Woman in Difference" 90). Thus, as one critic has observed, Spivak situates the material reality of

Jashoda's cancerous body in powerful contradistinction to "the universal valorisation of the clitoral orgasm as a space for women's political struggle" (Morton 84).

While I agree with Spivak that Kristeva's theory of female *jouissance* may not have applicability to the corporeal trauma depicted in Devi's prose, I am troubled by the implication that questions of female desire can have no relevance for the gendered subaltern. Spivak's outright dismissal of desire as a mode of resistance for the subaltern presupposes that questions of subalternity and female desire are mutually exclusive domains. I will argue that Vera's novels challenge this configuration of subaltern sexuality and corporeality. Although instances of corporeal trauma figure strongly in Vera's narratives, her novels are also frequently concerned with issues of female desire and non-reproductive pleasure. As I will argue in the final chapter of this dissertation, both *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins* offer us an examination of gendered subalternity, which *cannot* preclude questions of female desire.

Third, I propose that psychoanalytic theory is required to address questions of trauma, which are necessarily implicated in discussions about subalternity, but are generally effaced in Spivak's arguments. Significantly, Spivak considers the silent predicament of the subaltern only as a product of political and economic subjugation. The subaltern 'cannot speak' because she cannot access the hegemonic discourses which ensure her effacement. While Spivak is centrally concerned with the ways in which this 'historical invisibility' makes the subaltern vulnerable to extreme brutality, she does not discuss the psychological implications of this violent burden. The subaltern is, by the violent and oppressive conditions which inscribe her as such, necessarily a victim of psychological trauma. The atrocities to which she is too often subjected are unspeakable, not only because her testimony will be suppressed by autocratic hierarchies, but importantly, because psychological trauma resists narration. It cannot, as I will discuss in more detail in the following chapters, be enunciated under the rational and causal imperatives which govern symbolic relations. In my reading of Vera's novels, I show that the searing silences figured in her prose operate under both socio-political and psycho-linguistic restrictions.

In my analysis of *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins*, I will argue that Vera is ethical in her interaction with, and representation of, the subaltern; that her aesthetic experimentation is interested in reclaiming the (gendered) subalternity from its silent impasse, whilst avoiding the reductive appropriation of subaltern voices. Subalternity emerges in the texts, not as an essentialised 'other', but as a multivalent signifier expressive of the plural aspects of marginalised (female) subjectivity. In their protection of the subaltern's heterogeneity and provisionality, I will argue that the texts 'open spaces' in which alternative relations of power are imagined at different historical moments in Zimbabwean history.

CHAPTER TWO: Writing 'the voices of drowned men': Re-inscribing Subalternity in *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins*

In the final two novels which Vera published during her lifetime, she chose to focus on two very different periods of her country's tumultuous history.[27] In *Butterfly Burning,* she imaginatively reconstructs life in colonial Bulawayo and its bustling township, Makokoba. The theme of colonial subjugation and its attendant suffering, first introduced in *Nehanda*, resurfaces in this later novel. However, this time Vera removes her exploration from the moral chaos of war and rebellion to focus on the everyday realities of life for Rhodesia's impoverished and dispossessed subjects. Her final novel, *The Stone Virgins,* is the first to address issues of violence and subjection in post-independence Zimbabwe explicitly.[28] Set during the aftermath of Zimbabwe's second *Chimurenga*, *The Stone Virgins* reveals the brutality and violation wrought by Robert Mugabe's consolidation of one-party rule in the decolonised state. In this novel, Vera continues a project begun in *Without a Name,* which persuasively demystifies the rhetoric of liberation discourses and "its uncritical glorification of the male war-hero" (Hunter "Nationalism" 229). *The Stone Virgins,* however, goes further than any of Vera's previous novels to undermine the emancipatory claims of liberation and post-independence discourses and to reveal the renewed suffering of Zimbabwe's subaltern.

It is my argument, throughout this dissertation, that Vera's work embodies the effort to clear a space for potential communication between subaltern groups and the dominant systems which exclude them or, as Vera herself has phrased it, to "[mediate] between people who are unable to speak, like women, and people who should be listening" (in Hunter, "Truth of the Struggle" 82). Although this objective can be discerned throughout Vera's oeuvre, I have chosen to focus my analysis on her last novels, *Butterfly Burning*

[27] At the time of her death in April 2005, Vera was working on her sixth novel, *Obedience*. There is currently no official information available from Vera's publishers as to whether or not this final manuscript will be published.

[28] In her explorations of women who struggle to overcome the dominant power structures in society, all Vera's previous novels involve a critique of currently oppressive conditions, but this is done obliquely or indirectly. As Eva Hunter has noted, "…perhaps it is precisely because she is condemning what continue to be prevailing conditions for many Zimbabwean women, and does so in ways that counter entrenched and hallowed orthodoxies, that Vera resorts to distancing her tales in time, some by a century, others by some decades. In this way she forms a protective screen around her work in a country where journalists are being jailed and tortured for criticisms of the state…" ("Nationalism" 239).

and *The Stone Virgins*. While her previous novels, *Nehanda, Without a Name* and *Under the Tongue*, are of no less importance for their depiction of the suffering of Zimbabwe's disinherited subjects, these last novels represent, I believe, the culmination of her involved poetic style.

In a 2002 interview with Grace Mutandwa, Vera spoke of *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins* as her "signature works",[29] and it is indeed in these texts that various elements of her aesthetic are refined to handle the complex questions of language, voice and subjectivity in increasingly subtle ways. These novels share with Vera's earlier works the main features of her poetic style: the use of complex metaphorical configurations, elliptical sentences, present tense narration and a sensual, beautiful language which both counterbalances and underscores the brutality of its subject matter (Attree 64; Primorac, "Borderline Identities" 102). In these works, however, there is a movement away from what one critic has called the "thoroughgoing solipsism" (Muchemwa, "Language, voice and presence" 6) of Vera's narrative voice towards a more diversified narrative perspective. This is achieved in *Butterfly Burning* through a subtle manipulation of narrative focus, which includes perspectives other than those of the protagonist and, more explicitly, in *The Stone Virgins,* in which Vera's characteristic omniscient narrator is accompanied, for the first time, by two first-person narrators. Moreover, in *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins*, Vera deploys her characteristic compositional strategies with greater restraint: the metonymic device which saturates *Without a Name* is used pointedly and sparingly in these later novels, which avoid the excessive metaphoric straying of their predecessors.[30]

Despite their differing historical settings, *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins* share a preoccupation with the ways in which the dominant system threatens to negate the subjects it marginalises, denying them agency, voice, presence and often life. In both novels, there is a concern with engaging language in ways that can overturn the silencing

[29] As it is electronically reproduced on Weaver Press's website, Mutandwa's article is without pagination.

[30] See Muchemwa, "Language, voice and presence" 6-13 and Quayson 87-91 for detailed readings of these features of Vera's prose in *Under the Tongue* and *Without a Name*.

mechanisms of patriarchy, colonialism and authoritarian nationalism, in order to 'open a space' for subaltern speech. In this chapter, I focus on the strategies developed and employed in each novel to bring the marginalised figure of the subaltern, which Spivak argues is unrepresented and unrepresentable in discourse, back into signification. I suggest that the retrieval of subalternity is primarily negotiated through Vera's complex deployment of poetic language, which is able to confer visibility upon, and provisionally lend authority to, the traumatic histories of subaltern subjects.

Although preoccupied with experiences of subjugation and trauma, it should be stressed that both *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins* are intensely hopeful, often celebratory and keenly aware of the human capacity not only for brutality, but also for courage and love. Vera's poetic register itself is an insistence on beauty and creativity as a response to violence, pain and subjection; an insistence that the traumatic histories, which confine oppressed subjects physically and psychologically, can be transcended. This stylistic and thematic ambivalence is central to the retrieval of subalternity in Vera's prose, as it does not attempt to fix the margin as a stable, knowable entity, but acknowledges the shifting and contested condition of subjects disenfranchised by the dominant system. Rather than positioning the subaltern as the negative term in a set of binary oppositions, it insists on what Obioma Nnaemeka calls "the ambiguous interstices of the binaries where woman is both benevolent and malevolent, with powers healing and lethal […] in short, just human" (2-3). In my analyses of *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins* which follow, I consider the ways in which this strategic ambivalence enables Vera's texts to negotiate the oppressive systems and spaces which threaten the subaltern with erasure.

In her essay "Inside the city: reassembling the township in Yvonne Vera's fiction", Sarah Nuttall explores the production of the urban city space in *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins* and considers the significance of the close attention that Vera pays to the details of urban space in both novels. She argues that the construction of subjectivity in these texts is 'undergirded' by the "assemblages of city and township" (177) and offers a detailed reading of the ways in which "urban subjects and objects mutually constitute each other" (177) in Vera's writing. In this analysis, I am similarly concerned with the

relationship between the production of space and selfhood in *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins*, but I explore these concerns in relation to the construction of a specifically subaltern subjectivity in Vera's prose. In both novels, the interface between the colonised subject and the urban space emerges as a contested site, where the subaltern both submits to and resists colonial authority. The city is both a place of colonial subjection, where movement is restricted and controlled by the gaze of the colonial master, and one of creative possibility, where a new urban lifestyle seems to dissolve the restrictions of a traditional past. Vera articulates the story of subaltern subjectivity in relation to these paradoxical spaces, mapping the sites which constitute the fragmented and episodic histories of Zimbabwe's subaltern.

The politics of space and its relationship to issues of land ownership, identity formation and agency resonate throughout Vera's work. While meditating, on the one hand, on the disconnectedness and loss of identity wrought by colonialism's confiscation of land, Vera is also distrustful of Zimbabwean cultural assumptions which link the land to ancestry, stability and generative continuity. Her handling of the latter will be dealt with in some detail in the following chapter, particularly as it implicates the bodies and subjectivities of women. Here I focus on Vera's depiction of the spatial politics of colonialism in *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins,* as well as on her imaginative reclamation of colonised space. I show how the codes of a-textuality and stasis that inform imperialist notions of colonised space are re-evaluated and disrupted in the novels to reveal Bulawayo and its township, Makokoba, as spaces of dynamic and complex relations.

The vividly depicted world of Makokoba in *Butterfly Burning* is one of colonialism's unacknowledged territories, effaced by imperialism's undifferentiated representations of colonised land. Edward Said has described colonialism as an act of "geographical violence" (ctd in Karamcheti, 125), which erases the distinctive character of local geography in its definition of colonised space as uncharted 'virgin' territory. He notes that, "for the native, the history of his or her colonial servitude is inaugurated by the loss to an outsider of the local place, whose concrete geographical identity must therefore be searched for and somehow restored" (ctd in Karamcheti, 125). For Said, the recovery of

"local place" is a precondition for the retrieval of identities veiled by the homogenising assumptions of imperialism. Indira Karamcheti reiterates Said's point in her argument that Third World localities "bear a burden of a-textuality" (132), which she defines as both the "lack of a written (textual) tradition that makes real these [colonised territories]" and "the all-too-real presence of a world described through imperialist eyes" (129).

Throughout *Butterfly Burning*, the desire to rescue Bulawayo from imperialism's undifferentiated notions of colonised space, as well as to provide an authentic and historically specific representation of the city, can be discerned. "When I wrote *Butterfly Burning,*" Vera commented in one interview, "I just wanted to see my city in a book, just to see the name Bulawayo" (in Bryce, 226). Bulawayo and, more pointedly, its township, Makokoba, are indeed vividly imagined in the novel. Vera traces a path through Bulawayo's racially segregated streets into the bustling township space of Makokoba and its central artery, Sidojiwe E2. Makokoba is saturated with a multitude of objects and, in her descriptions of the enticing commodities of colonial capitalism, Vera evokes the specificities of 1940s Bulawayo:

> An orange dress. A dress bought at Baloos Stores one new year's day when the shop-owner has to leave suddenly and sells every item for twopence: dresses and khaki shorts, shoelaces, candy cakes, Eat One Nows, Afro combs, folded Swiss knives, Lion matches, Andrews' Liver Salts, Star Cigarettes, Golden Syrup, Minora Razors, Vanishing Pond's, Vinolia Soap, Roll-On, and Bata Tender Foots. Twopence for tenderfoots: black encasing shoes with the thick black rubber right around the edges and soft maroon soles that smelt like, well, like that. (37)

These objects "embody an era", as Nuttall argues; they "inhabit a language of proper names which seem to contain and produce meanings within and beyond the consumable items that they are" (185). Through its attention to such minutiae of the urban space, *Butterfly Burning* effects what Spivak calls the "textualising" (*Postcolonial Critic* 1) of Makokoba.

For Spivak, the re-inscription of colonialism's displaced localities represents an important step in the process of retrieving subalternity from its inscrutable impasse. Like Said and Karamcheti, she calls for the imaginative recovery of the material world of the colonised subject, noting that, in the absence of such representations, the existence of an "immense subaltern heterogeneity" ("Woman" 79) goes unacknowledged. She uses the term "textuality" to describe the process of bringing these displaced, uninscribed territories into signification:

> [Textuality] should be related to the notion of the worlding of a world on a supposedly uninscribed territory. When I say this, I am thinking basically about the imperialist project which had to assume that the earth that it territorialized was in fact previously uninscribed […] Now this worlding actually is also a texting, textualising, a making into art, a making into an object to be understood. (*Postcolonial Critic* 1)

Understood in these terms, the detailed descriptions of Makokoba do more than provide the novel with a provocative setting; they translate Bulawayo and its unknown township "into an object to be understood". The enunciation of place names like "Jukwa Road", "Sidojiwe E2" and "L Street" and their emphatic repetition throughout the text, restores the geographical specificity of the colonised space, rescuing it from its 'a-textual burden' and moving it into the "authoritative Logos of the text" (Karamcheti 132). By restoring some of Bulawayo's historical and geographical nomenclature to textuality, *Butterfly Burning* begins to map a space in the public imaginary for the colonised, displaced subaltern.

Through its emphasis on the details of physical space in Makokoba, the novel explicitly draws our attention to the spatial inequalities of colonialism and its role in shaping the identities of subaltern subjects. Makokoba township is a product of colonial geography; expressly constructed to contain Africans and separate them from the city's white spaces. Vera's sensitivity to the colonial manipulation of space and its role in disempowering the colonised population, derives from a much earlier theoretical interest pursued in her

doctoral study, "The Prison of the Colonial Space". In this study, Vera examines how the imperialist appropriation and reproduction of space constructed the colonised subject "as an immobile and delimited being, devoid of autonomy" (9). Drawing on Said and Frantz Fanon's work on the relationship between imperialism and space, Vera traces how the colonial organisation of space was intended to alienate and dehumanise the colonised, consistently condemning "the native […] to immobility by the prohibitive indicators introduced to the landscape" (Vera, "Prison" 30). In the fictional world of *Butterfly Burning,* Vera foregrounds the 'spatial violence' of colonialism and the restrictions it imposes on the physical and psychic freedom of the colonised. More significantly, the novel shows that, within the confines of the colonial space, there existed vibrancy, ingenuity and even agency, despite the immobility placed on these localities. Makokoba is not a wholly conquered and controlled territory, but emerges in the text as a heterogeneous locality, pulsating simultaneously with gestures of resolute defiance and bitter submission. As we shall see, it is through the language of poetry and music that Vera is able to negotiate the restrictive colonial landscape and it is within this imaginative space that the provisional transcendence of colonial confinement becomes possible.

In *Butterfly Burning*, Vera imaginatively recaptures colonialism's appropriation of space in her depiction of Makokoba. Her characters are quite literally imprisoned in the few streets and one-roomed shelters that comprise the impoverished township: their "Africa meant Sidojiwe E2" (53). Captivity within the physical boundaries of Makokoba is maintained by an oblique but consistent threat of violence against the 'native' who traverses the geographical boundaries which separate white from black. Vera shows how the threat of violence insinuates itself into the collective consciousness and memory of Rhodesia's colonised subjects; their histories haunted by the knowledge of the brutality inflicted on those who defied colonial authority. The patrol of the police vans driven by "white men with batons, ready to use them" (47) serves as a constant reminder of colonial authority and the violence it can inflict on 'disobedient' subjects. In this omnipresent culture of violence, the inhabitants of Makokoba are perpetually threatened with brutality and death: "Sidojiwe E2, the longest street in Makokoba, is fresh with all kinds of

desperate wounds. Bulawayo, only fifty years old, has nothing to offer but surprise; being alive is a consolation" (3).

