Beauty in violence: (Re) imagining violence and trauma in Yvonne Vera's *Without a Name* and *Under the Tongue*

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ABSTRACT

This research report is a study of how Yvonne Vera re-imagines violence and trauma by creating alternative ways to narrate the traumatic experiences of women, creating both new spaces for them to speak and highlighting possibilities of healing. This study will focus on two of Yvonne Vera's texts *Under the Tongue* and *Without a Name* and how they form part of lineage in black women's writing that congregates around beautiful expression in order to capture black women's experience. Both texts deal with particularly difficult forms of violence: incest, rape, and infanticide. It is the contention of this study that while violent and traumatic experiences are difficult to speak of and narrate Vera manages to do so in a manner that maintains the dignity of her characters. This research therefore aims to highlight that through the use of aesthetics and transcending the limitations of ordinary language and physical space, Vera's characters occupy new spaces in which to express themselves. Vera contributes to the discourse on trauma and re-imagines violence and trauma, encouraging us to find new perspectives on both while creatively forming new ways of speaking to violence within African literary studies, ways that continue to be reflected in contemporary women's writing and poetry.

KEYWORDS

Yvonne Vera, Trauma and violence, Aesthetics of violence, *Under the Tongue*, *Without a Name,* African literary feminism, Zimbabwean literature, Zimbabwean history.

DECLARATION

I declare that this research report is my own unaided work. It is being submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in African Literature at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.

—L.Mojapelo————————

Lebohang Mojapelo

15 March 2022

DEDICATION

To my children: Thandazani, Zion, Kgomotso, Kgatliso, Ayanda and Anele.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Yvonne Vera is a Zimbabwean woman writer (1965-2005) who produced a range of art including novels, short stories, and curated the Zimbabwe National Art Gallery for many years. She was also an academic in the field of English Literature with a Doctorate from York University in Toronto, Canada. Her publications consist of a collection of short stories *Why Don't You Carve Other Animals* (1992), with five novels following thereafter: *Nehanda* (1993), *Without a Name* (1994), *Under the Tongue* (1996), *Butterfly Burning* (1998) and *The Stone Virgins* (2002).

Vera's writing occupies a unique place in African writing on violence, gender and the discourse on the nation and identity. Her own motivations are uncovered in this interview with Ranka Primorac:

> ...what I want even now, to show is — are — the contradictions in their minds, the experiences which are, you know, kept down, which are in their minds, and I wanted to reveal that. So that men, or people in general, or 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 the 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

those feelings. And therefore how much more difficult that life is, you know. For someone whose mind is full of termites, you know.[1]

In light of this, for this research report I choose to focus on two of Vera's novels *Without a Name* and *Under the Tongue* and analyse how Yvonne Vera re-imagines violence and trauma by creating alternative ways to narrate the traumatic experiences of women, creating both new spaces for them to speak. Set in the context of the second liberation war in Zimbabwe, Vera's novels *Under the Tongue* and *Without a Name* deal with particularly difficult forms of violence: incest, rape, and infanticide. I contend that Vera's choice of style and application of aesthetics in her writing can be characterised as beauty, and the nature of beauty is to bring us closer to the truth, maintain value and dignity for victims as well as create localities of healing.

Of particular interest, are two main lines of thought that underline this analysis of Vera's work: Judith Herman on trauma, and the work of Elaine Scarry on beauty. Herman particularly highlights the inability of language to fully capture the traumatic, while their intricate study of traumatic symptoms, which is clearly based on the experiences of victims, will be the basis of the study of the characters within Vera's texts. Scarry, on the other hand opens the concept of beauty as not merely a physical category, but a political category as well, and provides the aesthetic as a place within which to understand what is valued, what is not and how this locality can shift how we respond to violence and its victims. According to Scarry beauty "…comes to us, with no work of our own, then leaves

[1] Vera, Yvonne, "'The Place of the Woman is the Place of the Imagination': Yvonne Vera interviewed by Ranka Primorac, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 39(3) (SAGE 2004), 151-171

us prepared to undergo a giant labour" in the face of the injustices portrayed. We therefore respond better to prompts by beauty rather than direct ones.

Through beauty Vera gives her characters the subjectivity they have been denied in representations in the writing of the nation and trauma. The very characters Vera creates are drawn to the beauty that surrounds them and they deploy this to create aesthetic experiences for themselves that allow them to transcend their present lives and escape in search of healing and hope. They do this by creating alternative, non-linguistic forms and psychological spaces like song, nature, music, and even physical beauty. This is in line with the lineage of black women's writing that congregates around beautiful expression in order to capture black women's experiences. As the study will show, Vera occupies this lineage which has extended to contemporary forms of the poetic by other black women writers as a form of witnessing critical experiences black women face.