The restrictions, which colonialism places on the external world of the colonised subalterns, become particularly dangerous when these constraints are internalised and incorporated into the oppressed subjects' psyches, determining their personhood and sense of self. Vera shows how the internalisation of oppression involves colonised subjects in the process of their own negation, paradoxically upholding the centrality and authority of the colonial master. Keenly aware of the repercussions which any transgression might incite, the black people of Bulawayo desire their own effacement from the city as a strategy for survival:

> The idea is to live within the cracks. Unnoticed and unnoticeable, offering every service but with the capacity to vanish when the task required is accomplished. So the black people learn how to move through the city with speed and due attention, to bow their heads and slide past walls […] The people walk in the city without encroaching on the pavements from which they are banned. It is difficult but they manage to crawl to their destination hidden by umbrellas and sunhats which are handed down to them for exactly this purpose… (3-4)

The passage dramatises what Fanon describes as the "epidermalisation of inferiority" (*Black Skins, White Masks* 13) of the colonised. In his essay, "The Fact of Blackness", Fanon argues that the colonised 'native' experiences great difficulty in the development of his bodily subjectivity. This is because "the slow composition of the self is undertaken in the middle of a spatial and temporal world within which the black body is regarded in terms of stereotypical malediction" (Quayson 110). Fanon's essay draws attention to the complex interrelationship between the interior spaces of the self and external configurations, noting how the malediction of the colonial master's gaze manifests in the bodily-schema of the colonised. In the above passage, Vera alludes to a law passed in Rhodesia in 1894, which banned Africans from walking on the pavements in the city. The legislation epitomised colonialism's spatial structuring of domination and Vera draws

attention to its psycho-existential effects: 'living within the cracks', Makokoba's subalterns internalise colonial notions of their inferiority and unwittingly participate in their own negation, augmenting colonial presence and absenting the margins it produces.

Economic imperatives, too, force Makokoba's people into the unwitting perpetuation of the colonial presence and authority that desires their negation. The opening passages of *Butterfly Burning* reveal the ambivalent condition of colonised subjects whose connection to the land has changed suddenly and violently. The novel opens with the description of a number of anonymous labourers, who are forced to work the land which no longer belongs to them: "The work is not their own: it is summoned. The time is not theirs: it is seized. The ordeal is their own" (2). The only choice for these men is between survival and the unwitting advancement of colonial presence on the one hand or refusal and death on the other. This predicament is focused through the character of Fumbatha, a builder, who has given twenty years of his life to the construction of Bulawayo:

> There is the pressure of survival, and money is needed for shelter. For almost twenty years Fumbatha has done nothing but build, and through this contact, Bulawayo is a city he understands closely, which he has held brick by brick […] He has built. When he is dead his hands will remain everywhere. He does not know if he is part of the larger harm. (20)

Fumbatha's participation in the building of Bulawayo is a strangely paradoxical act; one that effaces him in the act of creation. Fumbatha actively structures the spaces which exclude him and force him into the margins of Makokoba. Although registering an oblique sense of his unintentional complicity in advancing the spatial inequalities of colonial geography, "the pressure of survival" (20) offers him few alternatives. His building, ironically carried out with precision and dedication, effectively erases his history and memory from the landscape: "too little survives the intrusion, the trains, the buildings blocking every pathway[…] The village where his mother raised him is no longer there" (19).

On the one hand, then, Vera reveals how the restrictions of the colonial city space are instrumental in the production of a subaltern subjectivity devoid of autonomy and access to power. In the hostile city space, the subaltern is caught in the predicament between complicity with (and effacement by) the colonial system and death at the hands of the colonial master. However, Vera refuses to position either the subaltern or the colonial city as wholly conquered and she foregrounds the creative activities that negotiate a position out of this impasse. Her description of the playful behaviour of Makokoba's children, in the opening chapter of *Butterfly Burning*, comprises one of the most poignant examples in this regard. As they play in Makokoba's dusty streets, the children transform its impoverished, violent spaces into imaginative vistas; they "see rainbows and are assured of their own kind of permanence" (14). In this way, both the city and township spaces do not only constitute, but are in equal measure constituted by, the subjectivities of their displaced subalterns. For the women of Makokoba, too, the urban space functions as a site of creative transformation and they come to the city consciously seeking to embrace new modes of existence. The processes of urbanisation signal a departure from a traditional past, in which women's fates were irrevocably bound to men. Characters like Zandile and Deliwe consciously come to the city to assert their autonomy and claim their independence; they are "determined to find [the city's] flamboyant edges, its colour and light" (124). For these women, the city is seen as an emancipatory site "in which to reclaim and express subjectivity" (Nuttall 186).

This idea of the city as a "place of self-making" (Nuttall 189) emerges particularly prominently in the opening chapter of *The Stone Virgins*. In this novel, Vera again describes the urban cityscape of Bulawayo in intense and specific detail. The novel's opening sentence lists the many streets named after prominent colonial figures, notes several landmarks and describes the vivid colours of the city's fauna (a fusion of the indigenous and exotic). Like *Butterfly Burning,* the first chapter of *The Stone Virgins* is entirely dedicated to Bulawayo and the city is described in intricate detail before Vera introduces any of the novel's characters. In *The Stone Virgins*, however, time is accelerated and three decades (1950-1980) of Bulawayo's pre-independence existence are compressed into a single chapter. The effect is one of instability and transition, the

rigid colonial space slowly yielding to the flux of a new urban migrant culture. Movement between Bulawayo and Johannesburg is enabled by Selbourne Avenue, which links the two cities "like an umbilical chord" (5). Migrant labourers travel between the two cities, returning home to Bulawayo with the defiant, confident attitudes learnt from their time abroad:

> They can challenge the speculative, the hostile and suspicious enquiries about their presence in the city, and this, without flicking an eyelid. They click their fingers, move one knee forward, and dance mightily. To begin with, only their fingers move, tap-dance, heel to toe; with a body as free as weed in running streams. What they touch, they sing of with scorn; what they scorn, they do not touch. (5)

Unlike the self-effacing subjects who exist 'within the cracks' in *Butterfly Burning,* these men display their presence in the city "without flicking an eyelid" (5). The intercultural movement between the urban city centres incites alternative modes of behaviour and inspires new ways of challenging colonial configurations. They refuse to accept their marginalisation within the city and appropriate it as a space of creative self-definition. This reconstitution of the self in the city space is exemplified by the activities undertaken at Kay's Photo Studio on Jameson Street, a locality which provides a noteworthy opportunity for imagining and expressing alternative identities:

> She wants to go to Kay's Studio on Jameson Street where they give you a small mirror and another self flickers right past you while you stand still, and time stands still, and the self that you have prepared all week and now set free falls into the palm of your hand as easy as morning […] You are looking just fine; the city is a part of you. A lift of your arm captures its mood. (12-13)

These activities of 'self-making' effectively resist and destabilise the constraints of the colonised space and Vera reshapes the rigid colonial cityscape to reveal sites of creative

resistance and self-definition. Bulawayo's straight roads, which cut each other at sharp right angles, yield subversive and fluid spaces known as *ekoneni*:

> *Ekoneni*. A vista, and Selbourne Avenue is stretching from your forehead all the way to the stars. […] *Ekoneni* is a rendezvous, a place to meet. You cannot meet inside any of the buildings because this city is divided, entry is forbidden to black men and women, you meet outside buildings, not at doorways, entries, foyers, not beneath arched windows, not under graceful colonnades, balustrades and cornices, but in *ekoneni*. Here, you linger, ambivalent, permanent as time. You are in transit. The corner is a camouflage, a place of instancy and style; a place of protest. (10)

Vera imagines the crossings and intersections which proliferate Bulawayo's grid-like configuration as interstitial sites of resistance, forming nodal points across the city that destabilise its oppressive rigidity. The complex spatiality of *ekoneni* challenges the exclusions of colonialist geography. Here colonised subjects can embrace identities otherwise denied them, exceed their exclusion from the city's 'white spaces' or simply enjoy the pleasure of the unexpected: "Anything could be around the corner. A turn and your vision sees new light. Nothing is obscured" (10). It is a space where subjectivity can be reclaimed; to be in *ekoneni* is to be "present as time, solid and whole" (10). *Ekoneni* is subversive because it is ambiguous; it is a place of visibility and presence for Bulawayo's subalterns which simultaneously 'camouflages' them from the colonial master's oppressive gaze. It is formed by the very "straight and unbending" (5) streets which announce the restrictive presence of the coloniser, but it exceeds and resists his systems of control.

As a space that is at once contained by the geography of the centre but that exceeds its ideology, *ekoneni* constitutes what Gillian Rose describes as "paradoxical space" (159). Such spaces, Rose argues, are both defined by the dominant system and "[dream] of something quite beyond its reach" (159). As a paradoxical site, *ekoneni* is metonymic of the larger city space as it is imagined in Vera's prose. Like *ekoneni,* the Bulawayo of *The*

Stone Virgins and *Butterfly Burning* is at once a site of subjection and creative resistance, exceeding the racial and ideological restrictions of the colonial system that produced it. Bulawayo is neither a static nor homogeneous locality, but one of complex and sometimes contradictory relations. In this dynamic space, the subaltern is not constituted as a wholly suppressed subject, but one that is involved in a constant dialectic of submission to and resistance against the dominant system. The spaces that are mapped for the subaltern in Vera's prose are thus ambiguous, interstitial sites that illuminate the complex positionality of the displaced subaltern.

In its construction of subversive sites like *ekoneni,* Vera's prose inscribes ambiguity and paradox into colonialism's rigid spaces, to allow for the expression of suppressed aspects of subaltern identity. This technique is not only developed spatially in her prose, but operates at several different levels in *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins*. Vera deploys a similar strategy, for example, in her representation of music as a counter-hegemonic practice. In the same way that *ekoneni'*s paradoxical spatiality allows a degree of freedom for Bulawayo's colonised inhabitants, music is able to resist the dominant system through its fluid ambiguity, articulating versions of subaltern history and identity suppressed by colonial discourse. In both texts, music expresses forbidden desires and yearnings, allowing subaltern subjects to imagine alternative and emancipatory modes of existence. In the opening chapter of *The Stone Virgins,* Louis Armstrong's music is directly connected to the hope for freedom from colonial rule:

> They want [Louis Armstrong] to be heard above ground – somewhere. This is the day they are waiting for. Not for Satchmo to come, and go, and play their *Skokiaan* leaving them breathless and blue, but for this man to carry their own desires above ground – somewhere. Not to cover their sorrow with their hats, like that, their trumpet covered with a hat, like that. […] All they want is to come and go as they please. […] They would stay gone if they could establish this one condition, to come and go, as they please. Satchmo. (9)

Vera's exploration of the transgressive value of music in the restrictive colonial space is developed in particularly vivid detail in *Butterfly Burning,* which is infused throughout with the subversive and redemptive rhythms of *kwela* music. From the novel's opening passages, music acts as an antidote to exploitation and oppression under colonial control. For the labourers forced to work the land under physically gruelling conditions, music offers a curative respite: "As for healing, they have music, its curing harmony as sudden as it is sustained" (3). The lively harmonies of *kwela* explicitly counterpoint the moribund stasis of the colonial space and exceed its restrictive boundaries: descriptions of "empty city taverns which have NO BLACKS signs, WHITES ONLY signs and CLOSED SIGNS" are superseded by the refrain "there is music" (6). This music is the product of the improbable ingenuity of an impoverished people, who engineer "incessantly bold" (6) and intangible sounds from a "worn out handmade guitar" (75). The improvisational quality of *kwela* attests to the resistant creativity of marginalised people, who can never be wholly silenced by the dominant system.

In the novel, *kwela* provides one of the few modes of resistance which can be partaken of without suffering the threat of violence.[31] Music "clear[s] the night of all its troubles and sets the heart free" (72). It provides a release for repressed desires and inspires tentative dreams of a better future: "…the music is a dream too true to enter so they enter it, enter with hope" (74). When *kwela* starts playing, "the room explodes" (74) into frenzied movement:

> Two agile female dancers pull their white cotton skirts with blue dots high up and hold them way over their swinging waists then collide with the music, rounded hips twisting, the body rocks with one full spasm and the neck a pillar smoothed with the bright light, their eyes close in a free caress, an evocation […] with twirling raised skirts and sizzling armpits, their heels turned outward, spinning, pushing back and in front with quick dizzying steps […] The song ends in laughter and joyful rest. (74-5)

[31] Love may also be considered a mode of resistance, offering couples respite from oppressive realities. However, as shall be discussed later in the following chapter, heterosexual love necessarily involves gender oppression in the context of the novel.

The accelerated rhythm here is suggestive of the unbridled quality of *kwela* and the liberated, frenzied dance it inspires. The irrepressible movement of the *kwela* dance enables a momentary transcendence of the physical and psychological restrictions of the colonial space: "they dance with a joy that is free, that has no other urgency but the sheer truth of living, the not-being-here of this here-place" (73-4). *Kwela*, then, is constructed in the novel as a transformative articulation which protects Makokoba's colonised populace against "absorption by the places they inhabit" (Vera, "Prison" 50).

Although *kwela* facilitates self-expression and affords a provisional freedom for otherwise marginalised subjects, it is by no means expressive only of a utopian vision of emancipation and autonomy. *Kwela* is expressly constructed as having multiple, shifting and sometimes contradictory meanings: "Within this music, they soar higher than clouds; sink deeper than stones in water" (3). Its mutable quality is suggestive of the highly volatile character of life in the township, where the living can vanish in an instant, through forced removals, violent murders or random explosions. The transcendent imaginings inspired by *kwela*'s energetic rhythms underline the pain and subjection of everyday reality, so that it "brings a symphony of understandings, then within that, other desperate confusions" (4). This disjuncture inspires a feeling of intense vulnerability:

> Kwela strips you naked. Anything that reminds of pride can be forgotten in the emptiness introduced. A claim abandoned. A lover lost. It is the body addressed in its least of possible heights. A stone thrust. The knees down and the baton falls across the neck and shoulders. Kwela. Climb on. Move. Turn or twist or…move. No pause is allowed, and no expectation of grace. Kwela. Cut, pull, bend. (5)

Kwela simultaneously inspires the emancipatory movement of dance and recalls the unrelenting motion of forced labour, "cut, pull, bend". It reveals the "bittersweet paradoxes" (Attree 72) of life in Makokoba where, despite the creativity and artistry of its marginalised people, there can be no absolute reprieve from colonial oppression. While it

may be possible to "lean on music" (4) and be "swallowed by a song" (4), *kwela* is also a truth-teller, revealing the deeply felt suffering of a subjugated people.

Violet Lunga has argued that, because of its ambivalent disposition, it may be problematic to consider *kwela* as a counter-hegemonic practice. After noting that "sadness and a peculiar suffering" (Lunga 195) can be detected in the *kwela* tunes, she argues that "singing ceases to be either counter-hegemonic or capitulation but rather announces a margin of ambiguity inhabited by the characters in the novel" (195). Contrary to Lunga's assertion, I propose that it is precisely through its ambiguity that *kwela* achieves its disruptive effects. As a shifting and mutable articulation, it cannot be suppressed by the dominant system and thus allows for the enunciation of subaltern history and identity in the novel. The fragmented, complex and sometimes contradictory experiences of colonised subjects are captured in *kwela*'s volatile and discontinuous rhythms:

> This is Kwela. Embracing choices that are already decided. Deciding which circumstance has been omitted and which set free, which one claimed, which one marked, branded and owned. The beauty of eyelids closing; a hand closing; and a memory collapsing. Kwela means to climb into waiting police jeeps. This word alone has been fully adapted to do marvellous things. It can carry so much more than a word should be asked to carry; rejection, distaste, surrender, envy. And full desire. (3)

Kwela is at once defiant, aggressive, hopeful and emancipatory, as well as mournful of the habitual suffering experienced under colonial domination. As Lizzy Attree has argued, *kwela*'s shifting meanings "enact a defiance of definition, a refusal to be pinned down" (73). The complex mutability of *kwela* refuses the static definitions and closed meanings which colonial discourse imposes on the individuals it subjugates, defining them as a homogeneous and ignorant 'other'. Because of its flexibility and adaptability, *kwela* is able to suggest the plural and discontinuous condition of oppressed and marginalised subjects. As such, it can be argued that it protects the heterogeneity of the

margins and is able to register what Gramsci considers to be the "necessarily fragmented and episodic" (*Prison Notebooks* 54) character of subaltern history. As colonial intrusions efface origins and identity from the physical landscape, the deeply ambivalent and complex histories of the marginalised are recorded in the alternatively discordant and harmonious sounds of *kwela*.

Vera's descriptions of *kwela* offer a richly imagined portrait of the emancipatory and curative potential which art holds for oppressed subjects. As it is represented in the novel, *kwela* is able to negotiate the difficulties which Spivak contends are involved in enunciating subalternity. It is not a representational system which attempts to 'speak for' or 'as' Rhodesia's colonised subjects. Rather, it is an authentic signifying practice emanating from within the margins; one that displays and amplifies its episodic and dislocated condition. It thus provides a mode of expression through which Bulawayo's subaltern can 'speak back' to the dominant system. In its resistant ambiguity, it is not amenable to incorporation by the ruling hegemony but appropriates, undermines and exceeds the colonial master's discourse. In this regard, *kwela* can be understood as an example of "performativity" as it is described in Judith Butler's terms:

> Performativity describes this relation of being implicated in that which one opposes, this turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power, to establish a kind of political contestation that is not 'pure' opposition, a 'transcendence' of contemporary relations of power, but a difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably impure. (*Bodies That Matter* 241)

Butler's formulation suggests the transgressive value of contestatory practices which work within the dominant system to resist it. By refusing to position itself in immutable contradistinction to the dominant system, *kwela* provides a mode of resistance which is not sublimated by the colonial threat of violence, although it emphatically confers visibility on colonised subjects and their painful histories. As such, *kwela* can negotiate a position out of the predicament between complicity with the colonial system and death at the hands of the colonial master which I described earlier. It is able to re-inscribe

subalternity whilst acknowledging its precariousness, providing the possibility of creative self-definition while concomitantly tracking the dangers and difficulties attendant on such acts of agency.

As a performative articulation that works from within the dominant system to disrupt it, *kwela* music is analogous to Vera's poetic style itself. Lizzy Attree draws this comparisson in her essay "Language, Kwela Music and Modernity in *Butterfly Burning*", in which she argues that the descriptions of *kwela* in *Butterfly Burning* "can be read as a meta-fiction" (73) of Vera's creative use of language. She suggests that "…music is a creative device that exposes the innate role of language in the authorial quest for healing, resistance and freedom" (73). Attree compares Vera's experimentations with language to the improvisational play of the *kwela* musician: "The musician is limited by notes, the writer by words, but syncopation resists the regular beat, varying rhythms with unexpected interventions that disrupt a consistent, monotonous rhythm" (73). Like *kwela* music, the language of poetic metaphor, which dominates Vera's prose, is able to yield new meanings from existing forms to "remould experience in a language transformed from within" (Attree 73).

The dynamics of Vera's poetic prose are usefully elucidated by Attree's comparison, which suggests the value of aesthetic experimentation in illuminating marginalised and suppressed discourse. In my discussion which follows, I suggest that the "transformative power of language" (Attree 73), which Attree discerns in Vera's prose, can be elucidated as the disruption of the 'symbolic function' of language. I extend Attree's comparison to suggest that Vera's aesthetic play, like the ambiguous and transgressive rhythms of *kwela*, is able to negotiate a subaltern 'speaking back' to the dominant system. Again, the transgressive dynamic operating here should not be understood as a "purely" oppositional one that enables a "transcendence" of existing power relations, to borrow Butler's terms. Vera's prose does not assume a fixed ideological position as either 'anti-colonial' or 'anti-patriarchal', but displays and amplifies a variety of discourses and knowledges which these dominant discourses seek to suppress. Like the music of *kwela*, poetic language provides a complex articulation of the ambivalences and contradictions of

subaltern subjectivity, denying the reduction of marginalised subjects by the dominant system.

In his essay "Language, voice and presence in *Under the Tongue* and *Without a Name*", Kizito Muchemwa argues that a stress on "homogeneity rather than multiplicity" (7) is characteristically developed in Vera's prose. He notes her use of an autodiegetic narrator in *Under the Tongue* and *Without a Name*, who tells the story from a "single and fixed position" (6); a position which is ideologically aligned to the point of view of the main character. A similar technique is deployed in *Butterfly Burning*, in which the third person narrator is attached to Phephelaphi's narrative perspective. Although the anonymous narrator initially occupies a more worldly position that exposes Phephelaphi's innocence and naïvety, by the end of the novel the two perspectives seamlessly converge. For Muchemwa, this conflation of perspectives is problematic, as it does not allow for a critical distance to exist between "the third person narrator/writer" (6)[32] and her main characters. "This leads," he argues, "to the accent on an essentialist position regarding the question of language, voice and presence in Vera's fiction" (6).

Contrary to Muchemwa's position, I argue that Vera engages language in an intimate and productive way that allows for the emergence of the plural aspects of subaltern identity, and deliberately avoids occupying an 'essentialist position' with regard to questions of subjectivity, voice and presence in the margins. For Muchemwa, plurality is primarily achieved through the production of multiple narrative perspectives, which generate a dialogue between varying class and gender ideologies. These divergent perspectives allow for the articulation of the complex identities and experiences of subjects who exist within the margins.[33] In *Butterfly Burning*, I argue, plurality is achieved through a

[32] Significantly, Muchemwa conflates Vera's authorial position with that of her third person narrator in his reading of her narrative style. While a discussion of the difficulties and problems that arise out of this conflation are beyond the scope of this study, it is important to note the distinction between the author and narrator, and acknowledge that they do not necessarily inhabit the same ideological position. The importance of maintaining this distinction becomes particularly evident when reading *The Stone Virgins,* where Sibaso, one of Vera's first person narrators, articulates a morally problematic version of events.

[33] Importantly, this strategy is used in *The Stone Virgins* which was published after Muchemwa's article. Later in this chapter, I consider the effects and significances of Vera's use of the divergent narrative perspectives of Sibaso and Nonceba.

different, but no less effective strategy: through a manifestation of disruptive semiotic elements in the text's organisation. Through its many ambivalences and aporias, *Butterfly Burning* dismantles the binary that opposes a dominant speaking subject to a marginalised, silent 'other' and the associated dichotomies of civilised/uncivilised, knowledge/ignorance and agent/victim which this dominant binary implies. These semiotic disruptions articulate the heterogeneous, plural and provisional disposition of subalternity which, in Gramsci and Spivak's formulation, is "always emerging and in flux" (Lowe 193).

Through a careful destabilisation of the symbolic function of language, its emphasis on univocal meanings and its rejection of difference, Vera's prose provisionally insinuates the alterity of the margins into the realm of the viable, visible and proper. Such moments are achieved, not only at pivotal points in the novel's narrative progression, but often at less significant moments through a cursory metaphor:

> Another word enters the air and absolves what is hidden beneath each moving arm, what builds up under the brow. The word draws another and the two make honey. We are here. This is said urgently and with wisdom. We are here. The here of it and the now of it make honey. (62)

The pattern of Vera's metaphor here, taken from a passage describing the strenuous labour of Fumbatha and his fellow builders, is unusual, even for the reader accustomed to the idiosyncrasies of her poetic register by this stage of the novel. Honey becomes an effective metaphor for the succour provided by words; by the speech and song the men share as they endure their labour, but the comparison initially strikes us as odd, perhaps even eccentric. These categories of comparison exceed a symbolic logic, as there is nothing immediately apparent in either term which invites the association. The spontaneity of the metaphor suggests a degree of difference and singularity existing within the margins, which cannot be registered in the causal relationships posited by symbolic textual relations. Such unusual metaphoric configurations effect a defamiliarisation of language to capture what Vera calls "those intangibles" (in Hunter,

"Truth of the Struggle" 84); a range of complex experiences and emotions which exceed stable symbolic categories.

The characters in *Butterfly Burning* inhabit what is conceived of as a moment of temporal suspension, in the "pause" and "expectation" (1) foregrounded in the novel's opening sentence. Set during the period between Zimabawe's first and second *Chimurengas, Butterfly Burning* imaginatively recreates a period of the country's history in which the colonial administration's hold over the country was at its strongest.[34] This is not, however, a time of surrender. Vera shows that, even within those oppressed subjects who seem least able to change their fate, like Fumbatha, there exists a growing resistance to the dominant system:

> The sky releases him. Fumbatha hears the men beside him and returns to his work […] They are consumed but not resigned. Surrender, physical, visible, sharing the same axis of rotation as resistance. Each with an equal momentum, each with the possibility of ending: suddenly, abruptly. Each an emotion […] In water, an oar held firm in one place builds a current that makes a whole vessel turn in another direction: the power of inertia. (61)

Vera dismantles the binary between resistance and surrender, in order to imagine different relations of power operating within the colonised terrain. These men are not wholly defeated, despite their subordination to the colonial master, and Vera locates the ambivalent interstices from which resistance to the dominant system may emerge. Within their submission exists the possibility of resistance, like the current which gathers around an inert oar to change the direction of its vessel:

> Fumbatha's body bends to pick up an instrument and his shoulders swing to throw an object; this is not submission. An anger is gathered in the most minute solitude of his mind, in the folds of history most charitable to oneself. It is simultaneous

[34] The period was not without its uprisings. The first Railway Strike and the General Strike of 1948 occurred at this time. The former is briefly referred to on p.77 but no mention is made of the latter at any point in the novel.

> with the forced action, it precedes and follows in the familiar way in which sound follows the fall of an object on a hard surface. (61)

Vera's narratives show that, within the "folds of history" (61), exists not a homogeneous oppressed 'other', but the complex ambivalence of the margins in which subordination and subjection exist concomitantly with knowledge and resistance. By insisting on the simultaneity of submission and resistance within the oppressed subject, Vera offers us a portrait of an emergent subjectivity which, although inextricably implicated in the colonial system, is discretely part of the gathering resistance against it.

Through its rejection of binary categories and dualistic thinking, Vera's prose illuminates the tensions and instabilities constitutive of subalternity. Her characters, reduced or excluded by governing epistemes, do not occupy a stable position in the socio-symbolic, but are continually distanced by the dominant system from identity and subjectivity. They inhabit a liminal, interstitial space; caught at various points between life and death, speech and silence, identity and its negation: "The dead as dead; the living equally dying and bewildered" (8). Stylistically, this unstable positionality is suggestively captured in the discordance between Vera's delicate poetic register and the brutal histories it describes:

> The men are left up in the tree all day and all night. The moon gives them a living light that rises like a soft layer of smoke from their bodies, a spiralling mist in which the skin melts off […] Mist ascends like luxurious tears and claims the men. They are swimmers, in the mist pulling up and down the tree, like floating wood. Swimmers with no arms. Floating and forever dipping down. Sinking in a tree which has become a lake of light. (7)

The passage describes the execution of seventeen men, hanged for their participation in the 1896 anti-colonial uprisings. Through their melodic rhythms and poetic imagery, these descriptions claim dignity and presence for those historically silenced and humiliated by a brutally oppressive system. Vera refuses the absolute defeat of these men

even in death: “they can see even though all their senses have been silenced” (7) and “the women keep the most vital details of their men buried in their mouths” (9). The descriptions deliberately foreground the creativity and beauty that have been lost to a history of subjection: “The limbs smooth and taut, of dancers in a song with no words spoken. A dance denied. A blossom in the wind. A dark elegy” (9). These majestic images refuse colonialism’s dehumanisation of the subaltern, insisting on humanity and dignity where the dominant system posits its negation. Subalternity is granted the textual amplitude it is historically denied by the dominant system.

Vera’s technique here has, however, a double effect. On the one hand, the beguiling and sympathetic descriptions move the subaltern into a position of authoritativeness in the text, enlivening our awareness of history’s unspoken narratives. The passage demonstrates an interest in bringing the subaltern into representation by conferring visibility on a forgotten history. Yet, on the other hand, the compositional technique signals the thresholds of language and the limits of representation. The dissonance between the elegantly crafted lyricism and its macabre subject matter amplifies the gap between the signifier and its referent, indicating that there are areas of experience which language cannot ‘reach’. Indeed, the key element in this sequence, the moment of execution itself, remains unrepresented and exists only in the text as a silence or aporia. This aporia complicates any simplistic notion that the voice of the marginalised is seamlessly reclaimed in Vera’s prose. While there is a constant search for a language to ‘open a space’ for the enunciation of subalternity in the text, these silences simultaneously acknowledge the spaces where the subaltern’s speaking *cannot* be retrieved in language and, hence, from history, where the “voices of drowned men cannot be heard” (7). By calling into question the efficacy of representation itself, Vera’s prose does not allow for the easy appropriation of subaltern speech, but always points to the oppressive systems responsible for subaltern silence.

Poetic language thus allows for what can be termed a ‘provisionally recuperative’ version of subaltern history to emerge in *Butterfly Burning*. In its disruption of symbolic textual relations, Vera’s inventive prose challenges colonialist historiography and its inscription

of subalternity as the silent 'other' of the master's discourse. However, the semiotic disturbances, manifested in the text's ambivalences and aporias, do not allow for the seamless reclamation of subaltern speech, but instead signal that a stable position in the socio-symbolic cannot be unproblematically claimed for the historically displaced subaltern. This dialectic is most pointedly foregrounded in Phephelaphi's narrative and her struggle to attain an autonomous enunciative position; to experience, as the anonymous narrator describes it, "a birth of her own" (68). In the following chapter, I turn my attention to her narrative and Vera's handling of the complexities of gendered subalternity. Before pursuing this line of inquiry, however, I wish to focus on *The Stone Virgins* and, in particular, Vera's depiction of the 'dissident' Sibaso. This is a controversial aspect of the novel, which has significant implications for my analysis of poetic language and subalternity in Vera's prose.

The figure of Sibaso in *The Stone Virgins* represents a manifestation of the subaltern subject-position, both unfathomed in Vera's previous works and untheorised in Spivak's writings about subalternity. Spivak primarily conceives of the subaltern as a subject disinherited by governing epistemes; one that is thus unable to access hegemonic power structures. This powerlessness logically renders the subaltern a victim of the violence and brutality exercised by the dominant system. Spivak is particularly concerned with the subject-position of the subaltern in the postcolonial state, noting that the subject who has been twice dispossessed under the processes of colonisation and decolonisation inhabits a particularly precarious position: "The subject-position of the citizen of a recently decolonised 'nation' is epistemically fractured" ("More on Power/ Knowledge" 47). Spivak's comments here hint at the dangers which decolonisation might pose for the subjectivity of the twice disinherited subaltern, but she does not elaborate on this point in any detail. It is precisely the dangerous volatility of this "epistemically fractured" subject-position that is explored in Vera's depiction of the ex-guerrilla combatant, Sibaso, in *The Stone Virgins*. The novel reveals that the failure of decolonisation to restore subjects disinherited under colonialism does not only result in the renewed suffering and victimisation of the subaltern, but can also produce brutal, unstable subjects, who retaliate against their disinheritance with a savage violence.