The characters in Vera's texts use the beautiful to not only create alternative spaces for themselves and invent possibilities of healing, but also to fulfil their desire for certainty and to maintain hope. For them, beauty becomes a locality for both escape and healing. However, while there is hope created, Vera does not create certainty nor do her characters have a guarantee they will be healed. This is to highlight the limited room within the society she represents, for women to articulate themselves. It is through the use of beautiful expression that black women are gathering for themselves and encountering themselves. To write their pain and trauma, witness themselves and remind themselves of their beauty, to have something to hold onto, in a chorus that edifies and transcends and allows us to live from a different place. I therefore locate Vera in the present, and in the past of this chorus; she carried on as others carry on now.

1.1 Why Yvonne Vera?

Vera has contributed to what I would consider to be an African women writers' cultural language of speaking to particularly gendered forms of violence within African literature. Memorialising and archiving women's lives as historical subjects continues a now established language and lineage of intimacy through which history is articulated. It is a lineage that is carried on today particularly in contemporary African women's poetry as well as historical studies; as postcolonial feminist women historians and writers have and continue to recover women in the annals of history. Vera is part of a lineage aligned with Toni Morrison's use of rememory, a form or remembering what is in the margins of history, which Vera also writes through in order to memorialise women's lives that are neglected within history or mistreated/alienated.

Here it is important to mention the recent popular revival of the written poetry form in contemporary African women writers such as South African Koleka Putuma, Malawian Upile Chisala, Nigerian Ijeoma Umebinyuo, and British-Somali Warsan Shire. The intimate nature in which these poets capture black women and hold them gently to create healing texts is important. They not only remember black women, but they centre them, continuing a lineage of continuously finding innovative and creative ways to speak to black African women's experiences, eloquently reminding us that black women are not invisible. This freedom of experimentation and exploration of new and liberated forms of storytelling reflect both Vera's pioneering and extension of the African women's literary

archive. Therefore, grounding Vera in this lineage locates her in contemporary ways that extend the relevance of her work over time, thereby necessitating this study.

1.2 Representations of gender in writing the nation.

What is considered to be canonical African literature for a long time was dominated by men writers who silenced not only their women characters, but also women's experience in Africa, especially during colonialism and thereafter. Writers like Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Ayi Kwei Armah and Meja Mwangi were criticised for their biased representations of women characters. Julian Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi, writing in response to this phenomenon, states how for a long time, in African literature, the woman was always spoken for and shown to be a passive, unquestioning object whose portrayal has never done justice to their experiences, it was always the black man at the centre and the subject[2]. In many ways, women were never shown to be victims of oppression and if they were this victimhood was never analysed, it was always shown in relation to the emasculation and oppression of men. Senghor, a leading Negritude theorist and African thinker went as far as to articulate that "the African woman does not need to be liberated. She has been free for many thousands of years"[3].

Therefore, according to Molara Ogundipe-Leslie "Feminists have posited that the woman writer has two major responsibilities: first to tell about being a woman; secondly to describe reality from a woman's view, a woman's perspective."[4] Juliet Okoknwo, a

[2] Nfah-Abbenyi, Juliana Makuchi, "Introduction", *Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality and Difference* (Indiana: 1997), 5
[3] Senghor, Leopold, "Elegy of the Circumcised", *Poems of Black Africa* (New York 1975), 159-61
[4] Ogundipe-Leslie, Morala, *Re-creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations* (New Jersey 1994), 57

leading African feminist literary critic of the time, elaborates "Not only were women characters few, but when they appeared they did so in subservient and insignificant roles. Even then, very little effort was made to illuminate their lives in any detail within the circumscribed role assigned them in traditional society".[5]

This required a re-writing of the woman as subject and this is the task women writers like Buchi Emecheta, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Mariama Ba, Bessie Head and many others took upon themselves. Their aim was to highlight the injustice and the patriarchal nature, not only of oppression but of nationalism as well: "These women do not separate one form of oppression from another; neither do they advocate such a separation as might only sensationalise certain issues and sweep equally important issues under the carpet, reinforcing the general ignorance and neglect of problems of African women"[6], which is where Vera's writing finds its genesis. She performs the work of writing the nation but by bringing out the violence within the "private sphere", in the background of the more "public" nationalist war she blurs the lines between the private and the public. Or rather, she highlights the non-existence of the implied boundary between the two. Notable in this lineage is work by feminist historians Pumla Gqola, Gabeba Baderoon, Yvette Christianse, Barbra Boswell and others who use the body to trace and reveal the nature of trauma and how this translates to the narration of history.