Sibaso's narrative occurs three years after the war of liberation, during the *Gukurahundi*. Independence has not brought about its promised restitution, but only the renewed subjection of Shona 'quasi-nationalism'. As an ex-ZIPRA guerrilla, Sibaso is targeted by Mugabe's Fifth Brigade and he flees back into the hills of Gulati, where he fought for so many years during the war of liberation. Disinherited by the nation for which he fought, Sibaso's bitter disillusionment fuels a bloodthirsty vengeance, and he inflicts terror on the community of civilians who have failed to grant him refuge. He appears for the first time in the novel in chapter six, in which he decapitates Thenjiwe and rapes and mutilates her sister, Nonceba, symbolically cutting off her lips before leaving her for dead. Importantly, Vera chooses a disquietingly intimate lexicon to describe Sibaso in this scene and he appears in the image of a romantic hero, 'cradling' his victim Nonceba in his arms, "like a bride" (65). Moreover, his narrative that follows is lent the aesthetic power and beauty of Vera's developed metaphoric register, as well as the intimacy of a first person narration infrequently used in her prose. Accordingly, several critics have read Sibaso's narrative as an empathetic vision of the dehumanising effects of war. Eva Hunter argues that "the point of the aesthetic force in the representation of a man such as Sibaso seems to be that, although severely damaged, he is still a human and not a monster" ("War Victims" 2). Terence Ranger detects a similarly redemptive impulse governing Vera's representation of Sibaso, when he argues that she "is not content merely to consign the perpetrator Sibaso to motiveless wickedness. Instead she enters into his innermost thoughts" ("History has its ceiling" 209).

This reading of Sibaso's narrative as redemptive and recuperative is, I believe, problematic for a number of reasons. First, it is particularly difficult to reconcile with the novel's meditation on the suffering of the victim, Nonceba, whose narrative continuously interrupts Sibaso's monologue. Second, it introduces an ethical dilemma which Kizito Muchemwa articulates when he argues that "Vera comes very close to forgiving the rapist and killer by [disclosing the] direct personal motives in the crimes he commits, and by placing him too close to myth" ("History, memory and writing" 201). For Muchemwa, the 'pity' for the perpetrator that he, like Hunter, discerns in *The Stone Virgins*, comes

dangerously close to providing absolution for Sibaso's savage actions. I argue that Vera's inclusion of Sibaso's narrative is not an attempt to redeem a murderer and rapist, but that it provides a complex engagement with, and dismantling of, the 'grand narrative of the nation' disseminated by ZANU (PF)'s patriotic history. By including Sibaso's monologue in *The Stone Virgins,* Vera explores the war of liberation and the violence of the *Gukurahundi* from the perspective of a so-called 'dissident'; a point of view expunged from the government's discourses of national unity. Moreover, I argue that the lyricism, which Vera uses in her descriptions of Sibaso, is not directed at abating the horror of his acts though prompting the reader's empathy, but that, on the contrary, it pointedly and deliberately accentuates it. The deployment of poetic language in Sibaso's narrative does not effect the redemptive vision it allowed in *Butterfly Burning*, but instead articulates an abject and dystopian vision of post-independence Zimbabwe.

Like *Butterfly Burning, The Stone Virgins* contains passages in which acts of extreme violence are described in densely lyrical and elegant terms. Vera's description of Sibaso's rape and torture of the Gumede sisters appears stylistically similar to her representation of the hanging of seventeen men in *Butterfly Burning*, which I discussed earlier. In both passages, the moment of trauma is deferred by images of immense grace and beauty inversely proportionate to the intensity of the brutality being conducted, but the passage in which Sibaso rapes and kills does not allow a recuperative narrative of subaltern history to emerge. This passage is irredeemably catastrophic and abysmal and, in the final image of Thenjiwe's decapitated corpse, there is no possibility of restitution:

> Alone, afterwards, [Nonceba] turns Thenjiwe's body over, and pulls the blouse down to cover the wet breast. Wordless. She slides her fingers under the red cloth. Her touch is warm and longs for life, this lingering heat in the flesh, this threshold. Wordless. (72)

Thenjiwe's brutal execution is metonymic of the innumerable unrecorded atrocities perpetrated during the *Gukurahundi* and foregrounds the failure of decolonisation to bring about its promised redemption. Read in this context, the rape and murder scene

represents the perversion of the ideology of national liberation, which promised the glorious restitution of all subjects disinherited by colonialism. As Lene Bull-Christiansen has argued, it is this idea of the perversion of the anti-colonial spirit that crucially informs Vera's representation of the *Gukurahundi,* and she deliberately distorts the nationalist symbols of the liberation war to disclose a nightmarish vision of post-independence Zimbabwe:

> The war begins. A curfew is declared. A state of emergency. No movement is allowed. The ceasefire ceases. It begins in the streets, the burying of memory. The bones rising. Rising. Every road out of Bulawayo is covered with soldiers and police, teeming like ants. Road blocks. Bombs. Landmines. Hand-grenades. Memory is lost. Independence ends. Guns rise. Rising anew. In 1981. (59)

The "bones rising" (59) allude to the myth of Nehanda and the final words she is believed to have spoken before being hanged by the colonialist government for her participation in the 1896 anti-colonial uprisings: "My bones will rise to win back freedom from the Europeans" (Lan 6).[35] As I mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, Nehanda became a venerated symbol of the anti-colonial struggle, representing the "inevitable but so long awaited victory of the Shona over their oppressors" (Lan 6). The myth of Nehanda continues to uphold the notion of the anti-colonial struggle as a spiritualised quest, guided and abetted by the wisdom of the ancestors. In *The Stone Virgins,* however, Vera shows that the anti-colonial spirit of redemption embodied by Nehanda has been desecrated by the *Gukurahundi,* and the bones that rise now represent the horror of Shona 'quasi-nationalism' (Bull-Christiansen 90). Vera represents both 'dissident' and Fifth Brigade violence in her exploration of this period of her country's history, suggesting that accountability for Zimbabwe's post-independence suffering lies with both camps. The post-independence war is represented as the perversion of the redemptive spirit of the first and second *Chimurengas* and it is Sibaso that exemplifies this desecration:

[35] In his study of the role of spirit mediums in the liberation war, David Lan quotes Nehanda's final statement as it has been handed down through oral history.

> …his body assumes a defensive position; the desire to attack. If he loses an enemy, he invents another. This is his purge. He is almost clean. He seems to have a will, an idea which only he can execute. Of course, *this idea involves desecration, the violation of kindness*. (74; my emphasis)

Sibaso is a profane figure and his rape of Nonceba can be understood as the "violation of kindness" (74), inflicting harm with the intensity and intimacy that an ardent lover might nurture.[36] He is thus the perversion of a romantic hero (Bull-Christiansen 92) and the aesthetic power that Vera lends to his characterisation serves not to redeem him, but to emphasise his profanity. The poetic descriptions of his savage brutality evoke horror in the reader, because they represent the 'violation' of the stable symbolic categories which separate good from evil and kindness from malice. They denote, to phrase it in Kristeva's terms, a state of 'nightmarish' abjection.

Kristeva uses the term 'abjection' to describe the process through which the subject delineates the borders between self and other (*Powers of Horror* 3-8). The abject is what is excluded from the subject's notion of its "clean and proper" (Grosz 71) rational self: its narcissistic identification with the mother, for example, as well as the undesirable residues of its corporeal processes (vomit, excrement and blood are among Kristeva's graphic examples). The abject, Kristeva stresses, may be expelled by the subject, but it is never successfully banished altogether. It continues to "hover at the periphery of one's existence, constantly challenging one's own tenuous borders of selfhood" (McAfee 46). The abject, then, is what the subject can neither tolerate nor proscribe; it both repulses and beseeches us (*Powers of Horror* 4-5). For Kristeva, it is manifested foremost by that which

> …disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite, the traitor, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a saviour […]

[36] The similarities in Vera's description of Thenjiwe's lover, Cephas (who also appears as a 'romantic hero'), and the significances thereof will be discussed in detail in the following chapter.

> Abjection is immoral, sinister, scheming and shady: a terror that dissembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses your body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you… (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 4)

Sibaso is precisely such an ambiguous and composite figure; terrifying, because he cannot be integrated within any normative system of signs. He is both victim and perpetrator, simultaneously inhabiting the realms of the living and the dead: "I enter the lives of the dead […] I inhale their last breath. I share their last memory" (96). He represents, to borrow a phrase from Kristeva, the horror of "death infecting life" (*Powers of Horror* 4). This state of abjection must be distinguished from the liminality which I discerned in *Butterfly Burning*; the latter representing the productive disruption of stable symbolic categories, while the former enacts their sinister perversion. For Kristeva, abjection represents a psychologically dangerous stage in the subject's development. The subject, who fails to abject the 'other' from the 'self' and "secure differentiation between subject and object" (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 7), inhabits a state of borderline psychosis. Unable to negotiate the differences manifest in symbolic thinking, this 'borderline' subject, or "deject", has only a tenuous hold on reality (McAfee 51):

> The one by whom the abject exists is thus a deject […] the space that engrosses the deject, the excluded, is never *one,* nor *homogeneous,* nor *totalizable,* but essentially divisible, foldable and catastrophic […] the deject is in short a stray. He is on a journey, during the night, the end of which keeps receding. (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 8; original emphasis)

The manifestation of the abject in Sibaso's monologue thus articulates the deranged condition of his psyche, which has been irredeemably fractured by the horrors of war: "His mind is like a net and each event falls through it like a stone" (74). His narrative, which ensues during his rape of Nonceba, represents his attempt to organise and rationalise his experiences of war, and to articulate a version of history which will absolve his savage bloodlust: "I wipe my palm clean. Our country needs this kind of hero

who has a balm for his own wounds carried between lip and tongue […] who is in flight toward an immaculate truth" (75). But the horrors of war defy logic and coherence, and Sibaso's narrative, as it is perceived by Nonceba, is articulated in an idiom of fragmentation and discontinuity:

> Spider legs, he insists. In my fear of him I [Nonceba] envy this kind of perfect truth which sounds exactly like a well-constructed lie. While he closes his eyes I have the sensation that I am drowning, and see a multitude of spider legs stretch into the darkness. That is the other strange fact about spiders, their ability to walk on water while humans drown. (73)

Sibaso, incapable of using culture's symbolic modes, enunciates his version of the war and history in densely metaphoric terms, primarily through the motif of the spider, which recurs at several critical points in his monologue. The spider of Sibaso's monologue does not, however, lend itself to a single interpretation; it is an unstable signifier and its meanings shift and fracture during the course of his narrative. There is no single "immaculate truth" (75) that can be discerned from Sibaso's monologue and Vera does not provide a unitary narrative which absolves or redeems him. His narrative, on the contrary, reveals a state of perverse abjection, in which brutality is conflated with intimacy, rape with love and murder is understood as a redemptive sacrifice. Through his distorted monologue, Vera negates the restorative trajectory of patriotic history, to reveal decolonisation as a violent and brutal process that produces psychologically fractured and epistemically displaced subjects.

Vera's choice of the motif of the spider as a metaphoric device through which to articulate a dystopian vision of the war and its aftermath is far from arbitrary and its full significance, as Bull-Christiansen has argued (97-102), is best understood when it is read contrapuntally, against her use of the motif in her first novel, *Nehanda*. In this novel, Vera articulates an affirming vision of the anti-colonial struggle that draws on a traditional spiritual mythology in its representation of the first *Chimurenga*. The image of the spider similarly emerges as a dominant motif, but here it is used to signify Nehanda

and her role as a beneficent spirit guiding the anti-colonial struggle. As she moves through the forest, Nehanda is compared to a spider, weaving the past and future together in her wisdom:

> The spider weaves silence out of patience. Sending spindly legs into the future, it weaves all of time into its hungering belly. […] The spider moves gently through the insect-filled air. Weaving riddles into the air, the spider claims its space from branch to branch, in the armpit of the solid trunk. (*Nehanda* 89)

In her astute analysis of Vera's symbolism in *Nehanda*, Bull-Christiansen has argued that, in this passage, "the spider stretches its legs into the future and resembles Nehanda's role as a spatio-temporal liminal figure that resides both in the future and in the immediate struggle. […] The spider-Nehanda signifies the anti-colonial struggle" (97). Through its mythical descriptions of the 'spider-Nehanda', the novel articulates a spiritual schema, which asserts the continuity of the Zimbabwean revolutionary tradition, uniting the anti-colonial struggles of the past and future under the guiding spirit of the ancestors. In this regard, *Nehanda* affirms the notion of the anti-colonial struggle as an a-temporal spiritualised quest; a vision disseminated by the pre-independence nationalist movements and more recently appropriated by ZANU (PF)'s patriotic history.

It is this unitary, spiritualised narrative of the anti-colonial struggle that is shattered in *The Stone Virgins*, giving way to the bitter disillusionment and blood-lust of Sibaso's narrative. For Sibaso, the nationalist dream of the past has proven an idealistic and false vision; its failure represented by the dead, crushed spider that falls out of his copy of Solomon Mutswairo's novel *Feso*:

> …I decide to open the book. I search the small print on its opening pages. I feel an explosion in my head. I hold onto the fence of the school, my mouth dry. Held between the old pages is a folded map. Creased. There is a single arrow on it. My escape. Those many years ago. Between the map and the first page of the book I find a crushed spider weighed down by time […] I lift the sheet and this shape

> falls off the web of words, a fossil floating in noon light, perforated like a dry leaf. (110-11)

Like the spiders themselves, Vera's allusion to Mutswairo's novel is a pointed and deliberate choice that recalls the idealism of the nationalist movement. Originally written in Zezuru (a prominent Shona dialect) and later translated into English, *Feso* was the first novel to be written by a Zimbabwean author. It enjoyed wide readership as a set text in African schools in Rhodesia, before it was banned by the Rhodesian Front government in the seventies (see Ranger, "History has its ceiling" 213; Lan 6). First published in 1957, the novel is set in an unspecified pre-colonial era and tells the story of a Shona victory over an authoritarian African tribe, led by a despot referred to as 'White Sword'. In encouraging resistance against the oppressive rule of an alien power, the novel's political allegorical message was clear and the text quickly became "symbolic of Zimbabwe's black struggle against white domination" (Ricard 96). In its original version, the novel contains detailed descriptions of pre-colonial Africa as a social Utopia; a vision upheld as a glorious ideal by the growing nationalist movement of the sixties and seventies (Bull-Christiansen 52; 98). It is this vision that inspired the young Sibaso to leave university and join the liberation war, but which, three years after independence, is revealed to be a vision devoid of substance, like the desiccated spider that falls out of *Feso*. Although its "charcoal perfect" (111) outline remains, the vision of *Feso* is no more than a relic of an idealistic past; a "fossil floating in noon light" (111).

The discovery of the crushed spider between the pages of *Feso* leads Sibaso to think about the spiders he encountered in the sacred Gulati caves during the war of liberation. Like the spiders in *Nehanda,* they are associated with mythical continuity of the revolutionary struggle, weaving webs that are flexible, "just like time" (111):

> Spider webs. I have seen spider webs in the rain, in Gulati. There is more than one rainbow in a web. The most complex web carries many rainbows. No matter how heavy a rainbow is, a rainbow cannot break the back of a spider: a spider's web does not break. It stretches, just like time. (111)

Like the 'spider-Nehanda', the spiders of Gulati metaphorically articulate a mythical temporal-schema that places Sibaso in communion with the past and future, their webs holding the 'rainbow-like' visions of an idyllic post-war future. After independence, Sibaso still attempts to derive comfort from this mythologised vision of the anti-colonial struggle, invoking the spirit of Nehanda for protection as he hides in the bush: "I count each nameless ancestor on my dead fingers. The one buried in a noose. Nehanda, the female one. She protects me with her bones" (107). However, in the post-war dystopia that Sibaso inhabits, the powerful mythologies of the past fail to effect their promised redemption and Vera distorts their potent symbols to reveal the perverse realities of war. Sibaso himself appears like Nehanda, a figure caught between life and death, who dwells in secret, exerting his influence on the fate of the living. Sibaso, however, is the abject and macabre inversion of this spiritualised mythology, renewing the suffering of the powerless where Nehanda promised their glorious restitution.

The symbolism that Vera deployed in *Nehanda* to articulate a spiritualised narrative of the anti-colonial struggle is similarly distorted. As Sibaso tells his "many illicit versions of war" (73), the patient 'spider-Nehanda' that metaphorically represented a unitary vision of the first and second *Chimurengas* in Vera's first novel, is mutated into a withered and shrunken 'post-war' spider:

> There is a spider with long, long legs that are terrifyingly thin, ready-to-disappear. […] I saw it walk across a mirror one morning. Then it stopped moving. The mirror looked cracked. I could see my own broken face behind it. This is a post-war spider, a hungry spider. It is fragile like the membrane around dreams. […] It knows how to live on a margin, brittle, like a shard of glass. […] In the future there will be no trace of it. It dies outside time. (76)

Sibaso associates the emaciated form of the 'post-war spider' with his own broken image, signalling that his condition is comparable to the vulnerability of this ghostly figure. The war has produced such deathly, starving creatures that must inhabit the margins,

discarded and dispossessed. They die "outside time" (76), unacknowledged and untraced. The comparison seems to provide an apt description of Sibaso as a guerrilla fighter, who suffered through the traumas of war, only to be disinherited and labelled a 'dissident' by the post-war regime. However, the veracity of this analogy is immediately called into question by the image of a venomous, predatory spider, which resembles Sibaso's murderous bloodlust:

> There was no mistaking a poisonous spider, all the evidence was there, the legs ferocious, hairy pincers. It had a deadly weight about it, on your arm. A confident weight. It strolled over your arm like a deranged dancer. Outrageous in its design and colouration. You could feel it trying to make a decision, wondering if you were human, and if you were already dead. A spider never wastes its venom. You could feel its belly graze your skin. Poised. It made an art out of inflicting harm and approached you in daylight. It had a swiftness that seemed not to belong to the species. A lithe body. An elongated design. It lingered suspiciously. If it moved quickly it had granted you a reprieve. The encounter was ironic; death near and far. They have a name for this sort of spider *umahambemoyeni* – the swimmer in the air. (77)

This lethal spider precisely resembles Sibaso as he was described in the rape scene; a "deranged dancer" (77), who inflicts suffering with a graceful and practised dexterity. This image of a confident predator is entirely at odds with the image of the fragile 'post-war' spider, and these two spiders metaphorically articulate aspects of Sibaso's fractured subjectivity that are entirely irreconcilable. Unlike the spiders of *Nehanda,* they do not signify a coherent vision of the anti-colonial struggle, nor do they disclose an "immaculate truth" (75) of Sibaso himself.

In Sibaso's monologue, then, the unitary and spiritualised narrative of the anti-colonial struggle is fractured into a series of abysmal and irreconcilable strands. In writing his discontinuous narrative, Vera articulates "many illicit versions" (73) of the war of liberation and the *Gukurahundi* that are violently at odds with, and irreducible to, the

monologic 'grand narrative' of the struggle upheld by official nationalism. Significantly, his voice is interpolated throughout with Nonceba's narrative, in which Vera articulates her extreme suffering and struggle to survive the massive traumas inflicted by Sibaso. Like the various strands of Sibaso's own monologue, Nonceba's perspective is entirely irreconcilable with his point of view. By interpolating Sibaso and Nonceba's conflicting perspectives, Vera provides a multi-vocal articulation of the *Gukurahundi* that cannot be reconciled or reduced to a single or monologic narrative.

In her representations of the margins in *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins,* Vera discloses how Zimbabwe's history of conflict and suffering has wrought havoc in the psyches of its subjects. While *Butterfly Burning* seeks to articulate a provisionally redemptive vision of subaltern history that undermines the narrow vision of colonial historicism, Vera's final novel reveals a dystopian vision of suffering and war in Zimbabwe that challenges ZANU (PF)'s discourse of patriotic history. In both novels, the dynamics of poetic language disrupt the silencing mechanisms of dominant monologic discourses to provide a discursive space for subaltern speaking in the text. While I have focused in this chapter on how Vera's prose engages and disrupts the discourses of colonialism and post-colonial nationalism, of equal significance are the ways in which her writing challenges patriarchal narratives. In the following chapter, I turn my attention to the crucial question of female identity in Vera's prose, and consider how the transgressive value of poetic language negotiates the discursive dilemma of gendered subalternity in *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins*.

CHAPTER THREE: 'Rising into her own song': Gendered Subalternity in *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins.*

The psyches and subjectivities of Zimbabwe's female subalterns occupy the focus of all Vera's novels, each text consistently raising the problem of black women's relationship and access to power, speech and discourse. Because silence is the condition of women traumatised, dispossessed and unacknowledged by the dominant system, the recovery of a female voice is a crucial preoccupation for Vera. As Meg Samuelson notes, Vera's narratives can be collectively read as the "search for a language and voice" (16) to relate the experiences of women's marginalisation and violation under the often brutal social, cultural and political forces operating in Zimbabwe. Her work offers a complex challenge to the traditional silencing of Zimbabwean women and calls for the re-inscription of their voices into her country's historical and cultural memory.

It is Vera's search for a language to voice the suppressed and repressed aspects of black female subjectivity that I am centrally concerned with in this chapter; a search which, I believe, becomes increasingly complicated in its processes and ambiguous in its outcomes in her later novels, *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins*. While the reader is able to discern the protagonist's development "from silenced to vocal" (Samuelson 16) in *Under the Tongue*, in these later texts the predicament of the silence of the female subaltern is less readily resolved. These novels are no less invested in the recovery of women's marginalised discourse, but they do point more explicitly to the problems involved in reclaiming gendered subaltern narratives. Vera's female protagonists do not attain a stable speaking position in either *Butterfly Burning* or *The Stone Virgins*; speech and, hence, agency are only ever achieved provisionally (and often violently) for these women. I argue that it is not a linear, reassuring trajectory from 'voicelessness to voice' which these texts offer, but rather, as Vera herself has phrased it, a "moment of intervention" (Vera, Preface 3) into the systems which silence Zimbabwean women. While this "intervention" does not resolve for the reader (or for the characters) the predicament of gendered subaltern silence, it consistently engages and questions the forms of women's subjugation.

Before pursuing this line of inquiry, it is important to recall Spivak's arguments concerning gendered subalternity and, in particular, her warnings against any reductive pronouncements concerning the reclamation of subaltern 'speech'. Spivak has argued that gendered subalternity is not only a product of the external constraints imposed on women by male domination and exploitation, but also, crucially, of women's internalisation of these forms of oppression. A woman becomes unable to escape her subjugation under patriarchal law when the discursive 'gendering' imposed on her by the dominant system is internalised as constitutive of her subjectivity. In such instances, women's subordination becomes misconstrued as responsibility. In her translator's preface to three of Mahasweta Devi's short stories, Spivak foregrounds this predicament:

> Internalized gendering perceived as ethical choice is the hardest roadblock for women the world over. The recognition of male exploitation must be supplemented with this acknowledgement. And the only way to break it is to establish ethical singularity with the women in question, itself a necessary supplement to a collective action to which the woman might offer resistance, passive or active. Douloti [the protagonist of Devi's short story "Douloti the Bountiful"] as a subject is a site of acknowledgement. (Translator's Preface xxviii)

A crucial dialectic that informs Spivak's understanding of gendered subalternity is highlighted here. Although the female subaltern is without agency or volition, through "internalised gendering" she may often perceive the choices she makes to be 'ethical'. For Spivak, this predicament is highlighted in the practice of 'widow-burning' or *sati,* where the widow's willing participation in a ritual self-immolation is seen (by others and by the widow herself) as the enactment of her "ethical choice". Spivak argues that this complex internalisation which renders women's subordination as "ethical choice" must be acknowledged by any historian or theorist concerned with the condition of the gendered subaltern. It is through this acknowledgement that we might establish an "ethical singularity" in our dealings with gendered subalternity which, for Spivak, means

the recognition of the subaltern subjects' difference, without it becoming the basis of their exclusion. It is this establishment of "ethical singularity" through "acknowledgement" that indirectly, but crucially, informs the possibility of resistance against the dominant system.

Spivak's understanding of the role that literature may play in addressing the question of gendered subalternity is crucially influenced by this argument. For Spivak, literary texts do not impute speech to the female subaltern, but rather prompt the reader's acknowledgement of the involved processes which constitute gendered subalternity, thus inviting the establishment of an "ethical singularity" with the reader. This qualification is, I believe, crucial in understanding the treatment of gendered subalternity in Vera's texts. Her work has often invited readings which credit her prose with "[undoing] the silent posture" (Vera in Soros)[37] of Zimbabwean women and 'breaking their silences'. The problem with these readings is that they collapse Spivak's distinction; the representation of subaltern speaking becomes synonymous with subaltern speaking in an extra-textual realm. In an interview with Ranka Primorac, Vera makes this distinction explicit:

> …what I want […] to show are the contradictions in [women's] minds, the experiences which are kept down […] so that men, or people in general, or in the nation – can be as close as possible to women's experiences. And the experiences which are in their minds are the experiences which are not articulated, and my role as a writer is to articulate them, but in a convincing manner. *In a manner which doesn't force a woman to mouth it, because in fact, she wouldn't, in these circumstances*. But I want you to know, still, what her conflict of emotion means. How she harbours these feelings. And therefore how much more difficult that life is. For someone whose mind is full of termites. (Vera in Primorac, "Imagination" 162; my emphasis)

[37] In his review of Vera's writing, Eugene Soros quotes Vera to support his claim that her novels break women's silences. As it is electronically reproduced on the World Press Review website, Soros's review is without pagination.

Thus, although Vera offers us the "fully articulated" (Primorac, "Imagination" 162) perspective of Zimbabwe's gendered subaltern, this articulation should not be read as the unproblematic reclamation of subaltern speaking. My analysis of Vera's representation of the female subaltern proceeds with Spivak's caveat in mind. I show how the literary mode enables Vera to figure her protagonists as "sites of acknowledgement", to borrow Spivak's terminology, which enliven the reader's awareness of the complex singularity of the gendered subaltern. It is this acknowledgement that provides the first step into making way for the marginalised voices of Zimbabwe's subjugated women to be heard beyond the text.

In the preceding chapter of this dissertation, I considered how the deployment of poetic language in Vera's prose disrupts the hegemonic narratives of colonialism and decolonisation, inscribing ambivalence and plurality into their monologic discursive spaces. Here my focus moves to how Vera similarly problematises both Western and traditional Zimbabwean masculinist paradigms in her writing. Although set in very different periods of Zimbabwean history, all Vera's novels have been orientated towards a "contemporary focus on gender politics and its abuses" (Hunter, "Nationalism" 59), revealing female suffering under the patriarchal systems which dominate both the public and domestic realms. Of particular concern for Vera is the sublimation of women's voices by the masculinist discourses of national liberation, which narrate the history of Zimbabwe's anti-colonial struggle in terms of male agency and participation. As critics like Horace Campbell have argued, the narratives of decolonisation have focused primarily on the power struggle between the coloniser and the colonised, subsuming the stories of female resistance within this master narrative (268-270). Vera's novels insist that the story of women's agency and oppression in Zimbabwe requires separate elaboration and, in each of her texts, she has sought to recover a female voice during decisive moments of her country's history. In the analysis that follows, I focus on how *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins* problematise women's inscription within patriarchal and nationalist narratives to reclaim space for the articulation of the complex histories and identities of Zimbabwe's gendered subaltern.

In an essay entitled "Motherlands, Mothers and Nationalist Sons: Representations of Nationalism and Women in African literature", Elleke Boehmer argues that the "nationalist ideologies which inform African literature have worked to limit representations of and by women" (229). The essay explores how the "symbolic economy of nationalism" (233), as it has emerged across a variety of postcolonial locations, rests largely on tropes that fit into gendered categories. In its crudest form, this discursive gendering can be detected in the metaphors of 'motherland' and its associated ideas of origins, hearth and home; notions that rest upon a naturalised identification of women with the fertility and bounty of the beloved homeland. An idealised and fetishised figure of 'woman' thus emerges as a symbol of national plenitude, her fecund body representing a "never colonised, inner, essential identity" (Poulos-Nesbitt 306), reclaimed after the tyranny of colonialism. Considering the preoccupation with nationalist themes in African literature, Boehmer asks "how are women, specifically women writers, to work with the patriarchal in nationalism […] In nations that are less mother- than father(ed)-lands, where and how are women to find a voice?" ("Motherlands" 244). Vera's writing provides a compelling response to the challenges which Boehmer sets out in her essay and, in my analysis of *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins*, I show how the patriarchal tropes of Zimbabwe's nationalist mythology are unravelled in her prose to reveal the real dangers that these circumscribed narratives pose for women's subjectivity. I argue that the novels throw a "vivid spotlight on the contradiction between women's fantasy presence and real absence" (Mulvey 7)[38] from the symbolic frameworks of patriarchal nationalism, which valorise women for their fertility, nurturance and altruism, but deny them recognition as active participants in their country's history.

The reduction of female identity by the monologic discourses of patriarchy and nationalism is destabilised foremost through Vera's stylistic choices and the developed metaphoric register which characterises her prose. Throughout her writings, Vera has sought to develop a style that acknowledges the plural aspects of marginalised female

[38] I borrow the phrase from Laura Mulvey, who uses it in a very different context to describe the work of the sculptor Allen Jones. Mulvey's argument concerning the construction of female subjectivity through the fetishising male gaze has particular relevance for my reading of Vera's treatment of female identity in *The Stone Virgins*, which I discuss later in this chapter.

subjectivities, refusing women's status as totemic 'symbols and ciphers' in a dominant discursive order. In seeking to locate a subject-position for the gendered subaltern, however, Vera's prose simultaneously acknowledges the complexities attendant on such a project and, as I will go on to show, resists a nostalgic trajectory which stages the unproblematic recuperation of female identity. Although Vera's texts contain models of female expression and creative self-definition, they simultaneously reveal the dangers attendant on acts of female agency in a system dominated by an oppressive paternal law.

In *Butterfly Burning*, the struggle for female identity is played out against the backdrop of the larger struggle against colonial domination, and Phephelaphi's desire for self-actualisation in many ways mirrors the community's collective pursuit of some autonomy within the confines of the colonial space. Nana Wilson-Tagoe argues that "because it encapsulates both a struggle against oppressive gender codes and the community's larger colonial struggle, [Phephelaphi's quest] becomes a paradigm for the national quest itself" ("Representing Culture" 3). *Butterfly Burning*, however, also points towards an impasse between an emergent feminist consciousness and a growing nationalist movement, underpinned by traditionalist patriarchal ideology. Fumbatha, whose identity is linked explicitly to the anti-colonial struggle, embodies the discourses of both patriarchy and national liberation (Wilson-Tagoe, "Representing Culture" 7), neither of which allow for Phephelaphi's individualism and growing belief in female autonomy. Their relationship represents the possibility of a dialogue between these divergent ideologies, but this potential is never realised. Fumbatha only recognises in Phephelaphi the possibility of reclaiming a sense of masculine power denied him under the indignities of colonialism, and he stakes the claim upon her that he is unable to assert over the land of his forefathers: "Fumbatha had never wanted to possess anything before, except the land. He wanted [Phephelaphi] like the land beneath his feet from which birth had severed him" (23). Phephelaphi (and female identity more broadly) is subsumed by the nationalist dream as it is articulated by Fumbatha, which ascribes women a passive and nurturing position (Wilson-Tagoe, "Representing Culture" 9), but does not grant them any room for the expression of their autonomous subjectivities. In Fumbatha's inability to embrace the possibility of creative transformation which Phephelaphi embodies, *Butterfly Burning*

illuminates the failure of an emergent nationalist consciousness to include female emancipation within its liberatory aims.