In this report it is important to frame my theoretical use of the following categories: woman/man and feminine/masculine. In terms of gender, I refer to the masculine,

[5] Okonkwo, Juliet, "Nuruddin Farah and the Changing Roles of Women", *World Literature Today 58 (2),* (1984), 215-216

[6] Nfah-Abbenyi, Juliana Makuchi, "Introduction", *Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality and Difference* (Indiana: 1997), 5

feminine as well as men and women respectively borrowing from a very specific socio-historical context. The first concept is understanding women and men as the manifestation of heteronormative patriarchy and in line with this, that women and men are feminine and masculine respectively. I use these terms as they are pinned by patriarchy and the colonial systems that have reproduced these strict binary terms within the period of post-independence in Zimbabwe which Vera writes in and is read in.

As expressed by Susan Andrade, "...at the moment when the cultural production and political agitation of African men were easily assimilated to a nationalist paradigm, women's culture and politics were often understood as unrelated to nationalism, and, therefore, as not engaged in the larger political process".[7] By relegating women and their literary products to be concerned with the domestic, the domestic space was seen as not having any relation to the nation or the political, even though it is highly defined by gender and sexuality as much as race, ethnicity, and class.

Andrade continues to suggest a reading of the writing of the nation by men as complimented by the familial narratives that focused on women protagonists who were actively producing an alternative narration of the nation. She states: "While literary fiction is never the unmediated expression of an outlook towards nationalism, women's relationship to nationalism in fiction nevertheless has been and continues to be almost always more oblique than in that of their male counterparts."[8] Placing the reading of women writing at the same time as their male counterparts in writing the nation is therefore central to understanding the relationship between domestic life and nationalism.

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[7] Andrade, Susan, "Gender and 'the Public Sphere' in Africa: Writing women and rioting women", *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity* (54), 45
[8] *Ibid*., 47

1.3 Constructing the nation and Zimbabwean identity

Vera deliberately places her novels in different contexts, all within specific historical moments of Zimbabwe: precolonial, colonial and the liberation war. Invaded by the British Pioneer Column headed by Cecil John Rhodes in the 1890s, pre-colonial Zimbabwe resisted and King Lobengula, who was then the leader of the Ndebele in Matebeleland was defeated in 1893. This led to a revolt from both VaShona in Mashonaland and the Ndebele, which was the first Chimurenga of 1896-97. This resistance was led by Shona spirit mediums Nehanda and Kaguvi but was heavily suppressed through violence and the two were hanged.[9] For sixty years British minority rule was instituted in Zimbabwe until the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland from 1953-63. By then known as Southern Rhodesia, Ian Douglas Smith became Prime minister in 1964 through his party the Rhodesian Front winning the election. Smith immediately began a rebellion against Britain due to the pressure from the British government to include black people in government. At this time, Ghana had already gained independence as several other African countries had mounted physical resistance and were well on their way to independence from colonial rule under the British. However, Smith refused and in 1965 announced the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) from Britain. From this point African nationalists decided to launch a war of liberation after rejecting the UDI. The prolonged second Chimurenga was in full effect from 1966 to 1979.[10]

[9] Ranger, Terence, *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia, 1896-7: A study of African Resistance* (London 1967)
[10] *Ibid*

Colonisation meant the dispossession of land from the local black population, forced labour and the destruction of social institutions while instituting Christianity.[11] The second Chimurenga (1970-79) occurred in the bush through guerrilla warfare and led to the eventual liberation of Zimbabwe. The language of the second Chimurenga made use of the language of nationalism and a determined fight to gain back the land stolen by the British settlers and was led by soldiers and political leaders. Two movements led the liberation war: Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) and the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) with support from Tanzania, Botswana, Zambia and Mozambique, countries that had already gained independence. In 1979 after negotiations at Lancaster House in Britain, Zimbabwe gained independence and came into being.