It is the story of Phephelaphi's awakening consciousness that occupies the narrative of *Butterfly Burning* and the novel traces her quest to claim an autonomous identity, despite the restrictions placed on her by her race and gender. The chaos of urbanisation provides the transitional moment in which such acts of female agency seem possible and Phephelaphi is surrounded by courageous women, who defy both colonial and patriarchal authority. Inspired by the fiercely independent Deliwe and the transgressive rhythms of *kwela* which play in her shebeen, Phephelaphi learns a new language that questions women's subordination to men:

> [Phephelaphi] wanted more than obligation, not a fleeting excitement amongst male strangers with enticing tongues and flirtatious oneness. She wanted a birth of her own. […] It was about loving her own eyebrows before he passed his fingers over them and showed her that she had a smile that was tucked down on the edges […] She wanted a sense of belonging before that kind of belonging that rested on another's wondrous claim. (68-9)

Before Phephelaphi is able to fully embrace this newly discovered vocabulary of female autonomy, an unwanted pregnancy puts her quest for self-actualisation into crisis and threatens to deny her the opportunity of training as Rhodesia's "first black nurse" (84). As Eva Hunter has noted, in exploring the suffering that maternity entails for Phephelaphi, Vera undermines the culturally valorised trope of African motherhood, which eulogises maternity as the ideal of a nurturing and altruistic femininity. Her critique is directed not only at traditional Shona patriarchy, which esteems women primarily in terms of their child-bearing potential (see Hunter, "Nationalism" 230; Lan 25-6), but also at liberation and contemporary post-liberation discourses, which continue to uphold the glorification of Zimbabwe's "iconic maternal" (Hunter "Nationalism" 230). Phephelaphi's narrative foregrounds the difficulties involved in negotiating the inflexible representational categories of the dominant Symbolic order, which delimit women's roles

to their biology and symbolically tie them to the generative continuity of the land and nation.

As Desiree Lewis has argued, the figure of the African woman as mother "has been a particularly prominent and confining one in patriarchal nationalism" (1). While ostensibly ennobling women for sustaining the generative continuity of the nation state, it reduces their sphere of influence to the purely biological, thus depoliticising their roles. Vera's rewriting of an idealised maternity is not unique to *Butterfly Burning* but, as critics like Eva Hunter and Carolyn Martin Shaw have noted, the "distrust of mother and the social reproduction of motherhood permeate [Vera's] works" (Shaw 37). Maternity is commonly linked to female victimisation in Vera's writing. In *Without a Name*, Mazvita falls pregnant when she is raped by a guerrilla soldier and Phephelaphi herself is the product of her mother's prostitution. These children become the embodiment of their mother's oppression, occasioning acts of abandonment, infanticide and abortion. In her representations of these acts, Vera ensures that the reader's sympathy is won for her characters, who wish to unburden themselves from the agony of motherhood. For Vera shows, most emphatically in *Butterfly Burning*, that the danger of maternity lies not simply in its capacity to delimit women's influence to a domestic realm, but that, under the prohibitions of an inflexible paternal law, it involves the negation of female subjectivity and identity.

In this regard, the anxieties surrounding maternal parenthood raised in Vera's writing are not dissimilar to concerns represented in work by several Western feminists, like Adrienne Rich in her writings on "matrophobia" [39] and Julia Kristeva's work on motherhood and abjection.[40] Kristeva's analysis of maternity, in particular, provides a noteworthy perspective on Vera's engagement with the subject. For Kristeva, the process of 'becoming-mother' is not the wilful, controlled act of the subject, but involves a series of functions and processes over which she has no control. Accordingly, pregnancy

[39] Eva Hunter explores Vera's representation of maternity in *Butterfly Burning* in relation to other "matrophobic" writings from Africa and the West. See "Nationalism" 232-6.

[40] For a detailed discussion of Kristeva's argument concerning motherhood and abjection, see Caputi, "The abject maternal." See also my elucidation of Kristeva's notion of abjection in chapter two.

involves the abandonment of agency and distances the subject from the autonomy of the dominant Symbolic:

> Cells fuse, split, and proliferate; volumes grow, tissues stretch, and body fluids change rhythm, speeding up or slowing down. Within the body, growing as a graft, indomitable, there is an other. And no one is present, within that simultaneously dual and alien space, to signify what is going on. 'It happens, but I'm not there.' 'I cannot realise it, but it goes on.' Motherhood's impossible syllogism. (Kristeva ctd in Grosz, 79)

Vera's representation of maternity in *Butterfly Burning* shares with Kristeva's Western psychoanalytic model the proposition that maternity negates the subjectivity and identity of the mother. In psychoanalytic terms, maternity cements Phephelaphi's status as a subordinate subject in the socio-symbolic order and ties her irrevocably to the paternal law embodied by Fumbatha. The loss of self that Phephelaphi endures upon the news of her pregnancy is communicated emphatically to the reader in both literal and metaphoric terms. After the discovery of Phephelaphi's pregnancy, the images of mobility, flight and restless yearning previously associated with her are replaced by images of stasis and entrapment. She spends a week alone in the claustrophobia of Fumbatha's one-roomed house, almost paralysed in her knowledge of the unborn child. In these passages, Vera suggestively communicates Phephelaphi's psychological distress through descriptions of the physical world, in which material objects come to bear an excess of meaning. As Phephelaphi feels her identity disassembling, that "she was much less than a thin fabric tearing in the wind" (95), she seeks comfort in the materiality of the physical world and in the "safety of touch" (93): "She fought against this vanishing with a multitude of objects. The room was full of her memories. Each agony distinctly shaped; a haircomb, a spoon, a shoe" (93). In her diminishing capacity to lay claim to her own life and identity, Phephelaphi seeks "evidence" to ensure that "the events she remembered were true" (94). Her fears of negation culminate in her only monologue (occurring after she falls pregnant for a second time), which unambiguously describes maternity as a loss of subjectivity and selfhood:

> So I have to forget about training as a nurse altogether and what else am I to become but nothing, and he had already left me long before I knew about it and what he had left me with, for a little while, he came back to get. My being. My woman self tearing away. My sorrowful self. No matter my need. No matter which. I will NOT. Now he has broken my stem with this child he has given me. I am nothing. I am not here. Here is a place you can belong. I no longer belong. I am not here. (126)

Although Phephelaphi "claims the narrative space entirely in chapter twenty" (Attree 79), her monologue reveals her alienation within a Symbolic realm structured by paternal law. Her narrative hovers ambiguously between assertion ("I will NOT") and denial ("I am not here"), pointing to her problematic relationship to discourse and power. In this regard, Phephelaphi's monologue is demonstrative of a difficulty that Kristeva foregrounds in her comments regarding the always tenuous position which women occupy within the Symbolic order. For Kristeva, women do not occupy a stable position within the socio-symbolic realm, because it operates under the domination of the phallus. Although women as speaking beings are necessarily part of the Symbolic, they are not positioned there in quite the same way as men: "…where he is positioned in the Symbolic with the attributes of active, subject and phallic, she is positioned as object, passive and castrated" (Grosz 67). Women can only attain a stable speaking position in the Symbolic through identification with, and sublimation to, paternal law, as any maternal attachments to a pre-Oedipal imaginary threaten the subject's autonomy. This 'masculine identification', although necessary, is highly problematic, as it effaces female specificity (Grosz 68). Vera summarises this predicament in her study, "The Prison of the Colonial Space", wherein she points out that the 'I' of autobiographical discourse "is problematic in establishing female narrativity because of its avowal of a full subjecthood and normative masculinity" (208).[41] In terms of this argument, Phephelaphi cannot claim the enunciative position 'I' because, as both woman and mother, she is denied an authoritative position in

[41] Vera's argument proceeds from her reading of Sidonie Smith's study *Subjectivity, Identity and the Body*.

the socio-symbolic order. Her paradoxical erasure of self ("I am nothing"), which occurs at the moment of claiming 'I', is symptomatic of this problem.

It is thus important to note that Phephelaphi, unlike Zhizha in *Under the Tongue,* is unable to secure a voice and language to speak her marginalisation. For Zhizha, who endures the trauma of being raped by her father, self-definition is made possible through the reclamation of a maternally connoted language, excavated from "layers of patriarchal discourse" (Muchemwa, "Language, voice and presence" 4). We are told that Zhizha "[finds] the word grandmother has given […] It is a word that brings all our birth" (53). Phephelaphi also desires a "birth of her own" (68) but, denied both a stable enunciative position in a paternal Symbolic realm, as well as a compensatory maternal lineage, she is unable to secure a 'word' through which to forge her identity and personhood. Without a stable position from which to 'speak' and be 'heard', Phephelaphi can assert her identity and claim some form of authority only through negative and destructive means. Her individuation is brought about, ironically and tragically, through death; first of her unborn child and later through her suicide.

Vera dedicates the longest chapter of *Butterfly Burning* to a description of Phephelaphi's abortion, a weighting in textual length matched by the metaphoric and symbolic intensity of the prose.[42] Phephelaphi flees the confines of Makokoba and Fumbatha's shack to the banks of the Umguza River, where she performs her abortion alone, isolated from a community hostile to her dreams of independence. The location is appropriate; Phephelaphi returns to the banks of the river where she was claimed by Fumbatha, to assert her autonomy and claim control over her body. The eulogised symbols of land and mother are divested of a mythological glory in these passages and the descriptions of Phephelaphi's painfully endured abortion powerfully disavow the cultural connection between women and the generative power of the land.

[42] The significance that Vera accorded this chapter is also suggested by her decision to publish a slightly modified version of it independently, as a short story entitled "Thorns".

Vera has argued that "the connection to the land for women is that of disturbance. Something negative" (in Primorac, "Imagination" 161). Her female characters do not experience harmony with the land; the Shona worldview that posits a "unifying life force flowing through the entire phenomenal world" (Hunter, "Nationalism" 237) proves false in their experiences.[43] In *Without a Name,* the land, as the possession of men, becomes implicated in women's violation. Mazvita experiences her rape by a guerrilla soldier as an act enabled by a disloyal and violent landscape: "…she hated the land pressed against her back as the man moved impatiently above her, into her, past her […] she connected him only to the land […] the land had allowed the man to grow from itself into her body" (31). The land is similarly complicit in Phephelaphi's suffering. The "pure longing for land" (97), which she experiences at the beginning of chapter sixteen, is a nostalgic hope to be both comforted and liberated by the land as she endures "the willed loss of her child" (107). Phephelaphi imagines a lush landscape "filled with a calm essence, begetting grass, singing insects and trees, land that pauses, then listens as a leaf drops" (97); a bountiful land that could have "helped to cure tragedy" (97). However, the land is not curative, "this soil just is. It does not move. No kindness to it. It is a violent quiet" (105). For Phephelaphi, the land fails to signify. It is disconnection, not communion, that characterises women's relationships to the land in Vera's novels, and she refuses a nationalist mythology which imagines 'woman' as the fecund embodiment of the land.

In performing her abortion, Phephelaphi achieves a sense of purposefulness and agency hitherto denied her by the constraints placed on her by her race and gender. The abortion is described as Phephelaphi's own birth; her resolute action compared to "cracking" open a "shell" (107). Her body, which structures her subordination under paternal law, becomes the site of her triumphant release. She is finally able to assert control over her body and claim presence and identity: "It is her own vessel filled to capacity. It is herself, her own agony spilling over some fine limit of becoming… It is she" (99). Thus, as

[43] An important exception occurs in *Nehanda,* where the spirit-medium Nehanda is "infused with a potent life-force that flowed through the entire phenomenal world," which enables her to "traverse time and space" (Hunter "Nationalism" 237). Hunter argues that the discrepancy represents a development, not a contradiction, in Vera's articulation of the relationship between women and the land, symptomatic of the "complexities involved in being a pioneer in an historical and cultural milieu in which both the old and the new have strong claims upon one's fidelity and one's imagination" ("Nationalism" 240).

Wilson-Tagoe has argued, Vera's descriptions of Phephelaphi's abortion provide an effective "counter-narrative" to "the obligations of motherhood and fertility" ("Representing Culture" 9) enforced by the dominant system. Yet Phephelaphi's courageously endured abortion is not ultimately successful in securing for her an autonomous subjective position and, in the following chapter, Vera foregrounds the dangerous psychological implications of her defiant act: "…folded into two halves, one part of her is dead, the other living […] something has cast a terrible shadow into her being, split her mind into irreconcilable parts" (109). Because Phephelaphi's individuation can occur only through painful and destructive means, it concomitantly entails a division and loss of self. Thus foregrounded in her narrative is the dangerous ambiguity that attends acts of female agency and self-definition within a system dominated by paternal law. For Phephelaphi, resistance to the dominant system can only be articulated through self-inflicted harm, so that her resolute act of self-definition simultaneously and paradoxically involves a negation of the self. This predicament is brought into focus in Vera's representation of Phephelaphi's suicide, which comprises the novel's tragic conclusion.

Phephelaphi's suicide, like her abortion, is a deeply ambivalent act. It signifies a moment of control and authority, but one that can be effected only through her negation. At the moment of her death, she is positioned ambiguously between subjectivity and its annihilation. The dominant tone of the passage is, however, one of triumph and not defeat, and Vera clearly intends Phephelaphi's suicide to be read as an act of resistance and agency: "The fire moves over her, light as a feather, smooth like oil. She has wings. She can fly" (129). The 'unmaking' of her body, which is the site of her oppression under an inflexible paternal law, is registered as a profoundly cathartic act, and Phephelaphi is finally able to claim her own body and achieve self-love: "A touch, her own genuine touch, to love her own body now, after he has loved and left it, to love her own eyebrows and her own knees, finally she has done so, embracing each part of herself with flame, deeply and specially" (129-30). This final image of Phephelaphi is one of symbiosis and harmony, signalling that she has attained a vantage point outside the dominant discursive order which inscribes her inferiority and deficiency.

This reading of Phephelaphi's suicide relies on the idea that a wilfully enacted death does not imply silence but that, because it is performative, it can be interpreted as a speech act. Suicide becomes Phephelaphi's "one effective communicative act under a patriarchal system which otherwise disallows female authorship" (Bronfen 143). Accordingly, it can be argued that she attains an enunciative position and is finally able to 'speak' her marginalisation, interrupting the silence and passivity to which she is otherwise condemned. However, this argument is problematic, as it rests upon the idea that Phephelaphi's death *is* interpretable within the socio-political context of its enactment. Spivak places this concern at the centre of her discussion concerning the possibility of subaltern speaking and, hence, agency, in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?". In this essay, Spivak evokes the story of a young woman's suicide precisely to emphasise her point that the subaltern "cannot speak". Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri, a young woman tasked with committing an act of political assassination, chooses instead to take her own life. Her family, ignoring the fact that Bhuvaneswari waited for the onset of menstruation before committing suicide, assumes that her act was undertaken in an effort to conceal an 'illegitimate' pregnancy. Her death is thus not registered as an act of defiance, but is instead dismissed as a shameful act. Because her family and community cannot "excavate a reading and understanding of Bhuvaneswari's death in a manner that imbues it with agency rather than stigma" (Nge 196), Spivak concludes that the subaltern "cannot speak" ("Can the Subaltern Speak?" 104).

As a symbolic representation of death rather than a materially enacted one, Phephelaphi's suicide clearly has different implications for our understanding of subaltern agency than those raised by Spivak in her discussions of Bhuvaneswari's death. However, the novel, like Spivak's writings on Bhuvaneswari's suicide, does point to the difficulties surrounding the interpretability of acts of female resistance. In a scene which prefigures Phephelaphi's tragic death, an anonymous woman is driven to suicide by the rejection of her lover:

> A man she had cared for had not smiled back when she did, not touched her wrist on the pulsing wanting spot she asked him to, not come back one night and the many nights that followed. […] It was known by her best friend that she had swallowed a sewing needle before going to bed, all two inches of it, and followed it with water. She had left the thread on the needle hanging out of her mouth. Those who viewed the corpse said it would have been a better sight to tuck this piece of unfortunate thread under the woman's dead lips before the body was buried. (76-7)

The thread remains as a trace of the woman's voice, indicative of the words she was unable to speak (Hemmings 62). Her onlookers, both unable and unwilling to acknowledge its significance, wish to hide the offensive thread beneath her lips. As one critic has already noted, by tucking away the trace of her voice, the onlookers attempt to place the woman's story back in her mouth, "ensuring that her silence will live on" (Hemmings 62). The cursory scene casts doubt over the efficacy of Phephelaphi's own defiant act, highlighting the absence of an acknowledging community able to impute significance to her suicide. As Phephelaphi dies, she is "not sure if [Fumbatha] can hear the fragile whisper underneath that ribbon of flame" (129). The transmission and legacy of Phephelaphi's story are at stake here; the 'trace' of her voice that might secure her agency beyond her death.

That Fumbatha is finally able to acknowledge the significance of Phephelaphi's struggle is suggested in a short passage early in the novel, which anticipates her violent death:

> Fumbatha had no idea that one day he would open the door and find her gone, wishing he could close it again, wishing he had never left her at all; she would be in flight like a bird, laden with the magnificent grace of her wings. She would be brimming with a lonely ecstasy gathered from all the corners of her mind. She would be whispering something he could not hear, a message he would recall much later, when all his senses were finally free: he had moved from his own song into her astonishing melody. (29)

Fumbatha's ability to properly interpret the message of Phephelaphi's death represents the possibility of a broader cultural transformation, in which the seemingly irreconcilable paradigms of men and women can move closer together in a reciprocal, rather than hierarchical, engagement. Through his empathetic response to Phephelaphi's struggle, Fumbatha is able to move "from his own song into her astonishing melody" (29), an emotional and ideological development that allows their respective histories of struggle to come together. The liberatory promise of *Butterfly Burning* is thus not only located in Phephelaphi's courageous struggle to reject women's subordination, but also in the possibility of a dialogue between the narratives of male and female resistance. Fumbatha's ultimately empathetic response to Phephelaphi's death provides an appropriate paradigm for the reader's own engagement with her narrative, signalling the importance of an ethical response to her struggle. It is finally the space of writing that allows for the acknowledgement and validation of Phephelaphi's fraught and sometimes ambivalent journey, Vera's fictional narrative securing the trace of women's agency and resistance uninscribed by the dominant narratives of patriarchal nationalism.

Fumbatha's acknowledgement of Phephelaphi's suffering is anticipated, rather than enacted, in the narrative and it is only in *The Stone Virgins* that the potential represented by their relationship is more positively realised. Vera's final novel ends on a note of affirmation, which imagines the possibility of both personal and national healing emanating from the undemanding and patient love that develops between Cephas and Nonceba. Before this restorative union is achieved, however, the novel interrogates how women are drawn into a 'male-authored' history (Boehmer "Large Nations / Small Stories")[44] of the nation and discloses the violent physical and psychological implications of the subordinate status that women are assigned in nationalist mythology. In this novel, the different modes of male and female engagement represented by the relationships between Cephas and Thenjiwe, Nonceba and Sibaso and, finally, Cephas and Nonceba, provide the paradigms through which Vera explores 'the different axes of Zimbabwe's

[44] The citation is from my own summary of a paper that Boehmer presented at a colloquium hosted by the Nordic Africa Institute in December 2005, entitled "Opening Spaces: A Research Forum on Yvonne Vera's Writing".

post-independence social imaginary' (Boehmer "Large Nations/ Small Stories"). Their respective exchanges draw the national catastrophe of the *Gukurahundi* into the realm of the private and personal, and Vera discloses how the brutal processes of decolonisation violate the psyches and somas of Zimbabwe's subalterns.

In the third chapter of *The Stone Virgins,* which is set in the "rural enclave" (15) of Kezi just before the arrival of independence, Vera describes the meeting of Thenjiwe and Cephas and the passionate affair that ensues between the pair. Cephas is a stranger to Kezi and understands little of its landscape and people. Thenjiwe, conversely, appears at ease in the rural village and is rooted within her environment: "…the swing in her walk places a claim on the entire earth" (31). Unlike the female protagonists of *Without a Name* and *Butterfly Burning*, Thenjiwe enjoys a feeling of connectedness to the land, without its associated obligations of fertility and nurturance. She is able to embrace the land without anxiety: "Each drop of rain a rendezvous. That drizzling time of melting anthills; the rain beats the soil till it slides off its mound. Thenjiwe, more beautiful than rain, watches the rain slow the hills, flatten them…" (30). In her autonomous attitude, she embodies a form of female agency and self-knowledge that is painfully desired, but never fully realised, by Mazvita or Phephelaphi. Unlike these characters, Thenjiwe "really does not care much for her own motion, her weightless desire to be loved […] She has always just lived her life" (29-30). She thus appears to be the self-actualised individual that Phephelaphi imagines when she proclaims that, only when she becomes "all the loving there could be", would she "seek something more […] and love a man simply because she could" (69).

Thenjiwe, as one of Vera's most assured female characters, befits the historical epoch which the novel's early chapters chart. In her self-possessed demeanour, she exemplifies the spirit of independence and its promise of agency for a colonised people. The female guerrilla soldiers who congregate at Thandabantu Store, the social and economic centre of Kezi, similarly appear to have realised the emancipatory promise of decolonisation. These women "define the world differently" (49); they disregard the limitations imposed on them by their gender and defiantly "[pull] down every barrier" (49). Zimbabwe, at the

moment of independence, seems to provide the conditions under which women can imagine different modes of existence and embrace the autonomous identities hitherto denied them. However, the optimism represented by these figures of female autonomy is immediately qualified in the following chapter, which describes Thenjiwe's murder and Nonceba's rape. The brutality inflicted by the 'dissident' Sibaso renders the restorative promise of decolonisation a phantasm and signals the prohibition of the female individualism and agency embodied by Thenjiwe in the postcolonial state.

In her representation of Thenjiwe and Cephas's sexual affair, Vera foregrounds the gender inequalities that normative heterosexuality can entail for women. Initially, their union represents a pleasurable and restorative fusion, providing a welcome respite from their respective memories of "persecutions and possible agonies" (28). Cephas is at first fascinated by Thenjiwe's autonomous spirit and by her mind, which is "heir to an eternity" (34), but her unrestrained and active desire gradually comes to represent a threat to his position of mastery and control. Thenjiwe refuses to submit entirely to Cephas's desire and rejects the female passivity inscribed within normative heterosexuality. Instead, she assumes agency in their relationship and,

> …gives him instructions with her body, turning her full weight over to his side of the bed in order that they touch one another, sliding her palm against his for a greeting, turning his fingers over and bringing them to her quiet tongue; the tip of her tongue licking the moisture off the bottom of his neck, raising her knee high to his navel in order to seek his comfort, gazing kindly at him to draw his body nearer, each embrace offered mutely; parting her legs, offering him the silent but astounding warmth of her thighs. (35)

Thenjiwe refuses to succumb to a paternal law which requires the repression of female *jouissance*, and instead actively privileges her pleasure in her interactions with Cephas. Unable to occupy a stable position within the socio-symbolic, Thenjiwe embraces the semiotic, transgressive excess represented by her maternal body and celebrates rather than represses it: "She wishes to conceive a child from this man. He would be a dream

child from head to toe" (34). In this way, Thenjiwe's sexuality serves a "reconstitutive function" (Henderson 131), enabling her to claim a subjective position, despite Cephas's coercive desire "to possess […] each part of her" (33). In the figure of Thenjiwe, Vera provides a model of female sexuality that is neither tied to reproduction nor orientated towards the satisfaction of male desire, but is instead expressive of women's agency and subjectivity. The novel thus posits female pleasure as an effective mode of resistance against the reactionary narratives of patriarchy and as crucial to women's reclamation of autonomous identities.

While Thenjiwe's unrestrained sexuality is instrumental in allowing her a subjective position, it simultaneously poses a threat to Cephas's autonomous identity, for two different but related reasons. First, her semiotic *jouissance* is disruptive of Symbolic hegemony and the position of mastery it secures for male subjects. Second, her "fascinating sensuality" (Bronfen 183) produces in Cephas the desire to inhabit a state of undifferentiated unity with Thenjiwe: "he wants to preserve her in his own body, gathering her presence from the soil like a perfume" (33). This insatiable desire disrupts his coherent self-image, awakening in him the realisation that he does not independently possess a unified and complete identity: "When I am not touching you I am nothing. I am not whole. I see nothing. I hear nothing. I am a leaf tossing in the wind" (39). She thus threatens his authoritative position, because she represents a semiotic excess which he cannot control and because she inspires in him a desire that makes him wholly dependent on another to compensate for his own lack. In this regard, the relationship figured between desire and subjectivity in Vera's descriptions of the lovers is demonstrative of Lacan's notion that:

> Everything longs for what it lacks, and nothing for what it doesn't lack. Desiring to secure something to oneself forever may be described as loving something which is not yet to hand. I love you, but, because inexplicably I love in you something more than you – the *object petit à* – I mutilate you. (Lacan ctd in Bronfen, 181)

As Lacan's comments suggest, desire is underpinned by a threatening dynamic that negatively implicates the subjectivity of the beloved. Desire seeks out in another what the self lacks, but because lack is constitutive of subjectivity and cannot be satiated, desire "mutilates" the other. This dynamic is made explicit in Cephas's narrative and in his attempt to stabilise the threatening excess represented by Thenjiwe's unrestrained sensuality. He assumes a controlling male gaze, which configures her as the passive object of his active desire and discounts her agency:

> He loves her fingernails. He loves each of her bones, from her wrist to her ankle, the blood flowing under her skin. […] He loves her bones, the harmony of her fingers. He loves most the bone branching along her hip. The sliding silence of each motion, tendons expanding. The stretch of time as she moves each foot after the next, slowly and with abandon. White bone her inner hip, her hip in motion. He places his palm along her waist and announces, as though she is a new creation, 'This is a beautiful bone'. (32)

Cephas adopts a synecdochal logic in formulating his knowledge about Thenjiwe, idealising each part of her body, but failing to recognise her autonomous subjectivity. His narrative rehearses the transformation of the female body into an object of excessive visual pleasure; a process that Laura Mulvey describes as "fetishistic scopophilia" (21). According to Mulvey, the erotic male gaze sublimates the threat of alterity and castration posed by the female body, by transforming it into something satisfying rather than threatening (Mulvey 21). Under Cephas's controlling gaze, Thenjiwe's position is stabilised and she becomes a passive signifier for his coherent, unified identity and dominant subject-position. The extent of the danger posed to Thenjiwe's subjectivity by this coercive erotic gaze is revealed when, in Cephas's ardent fantasising, death becomes the extreme of a fetishised female passivity:

> If you died and I could only save one part of your body, I would save this bone. I would carry it with me everywhere, and it would be as though you were alive. Death is where every part of us vanishes, especially the most precious part […] If you die in

> my absence and I find that you have already been buried, I will dig your body up to the moonlight, so that I can touch this beautiful bone. Touch it, touch it, till you are alive. Then I will let you rest. With my fingers on your bone. (39)

In death, Thenjiwe's body no longer represents a transgressive and threatening semiotic excess, but is "stabilised into a figure of Otherness" (Bronfen 189), clearly differentiated from the order and stability of the Symbolic. The image is pleasurable for Cephas, because it helps him to once again distinguish between self and other (a boundary that has become blurred by his consuming desire for Thenjiwe) and because it eliminates the threat posed by her unrestrained sexuality (Bronfen 187). In his fantasy of Thenjiwe's death, Cephas again enjoys the power that her active desire otherwise denies him.

The vocabularies of a possessive male desire, foregrounded in Cephas's narrative, re-emerge in Vera's descriptions of Sibaso and the moment of the decapitation itself is narrated as a macabre re-enactment of Cephas's consuming desire for Thenjiwe. Cephas "places his foot where [Thenjiwe] has left her imprint on the soil, wanting to possess, already, each part of her" (33); Sibaso imitates and literalises this movement as he appears

> …where Thenjiwe was before, floating in her body, he is in her body […] Thenjiwe's body remains upright while this man's head emerges behind hers, inside it, replacing each of her moments, taking her position in the azure of the sky. He is absorbing Thenjiwe's motions into his own body, existing where Thejiwe was, moving into the spaces she has occupied. (66)

Sibaso gazes at his victims with the intimacy and delicacy reminiscent of Cephas's sensual passion for Thenjiwe: "[Sibaso] considers the woman in his arms […] he has memorised parts of [her], shape and curve" (71-2). By associating the gaze of the lover, Cephas, and the violator, Sibaso, *The Stone Virgins* establishes a continuum on which ownership of the female body is articulated. Vera reveals that the logic through which the

erotic male gaze asserts ownership over a passive female body, has a dangerous and violent extreme. The fetishised, circumscribed femininity celebrated by Cephas, re-emerges in Sibaso's foreboding fascination with the sacrificial virgins of the novel's title:

> Disembodied beings. Their legs branch from their bodies like roots. The women float, away from the stone. Their thighs empty, too fragile, too empty to have already carried a child. They are the virgins who walk into their own graves before the burial of a king. They die untouched. Their ecstasy is in the afterlife. […] The female figures painted on the rock, the virgins, form a circle near the burial site, waiting for the ceremonies of their own burial. […] Perhaps they have been saved from life's embrace. Not dead. I place my hand over the waist of the tall woman, on an inch of bone… (95)

As Sibaso touches the female figure painted on the rock, Cephas's fetishisation of Thenjiwe is ominously recalled in the image of the "inch of bone" (95). The virgins painted on the rocks are icons of an idealised femininity, devoid of agency and desire. Like the celebrated maternal body of 'Mother Africa', this is a mythologised, circumscribed femininity, which forecloses the possibility of female autonomy. The image of the virgin figures painted on the rock retrospectively elucidates Sibaso's perverse logic as he looks upon Nonceba as a human sacrifice:

> He sees her dancing heels, her chaste dead bone, porous thin, painted on a rock. Her neck leaning upon a raised arrow, her mind pierced by the sun. She is a woman from very far, from long ago, from the naked caves in the hills of Gulati. She does not belong here. She bears the single solitude of a flame, the shape and form of a painted memory. He thrusts the body to the ground; a dead past. (72)

The association of Nonceba with the mythological virgins of Gulati provides Sibaso with a rationalisation for the violation he conducts. In the ritual practice of virgin sacrifice that Sibaso recalls, the negation of female subjectivity is not only sanctioned, it is celebrated

and eulogised. As Elizabeth Bronfen has argued in her study of female sacrifice, existing socio-symbolic laws are secured over the site of the sacrificed female body: "At the corpse of the sacrificed victim, the violence of the semiotic chora is confined to a single place, receives a signifier and by virtue of this representation, it can be detained and admitted into the symbolic, social order" (195). The violent content of this mythology, and its material implications for female subjectivity, is realised in Vera's descriptions of Thenjiwe's decapitated corpse:

> The body falls forward and [Sibaso] stumbles and pulls the body back, bone bright white from it, neckbone pure, like a streak of light the bone vanishes into the stream of blood oozing out, the knees buckle forward and the body twirls on its heels, the legs together. […] The body is his, pulse and motion. The blood ripples over the breasts. (68)

Vera denies the celebrated femininity of an African mythology its rhetorical force. In place of the ethereal figures painted on the rocks of Gulati are the brutalised bodies of Nonceba and Thenjiwe, made to bear the scars of a protracted national struggle. Divested of a mythological glory, their violated forms bear incontrovertible testament to the unspoken history of *Gukurahundi* and signify the abysmal failure of decolonisation. The fractured, dismembered female body of *The Stone Virgins* is thus at once a site of subjection and resistance. The spectacle of the violated female body signifies the impossibility for any absolute recuperation of a female subaltern identity, and it also affronts the rhetorical make-up of a post-independence nationalism which takes the fecund female body as the symbol of its triumph.