Vera's first novel, *Nehanda* is set in the context of the first Chimurenga and details the story of one of the main figures of this war and time. Nehanda is widely known, in Zimbabwean Shona spiritual tradition, to be a spirit medium that has lived before and always comes back to inhabit a living human, usually a woman, as a guide from the ancestral land. Nehanda, in this case, inhabited a young woman named Charwe who led the resistance against the settler colonists and therefore became one of the spirit mediums to be murdered by hanging[12]. Her hanging was very symbolic as she represented the centre of Shona institutions from which all life and organisation of social life was drawn from.[13]

According to historian Terence Ranger, when Nehanda and Kaguvi, Gumboreshumba, a fellow medium ancestral spirit were executed, Nehanda prophesied

[11] *Ibid*
[12] Ranger, Terence, *Revolt is Southern Rhodesia, 1896-7: A study of African Resistance* (London 1967)
[13] Ibid

that her bones would rise again [14]. Those who stood to fight in the second Chimurenga drew from this prophecy to reach freedom and gain independence in 1980. Indeed, Nehanda is said to have come back through a young woman named Kanzaruwa, a medium who became part of the liberation struggle, becoming central to ZANU-PF's effort to mobilise. Commander Josiah Tongogara noted: "When we started the war the spirit mediums helped with recruitment...Mbuya Nehanda was the most important recruit in those days. Once the children, the youth and girls in the area, knew that Nehanda had joined, they came in large numbers."[15]

Across the continent and in Zimbabwe, writers took up the nationalist project of the liberation struggle; Nehanda was a notable symbol of the literature used to "imagine the nation", as defined by Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*[16]. Nehanda's image was continuously applied in the construction of the "nation" of Zimbabwe through the following writings: Solomon Mutsvairo's *Feso* (1956), Stanlake Samkange's *Year of the Uprising* (1978) and Charles Samupindi's *Death Throes: The Trial of Mbuya Nehanda* (1990).

In particular, *Feso* by Mutsvairo is considered by Muchemwa to be the "literary originator of an unproblematised ethnic nationalism".[17] Mkwesha states how Mustvairo "initiates the cult of Nehanda, engaging orality to construct a history of nationalist resistance. Presented and constructed as a figure of violence, her spirit associated with her

[14] Ranger, Terence, *Revolt is Southern Rhodesia, 1896-7: A study of African Resistance* (London 1967)
[15] Lan, David, *Guns and Rain: Guerrilla and Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe* (Harare 1985), 147-8
[16] Anderson, Benedict R, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, New York 1991)
[17] Muchemwa, Kizito Z, "Some thoughts on history, memory, and writing in Zimbabwe", *Versions of Zimbabwe: New Approaches to Literature and Culture,* R. Muponde and R. Primorac, eds (Harare 2005, 195

militaristic nationalism and xenophobic patriotism, Mutswairo's Nehanda is one whose warrior spirit is appealed to in order to resuscitate the warrior spirit of Zimbabwean masculinity that is seen as having been feminised by colonisation."[18] She began to represent the fight for land, restoration of dignity and the "power of traditional authority."[19]

In this way, Nehanda is no longer an individual but a nationalist symbol that defines citizenship, in this case, to the Shona people of which Mutsvairo writes, which can be extended. This is obviously problematic and exclusionary in several ways: citizenship and belonging to this imagined nation had already been determined as being Shona and masculine as represented by the militaristic might she is presented as. All of this, appropriated by ZANU-PF who are now and continue to be the central representation of struggle heroes and leaders and essentially, as we come to see later on, owners of the land, identity and story of Zimbabwe through Nehanda.[20]

That Vera's first book is about Nehanda is significant to who Vera is and what her writing came to represent throughout her career, and what this study is predicated upon. She revisits the story of Nehanda, its roots, and the young woman, Charwe who is inhabited by this spirit. Kaguvi, her counterpart, is presented as the weeping warrior while Charwe is presented as the agent of her own story, not a mere symbol. The context in which Vera writes, the era of nationalist euphoria which glorifies the masculine battle for the freedom of the nation produces texts that refer to women only as bystanders and their

[18] Mkwesha, Faith, "Zimbabwean women writers from 1950's to the present: Re-creating Gender Images" PhD diss. (Stellenbosch University 2016), 23
[19] Ibid
[20] Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Sabelo, Rethinking "Chimurenga" and "Gukurahundi" in Zimbabwe: A critique of partisan national history", *African Studies Review* (55) 3 (2012)

experiences are not only nullified but do not seem to exist at all in the annals of this history. The presence of women and their contribution to the nationalist cause is clearly undermined.