In its devastating descriptions of Nonceba's rape and Thenjiwe's murder, *The Stone Virgins* discloses the brutal systems responsible for the silence of the gendered subaltern. The rape scene is narrated as a loss of voice; Nonceba is gradually engulfed by a "mute stream" (67), until she is literally silenced by Sibaso, who cuts off her lips before leaving her for dead: "He cut. Smoothly and quickly. […] My mouth, a wound. My mouth severed, torn, pulled apart" (99). It is primarily through her narrative that the predicament

of subaltern silence is explored in the novel, and Vera is centrally concerned in the latter half of the text with dramatising her courageous struggle to recover a voice to 'speak' her trauma. While Nonceba's journey enacts the possibility of healing after violation and reclaiming speech, the text concomitantly acknowledges the voices that have been erased from history by the *Gukurahundi*. The unelaborated narratives of the anonymous woman who is forced to murder her husband with an axe (80); Mahlathini, whose execution by the Fifth Brigade "would not be registered" (122); and the nameless civilians "marched into the forest" (124) to be executed, are all metonymic of Zimbabwe's innumerable subaltern voices that can never be reclaimed.

Nonceba's voice emerges for the first time in the novel during the passages in which she is raped and Vera narrates the scene primarily from her point of view. During these passages, Nonceba repeats the refrain "I am alive" (62; 66; 69) at several points; an assertion which interrupts the negation of her subjectivity by the brutal violation that Sibaso conducts. In her first person narration that follows, Vera focuses on the distortion of subjective space wrought by the atrocities Nonceba is forced to endure. She inhabits a hallucinatory state, in which memories of the traumatic event continuously impinge upon her psyche and co-mingle with perceptions in the present and thoughts of Thenjiwe:

> Now Nonceba can see the woman with the axe. She is tall and thin and her legs do not reach the ground. It is as though she is hanging from a tree. 'Is she hanging from a tree?' Why does Thenjiwe ask that? Why ask at all. The woman is a tree and all the branches are in her head moving, back and forth. The woman wants to cut the tree down […] Nonceba moves her arms forward to protect the woman, to remove the axe from her hands. Nonceba's arms are tied to the bed, so she cannot move. She has to watch and be silent. She can only see. She cannot say a word. She cannot speak. Not a word. (81)

In psychoanalytic terms, Nonceba becomes estranged from the Symbolic realm and is unable to partake of its logical and coherent structures. The traumas she has suffered cannot be articulated under the rational and causal imperatives which govern symbolic

modes and she is thus unable to properly access discourse. Her inability to speak is emphatically repeated throughout the four chapters which comprise her narrative. Vera continuously returns to the image of Nonceba's mouth as an inarticulate wound: "…my mouth [is] stiff, stitched like the hem of a dress, folded; heavy with numbness […] My mouth has no words, shrivelled" (113). Vera's insistence on representing silence in this manner is demonstrative of her claim that, "to make visible the impossibility of naming is also to empower the dispossessed. It is to make present their absence" ("Prison" 100).

In its representation of Nonceba's recovery, Vera's prose does not stage the unproblematic reclamation of subaltern speaking, but rather dramatises the processes under which subaltern silence operates. Her narrative places the representational problematic of psychological trauma at the centre of the subaltern's muted condition. Nonceba 'cannot speak', not only because her story will be suppressed by the dominant system, but also because her psychic processes are unable to cope with the trauma and cohere her experiences into narrative. Her first person narration displays the processes of sublimation, dissociation and displacement wrought by psychological trauma; a technique commonly used in Vera's prose, which Ato Quayson has labelled a "symbolisation compulsion" (82). In an essay on *Without a Name,* Quayson uses the term to describe the "drive toward an insistent metaphorical register even when this register does not help develop the action, define character or spectacle, or create atmosphere" (82). The "symbolisation compulsion" in Vera's prose, he argues, is intended primarily to display the difficulty of representing trauma and show how its "referential locus" (79) is deferred and sublimated in language, primarily through the processes of metaphoric condensation and metonymic displacement. Quayson's argument is usefully elucidated by the passage I cited above, in which Nonceba's many traumatic memories are metaphorically condensed into the startling image of the 'tree woman'. The image itself does not yield a coherent meaning, but is powerfully suggestive of the dissociative condition of Nonceba's psyche, in which the order of the metaphoric and literal have become conflated (Quayson 90). While these hallucinations are symptomatic of the brutality Nonceba has suffered, she remains unable to access the traumatic moment itself:

> I know his name. I cannot call his name. My tongue is silent, his name on it. […] His eyes are everywhere. This I see. I close my eyes briefly. Perhaps I do not close my eyes at all, but I miss his next act. It occurs between one breath and the next, one gesture, one act. I carry this moment now like a blindness. His movements are quick. I do not remember when or how anything occurs, the unfolding of his fierce act. I search and search for the precise moment of his action. I do not find it. (100)

In this way, Vera is able to "make present" the absent subaltern voice; not by appropriating it, but by representing its silences and aporias. For Quayson, the "symbolisation compulsion" which he detects in Vera's prose is primarily noteworthy for its ability to "mime as closely as possible the conceptual epistemological problems brought on by psychological trauma" (91), but he does consider its possible reconstitutive effects. By dramatising the loss of language which Nonceba suffers, *The Stone Virgins* makes visible the myriad systems and processes responsible for subaltern silence. While the narrative reveals to us a history of suppression wrought by an unspeakable violence, its compositional technique discloses the psycho-linguistic repression which maintains the oppressed subject's silent posture. Faced with the inadequacy of symbolic language to articulate her trauma, Nonceba longs for a pre-discursive articulation anterior to culture's dominant modes:

> She is in an abysmal place, inert, held down. She is mute. A voice dying. Unable to shape words into language, to breathe freely. She will have to find the sources of sound inside her, pure and timeless. Then she will open her mouth and let the sound free. Words will flow. Only then would she discover a world in contrast to her predicament. She would restore her own mind, healing it in segments, in sound.
>
> She thinks of the language of animals which has no words but memory.
> The movement of their bodies, the memory in their bones, of the places they have been. When they have tragic encounters, how do they survive? Do they close their eyes in dream, or do they dream with their eyes open, do they dream at all? Are

> they reborn in sound? She would like to know the language of all wounded beings, where do they begin when everything is ended. Is there a language in the ending of the mind, of all minds? (82)

Nonceba imagines that the semiotic sounds of animals might make her grief communicable and she longs to partake of their language "which has no words but memory" (82). It is a longing for an articulation which can interrupt the repressive mechanisms of symbolic modes and make visible her unspeakable suffering. This "language of all wounded beings" (82) appropriately describes Vera's own poetic metaphor and its capacity to represent the "ending of the mind" (82). Like the language that Nonceba imagines, Vera's poetic prose manifests a semiotic modality that unsettles rational discourse, to make visible those experiences which exceed logical organisation. The acute metaphoric and metonymic register of her prose, as well as its silences and aporias, produces a semiotised language, which stands in contradistinction to the "staccato narration" (165) of the hospital card which records Nonceba's injuries: "…inflicted by a sharp object…could be a blade…victim did not see the instrument…grievous harm…lips cut off…urgent surgery required …skin graft" (165). Vera's poetic prose is able to communicate the suffering and trauma left mute by this rationalised narration.

While Vera is centrally concerned with representing the traumatic silences wrought by Sibaso and the horror of the *Gukurahundi* on the one hand, her prose simultaneously seeks to imagine a language of healing after violation. The final chapter of *The Stone Virgins* traces Nonceba's efforts to partake once again of the socio-symbolic, despite her realisation that "everything has changed, gone, not to be recovered" (82). She can no longer enjoy the feeling of undifferentiated unity represented by her bond with Thenjiwe, but must build her future independently: "There had always been two of them, one walking beside the other like a shadow, now she is alone, the shadow to her own being" (83). Vera does not claim for Nonceba a unified subject-position after her trauma, but celebrates her courageous effort to survive despite the "wounds of war which no one can heal" (86). Significantly, it is Cephas who facilitates Nonceba's recovery and enables her

reintegration into society. The reader is surprised to find that he is no longer the impassioned, impulsive individual who followed Thenjiwe home from Thandabantu Store. Importantly, his actions are no longer determined by the insatiable desire which associated him with Sibaso earlier in the novel:

> He is waiting for a sign from Nonceba […] She pulls up the strap of her sundress back over her shoulder, unaware he is staring; immobile. He would like to keep this moment, prolong it, return over and over again to it, Nonceba the gentle wind in the centre of his dream. He condemns himself for noticing her in this manner, for his need to possess each movement of her arm. He is waiting for the certainty of her words. […] The purest emotion is when desire is not requited; when it is only an expectation, a belief, a quiet emotion. (161)

Cephas refuses his desire to "possess" Nonceba and, through recognising her autonomy, is able to offer her a truly restorative love. He finally realises the potential that his love for Thenjiwe originally represented: "He had not heard [Thenjiwe] at all. Perhaps this was the similarity between the sisters, to ask him to wait […] He would let Nonceba be. Leave her and bury his own longing, but not walk away" (164). Cephas is the first of Vera's male characters to question and reject a patriarchal system which asserts ownership over female subjects and their vulnerable bodies. The novel's ending suggests that healing from patriarchal violence can only occur when male desire is no longer accorded primacy. In the absence of a coercive masculinity, Nonceba is able to embrace a future, despite the wounds of the past. Importantly, Cephas acknowledges that Nonceba will never be completely restored from the traumas of the past, that "what he sees of Nonceba is only what is recoverable. […] It would be too much to ask her to be entire. It would be impossible" (158). Nonceba's "lingering scars" (157) refute the narratives of post-independence nationalism, which claim that colonised subjects have been restored by the new nation-state, and the novel asserts that traumatic histories must not be

concealed by idealised mythologies. Only when the brutalised, fractured subject is recognised as constitutive of the decolonised state can a new and different future be imagined.

In tracing Nonceba's reintegration into a social realm, *The Stone Virgins* represents the possibility for women brutalised by histories of political and patriarchal violence to begin 'speaking'. The novel does not, however, offer any simple solution to the predicament of women's traumatised silences. On the contrary, it is a difficult, anguished path that Nonceba travels in order to regain speech, and Vera represents her new found self-assuredness as the product of tremendous bravery. Like Phephelaphi in *Butterfly Burning*, she endures untold suffering before she is able to make her voice 'heard'. Both *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins* pose the establishment of dialogue between men and women as a tentative solution to the predicament of gendered subaltern silence. It is in the combination of female courage and male acknowledgement that Vera imagines the possibility for women to exceed their muted condition and 'rise into their own songs'.

CONCLUSION

In my discussion of *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins*, I have argued that Vera's fiction is crucially involved in a process of bringing the displaced figure of the subaltern, which Spivak argues is effaced in discourse, back into signification. I have utilised Spivak's discussions concerning the predicaments involved in representing subalternity to articulate areas of inquiry into Vera's work, and I have suggested that both novels heed Spivak's call for the establishment of an "ethical singularity" in our dealings with, and representations of, 'voiceless' and disempowered subjects. Much of my analysis has therefore been concerned with illuminating the complex ways in which Vera's prose negotiates the discursive dilemma posed by the subaltern subject-position. In my reading of *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins*, I have avoided the reductive assumption that the voices of Zimbabwe's dispossessed subjects are somehow seamlessly reclaimed by Vera in her fiction. Rather, I have argued that her poetic prose is involved in a process of 'opening' a discursive space for subalternity, which acknowledges its complex heterogeneity and provisionality.

In order to clarify how Vera's fiction is able to 'open spaces' for subalternity, I found it necessary to turn away from Spivak's theorising. Despite her interest in the ways in which literature might "move the subalterns into hegemony" ("More on Power/ Knowledge" 165), Spivak offers little comment on the dynamics which operate in literary language to effect this transgression. I have argued that Kristeva's notion of 'poetic language' provides a theory of literary transgression that critically illuminates the subversive value of Vera's fictional style. Following Kristeva's understanding of poetic language as a modality that is able to unsettle the silencing mechanisms of dominant monologic discourse, I have used the term 'poetic' not simply to suggest the aesthetic beauty of Vera's prose, but also to imply this disruptive, transgressive quality.

While the theories of 'poetic language' and 'subalternity' have offered valuable points of entry into Vera's texts, her writing has also provided the opportunity to rethink some of the assumptions put forward in Kristeva and Spivak's theorising. I have endeavoured to

show how the inventive prose of *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins* provides an occasion to bring these apparently disparate theories into a productive relationship. In doing so, I have challenged Spivak's notion that the application of Western critical theory to a postcolonial context necessarily results in the 're-colonisation' of the subaltern's voice. While it is imperative to acknowledge the limitations of such an application, and to exercise caution when pursuing it, I have shown how it may open valuable avenues of inquiry into postcolonial texts such as Vera's. In suggesting that her innovative poetic style requires more flexible reading practices than those that Spivak allows, my analysis has tacitly supported Mandi Maodzwa-Taruvinga and Robert Muponde's assertion that Vera provides "…a deconstructed notion of the African novel, one that often challenges the more conventional views of postcolonial literature and poses new vistas of imaginative, spiritual and psychological space" (ix).

Although I have been interested in testing how these literary theories may illuminate, and be illuminated by, Vera's prose, I have also been centrally concerned with exploring the significance of *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins* within Vera's historical and cultural context. In exploring Vera's representation of female identity in both novels, I have suggested that her texts disclose the discursive marginalisation of women which persists, not only in the historical eras in which her novels are set, but also in contemporary master narratives. I have argued that *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins* both displace the hegemony of patriarchal nationalism to disclose the real physical and psychological suffering which women endure under an inflexible paternal law.

Vera's preoccupation with exploring previously suppressed narratives of female experience is part of her broader concern with voicing untold or unelaborated versions of her country's past, and I have paid careful attention to the ways in which her prose critically engages dominant narratives of Zimbabwe's history. *The Stone Virgins* is especially significant in this regard for its representation of the politically motivated violence of Zimbabwe's early independence, which has remained unacknowledged by ZANU (PF) for over twenty-five years. I have argued that, by narrating the story of

Zimbabwe's decolonisation from the perspective of two of its disinherited subalterns, *The Stone Virgins* interrupts the homogeneous narratives of patriotic history currently disseminated by the government's third *Chimurenga* discourse. The novel does not provide a singular or univocal disavowal of ZANU (PF)'s 'grand narrative' of the nation, but rather represents an attempt to re-inscribe plurality, discontinuity and dissent into the dominant versions of Zimbabwe's past.

In a 1998 interview with Eva Hunter, Vera spoke of literature as a "mediating" force between society's 'voiceless' subjects and those who have access to power ("Truth of the struggle" 82). In my reading of her novels, I have supported this view of literature as a mode that is able to intervene in the oppressive silences enforced by dominant socio-political practice, but I have also been cautious not to collapse the distinction between subaltern speaking in a textual and an extra-textual realm. One of the crucial arguments that I have tried to reinforce is that this process of "mediation" does not secure a speaking position for marginalised subjects outside of the literary text, but that it can 'open spaces' for the ethical acknowledgement of subaltern suffering. In present-day Zimbabwe, where human rights violations continue to be perpetrated on a national scale, the need for such recognition and acknowledgement is more pressing than ever. The autocratic rule of ZANU (PF), which has spanned nearly three decades, has brutally silenced the traumatic stories of innumerable Zimbabweans and continues to renew their suffering. In this context, the anxieties that Vera so eloquently expresses about the silences of her country's unacknowledged and dispossessed subjects are ones that urgently need to be heard.

Although my study of *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins* has centred on Vera's treatment of narratives of subjugation and trauma, I hope I have also communicated the aspects of love, creativity and healing, which she consistently celebrates in her prose. These are certainly elements which she considered central to her fictional project and which account for much of the compelling lyricism of her writing: "I would not write if I weren't in search of beauty, if I was doing it only to advance a cause. I care deeply about my subjects, but I want to be consumed by figures of beauty" (Vera in Bryce, 224). This

'search for beauty' enabled Vera to maintain an intensely hopeful perspective, despite the devastating subject matter that so often concerned her. As an author who was both preoccupied with disclosing violent histories of subjection and with imagining ways to transcend them, she will certainly be remembered in the manner that she hoped: "As a writer who had no fear for words and who had an intense love of her nation" (Vera in Mutandwa).

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