Similarly, there are silences which Vera also writes into in *The Stone Virgins,* which is the Gukurahundi. The Gurkurahundi is a genocide committed against the Ndebele people in Matebeleland by the Zimabwe National Army between 1983 and 1987 that resulted in the deaths of over 20 000 people[21]. This moment, however, is not acknowledged in the official history of Zimbabwe nor the patriotic history which, as chronicled above, is deliberately exclusionary. According to Zimbabwean historian Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni "Zimbabwean nationalism is thus predicated on the assumption that diversity of ethnic and racial identities has to be homogenised into a singular national identity" and to create an ideology "...around which imaginations of a monolithic nation-state had to crystallize."[22]

Mkwesha writes of Vera's *Nehanda*: "She revisits the past, the first Chimurenga revolt, to recuperate women's role in storytelling, use of words to shape the future, and their physical participation in the rebellion by recreating the image of the rebellious defiant spiritual woman-hero Nehanda." [23] By doing so, Vera establishes a Zimbabwean women's lineage of literary tradition rooted in oral traditions and a tradition of fighting for their own liberation. Similarly, and more recently, in her book *These Bones Shall Rise Again* (2018), Panashe Chigumadzi continues this tradition by challenging the

[21] Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S.J, "Rethinking "Chimurenga" and "Gukurahundi" in Zimbabwe: A critique of partisan national history", *African Studies Review 55*(3), (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 4.
[22] Ibid
[23] Mkwesha, Faith, "Zimbabwean women writers from 1950's to the present: Re-creating Gender Images" PhD diss. (Stellenbosch University 2016), 24

Zimbabwean state's continued erasure and obfuscation of political narratives and calls out to the spirit of Nehanda to create a more inclusive understanding of Zimbabwe. Vera's writing therefore figures as part of the competing nature of history, especially the history of Zimbabwe, while also specifically focusing on writing women's experiences.

1.4 Summary of the texts.

As stated earlier, the two texts of concern in this report are *Under the Tongue* and *Without a Name*. *Under the Tongue* highlights the journey of Zhizha, a young girl who has been sexually abused by her father, Muroyiwa. Her life is chronicled in her first-person narrative in a staccato voice mostly in a stream of consciousness with no dialogue. She can hardly speak anymore, and her life is surrounded by silence, a silence that permeates the text. This is well highlighted by the title of the text *Under the Tongue*, Zhizha's is "a tongue that no longer lives, no longer weeps,"[24] it is burdened by the memory of the traumatic event and speaking becomes hard to do as she is haunted by memories of horror.

According to Judith Herman[25] one's relationship with the world is formed initially with the first caregiver, with whom the child forms a bond of trust, and this informs the relationship one has with the world itself. This trust is sustained and forms the basis of beliefs, humanity, and relationships with others. When one encounters trauma, they look to the world, their caregivers and/or God for help. When it does not come, they lose that faith and belief in goodness. This affects the relationships this person has as trust is lost

[24]Vera, Yvonne, *Under the Tongue* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1996), 1
[25] Herman Lewis, Judith, *Trauma and Recovery* (London: HarperCollins, 1992).

and their sense of safety in intimacy disappears. Instead, what is left is a strong feeling of betrayal, shame and disconnection from society and formerly close familial relationships.

Zhizha's disconnection is manifested by her inability to speak and communicate with others, and she is very aware that she has lost something. "Father whispers an embrace of lightning…My voice is sinking down into my stomach. My voice is crumbling and falling apart and spreading through his fingers. My voice hides beneath rock. My voice burns beneath my chest. Lightning finds me, embraces the moon, finds me fallen from the sky. I hear father."[26] By likening her father to lightning she is noting his violent and destructive nature, showing her awareness of what he has destroyed within her. He becomes the source of her nightmares, a figure of danger, fear, and the reason for her loss of her subjectivity.

Zhizha lives with her grandparents and has an especially close relationship with her grandmother, who also carries burdens of memories and wounds, and she does not hesitate to carry the burden of Zhizha's pain. When Zhizha's mother finds out that Muroyiwa, her husband has raped her daughter, she is so furious she kills him, and she is sent to jail. Zhizha is affected by the absence of her mother, whom she dreams about and longs for her return. When her mother comes back, Zhizha hardly remembers her and takes time to warm up to her again. The relationship created between Grandmother and Zhizha is a special one in which Grandmother, burdened by the pains of being a woman in a patriarchal world, tries to teach Zhizha the necessitated women's art of forgetting, remembering, and carrying one's sorrows.

[26]Vera, Yvonne, *Under the Tongue* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1996), 3

Without a Name is the story of Mazvita, a young woman from Mubaira, Zimbabwe. She is raped by a guerrilla after they invade her village and set her parents homestead on fire. She moves to Kadoma where she falls in love with Nyenyedzi, a farm worker dedicated to the land and the fight for liberation. Mazvita however, hates the land which she associates with her rape and what happened in her village. She feels restless and wants to detach herself from this fight for collective freedom but wants individual freedom, autonomy: space for self-actualisation outside of this masculine war. She leaves Nyenyedzi and goes to Harare, the big city where the nature of psychological colonialism is revealed in the skin lightening creams adorned by the African women. The loneliness and the erasure of identity due to the brutality of the colonial regime is made evident by the zombie like state of most of the citizens walking the streets.

In the context in which Vera writes, the second Chimurenga, the land in Zimbabwe is at the centre of the discourse of nationalism. Staying on the land was essential to the fight for it and when Mazvita is raped by a freedom fighter, she sees it as a betrayal of the land itself. Her belief in the land is lost: "She had loved the land, saw it through passionate and intense moments of freedom, but to her the land has no fixed loyalties…She understood the kind of loyalty Nyenyedzi referred to, but she was ready to move into another sphere of presence, to depart."[27] Mazvita is now determined to find her identity outside of the land and the fight she no longer believes in.

In Harari, Mazvita lives with Joel, a man who takes care of her financially while she sees to his other needs, yet she still feels unfulfilled as she realises she came to the city only to rely on another man. She is slowly suffocating, and this is heightened when

[27]Vera, Yvonne, *Without a Name* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1994), 34

she notices she is pregnant with Nyenyedzi's child. Joel begins to treat her badly when she falls pregnant and when the child is born, Mazvita feels her freedom threatened and she kills her baby to protect her autonomy. Her baby never seems real to her, and she never names the child. Vera highlights the brutality of the death of her baby while simultaneously chronicling the trauma and pain Mazvita goes through in such a detailed manner.

After Mazvita kills her child, she becomes psychotic and the traumatic effects of all she has experienced come in the form of a haunting as the symptoms seem to take on a life of their own. They also manifest physically as she cannot escape the guilt of her crime: "Her neck was twisted. A bone at the bottom of her neck told her that her neck had been turned and turned till it could no longer find a resting place. Her neck had been broken. She felt a violent piercing like shattered glass, on her tongue where she carried fragments of her being."[28] This is reminiscent of the nature in which she killed her child: by twisting its neck till it died.

Eventually Mazvita breaks down and survives in a completely post-traumatic stress disordered world and suffers. She goes in search of respite from this suffering and ends up on a journey back home to Mubaira with her dead child, hoping to hear someone call her name to remind her who she is. According to Muponde[29] Mazvita's search for self-actualisation is doomed from the beginning and even though there is less and less hope as she goes along, she never lets go of the possibility for more.

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[28]Vera, Yvonne, *Without a Name* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1994), 3

[29]Muponde, Robert, "The sight of the dead body: dystopia as resistance in Vera's *Without a Name*", *Sign and Taboo: Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera* ed. Robert Muponde and MandiTaruvinga (Harare: Weaver Press, 2002), 118- 126

The next two chapters contain the literature review and theoretical framework of the study while the fourth chapter which will focus on the writing techniques of the author whose poetic language and several aesthetics I theorise as beauty. I analyse the ways in which her characters create alternative worlds and spaces that transcend their situations and contain their trauma and memory. They deploy beauty in order to find expression and seek healing. I argue that these spaces are important for them, and the use of beauty creates promise and hope and yet healing is not guaranteed[30]. This ambivalence is important in exposing the limited space these characters have to find healing, while exploring how the use of beauty prompts us towards justice. Additionally, the next two chapters reveal the lineage in which Vera's work is vital to through maintaining beautiful expression in capturing black women's experiences. A lineage that is made evident in contemporary African women's writing.

The final chapter will be a conclusion of my findings through a summary of my discussions. I will reiterate the unique place Vera's work occupies within the body of African literature.

[30] Vera, Yvonne, "'The Place of the Woman is the Place of the Imagination': Yvonne Vera interviewed by Ranka Primorac, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 39(3) (SAGE 2004), 158

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Vera's writing oeuvre has been the subject of much discussion and critique within literature and her memory is well held, even though as a woman writer she faced strong critique for her choice subject and style of writing. In her interview with Primorac, Vera points to two main things in the reception of her writing: resistance to 'sophistication' to a language that she is related to through violent imposition and secondly, feminism. She states: "If you write in a style that quickly tells the reader that you are situating yourself as a woman writer and that your act of writing is perhaps structured around a particular idea of, I don't know, body, or structures in the society or independence: that you are making an argument about female identity — immediately that is seen as transporting foreign ideas. You are not behaving yourself basically. You are hysterical."[31] It is these "hysterical" concerns that are discussed in this chapter: violation, motherhood, madness and beauty.

2.1 Writing violation.

In Zimbabwean literature the exposition of violence is limited to the liberation struggle, according to Muponde,

> Some of the war novels published after independence in 1980 had predictably heroic protagonists. Here I have in mind Edmund Chipamaunga's *A Fighter for Freedom* (1982); Garikayi Mutasa's *The Contact* (1985); I.V Mazorodze's *Silent Journey from the East* (1986); Shimmer Chinodya's *Child of War* (1985).

[31] Vera, Yvonne, "'The Place of the Woman is the Place of the Imagination': Yvonne Vera interviewed by Ranka Primora, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 39(3) (SAGE 2004), 158

> Protagonists of these novels joined the war on the 'right side, and made their contribution towards the repossession of the land that the white settlers had 'wrested' from the Africans. The war is portrayed as a glorious opportunity to 'correct the imbalances' in land distribution.[32]

In terms of women's experiences of violence there are very particular tropes within which African women were written and portrayed in African Literature during the time Vera was writing. There was a large body of work on the writing of women in a particular binary: as the village woman who is the proprietor of all values and morals and the prostitute figure in the city who embodies the decay of the moral fibre of African society. Beyond this, as is articulated very well by Stratton[33], there was the metaphor of the African continent as a woman violated and plundered. African feminists noted the lack of insight into the portrayal of women characters in African literary texts especially within what was considered the canon. There was no exploration of the suffering or victimhood of African women and yet the prevailing image of Africa portrayed is one of a violated woman. Africa was seen as a violated space which has been plundered, victimised, raped for its resources and left bare and barren. This imagery was very common, and the prevailing image is that of the African man who is directly affected by this violation of 'her' and his duty is to save 'her'. Therefore, the violence of the nationalist movement was formulated to regain masculinity in fighting for the dignity of the African continent.

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[32] Muponde, Robert, "The sight of the dead body: dystopia as resistance in Vera's *Without a Name*", *Sign and Taboo: Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera* ed. Robert Muponde and Mandi Taruvinga (Harare: Weaver Press, 2002), 118

[33] Stratton, Florence, "The shallow grave: archetypes of female experiences in African fiction" in *Research in African Literatures* vol 19, 2 (1998)

A number of things can be read into this imagery. The first is the sense that women are seen as passive and simply as victims with no agency, they need men to save them. However, there is an inherent contradiction in that although Africa is seen as a woman, what she experiences is not about her experiences at all but rather as a possession of the man and whatever happens to her is an erasure or insult to the African man's masculinity and subjectivity. In the same way, most African literary texts that spoke of rape, spoke to a larger condition- that of the violation of our continent. This means that real experiences of rape were overlooked in their individual nature.

In *Without a Name*, Mazvita is raped by one of the guerrillas and because she could not see his face, she begins to hate the land- since it is representative of what the man is fighting for. In his analysis of Mazvita's rape in *Without a Name*, Zhuwarara ignores the individuality of the act by stating "In such a context the woman's body functions as a metaphor or trope of mother earth. As readers, we cannot help but observe that just as the foreign settlers continue to rape the land for their own benefit, Mazvita has also been raped by a stranger whose social outlook is informed by the kind of outlook usually associated with patriarchal societies."[34] In another take, Wilson-Tagoe contrasts Chindoya's writing of rape in *Harvest of Thorns* with Vera's framing of Mazvita's rape. She notes that while Chinodya frames the rape of women by male guerrillas as a moral issue - "the questions it raises point to masculine sexual anxieties and guilt as well as the sacrifices made by the fighters: the suppression of male libido for the purity and integrity of the national cause."[35] This, according to Wilson-Tagoe keeps rape and the discourse on it within these

[34]Zhuwarara, Rino, *Introduction to Zimbabwean Literature in English*, (Harare: College Press, 2001)
[35] Wilson- Tagoe, Nana, "History, gender and the problem of gender in the novels of Yvonne Vera", *Sign and Taboo: Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera* ed. Robert Muponde and Mandi Taruvinga (Harare: Weaver Press, 2002), 171

patriarchal confines and does not explore the nature of male and female sexuality in this culture while maintaining the larger focus on the war and liberation.

An important evolution in the development of theory surrounding trauma and rape as stated by Herman is when "Feminists redefined rape as a crime of violence rather than a sexual act"[36], allowing for further definition of rape as a form of control of women by men and perhaps the most profound statement in relation to this is one made by Susan Brownmiller:

> Man's discovery that his genitalia could serve as a weapon to generate fear must rank as one of the most important discoveries of prehistoric times, along with the use of fire and the first crude stone axe. From prehistoric times to present, I believe, rape has played a critical function. It is nothing, more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear.[37]

This is reminiscent of Nurrudin Farah's writing[38] of the traditional Somali family and how its structure enables the success of a military regime in a number of ways. Farah suggests that the traditional family becomes the place where Somalis are conditioned to allow this authoritarian structure. According to Wright "He reveals that, for all the vaunted egalitarianism of Somalia's traditional political institutions, the authoritarian family structure at the roots of society actually conditions people and predisposes them towards the tyranny officially endorsed and institutionalised by military regimes."[39]

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[36]Herman Lewis, Judith, *Trauma and Recovery* (London: HarperCollins, 1992), 30
[37]Ibid
[38] Mainly found in his trilogy entitled "Variations on the theme of African dictatorship" which includes the texts *Sardines* (1979), *Sweet and Sour Milk* (1981) and *Close Sesame* (1983).
[39]Derek Wright, "Fathers and sons: *Sweet and Sour Milk*" in *The Novels of Nuruddin Farah* (1994), 48

Paternal power and violence become an extension of the state, with the space of the family being drawn into the monopoly of the state and under its control. This highlights the difficulty to separate the public from the personal- "Private life is just another domain of public politics for the regime."[40] The women are used as political instruments and "Sexual politics are part of the larger political strategies."[41]

In *Sardines* Amina is raped because the perpetrators are trying to violate her father[42]. She is not considered as a person, but as a space on which the power struggles within the state can be acted upon. Further aggravating is that her rape is only considered in this context, as a political act and instead of punishing the perpetrators, they are freed because the General does not want to rouse opposition. The laws that exist on a national level are evidence of the patriarchal nature of the society: "In this country rape is not punishable as other crimes of violence. The characteristic compromise arrived at is usually that the rapist marries the victim, accepts her hand in marriage in the presence of the elders of his and her clan."[43] This denies the woman's pain who is, once again, not considered to have feeling and further overlooked.

Similarly, Vera's writing of rape seeks to highlight rape as violence and the liberation war as a patriarchal exercise. "It makes rape the spur to a woman's subjectification and in this way links the poetics and politics of gender, making gender a major cultural, social and political theme. The history of the national struggle, in this

[40]Dubravka Juraga, "Nuruddin Farah's Variations on the Theme of African Dictatorship: Patriarchy, Gender and Political Oppression in Somalia", *Emerging Perspectives on Nuruddin Farah* ed Derek Wright (New Jersey: Africa World Press Inc, 2002), 300.
[41]Ibid
[42] Nuruddin Farah. *Sardines*. (Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 1992), 128
[43] Ibid

context, then acquires larger perspectives as the freedom it demands is ironically juxtaposed to other freedoms."[44] The imagined veil between the public and the private, the fictional and historical are both blurred by Vera when she casts the violence within the home into the larger perspectives of freedom and identity.

2.2 Writing motherhood

In her work though Vera is not limited to violence in which women are the victims but also the perpetrators. She challenges dominant images of motherhood and womanhood which are also silencing and oppressive mechanisms. She tackles issues surrounding abortion and infanticide which are both spaces of silence within African narratives and in *Without a Name* we encounter the tragic killing of Mazvita's child which she performs herself.

In a study of the mediation of narratives of infanticide in the media Charles Briggs states that

> …both the state and activists assumed that the relationship between narrativity is imminent, that particular acts of violence prompt specific types of narrative; justice consists of revealing the proper relationship between violence and narrative. What is very clear, however, from the narratives from journalists and the way justice is carried out, are the prevailing stereotypes and embedded ideas surrounding women and infanticide.[45]

[44] Wilson- Tagoe, Nana, "History, gender and the problem of gender in the novels of Yvonne Vera", *Sign and Taboo: Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera* ed. Robert Muponde and Mandi Taruvinga (Harare: Weaver Press, 2002), 171

[45] Briggs, Charles, "Mediating infanticide: theorising relations between narrative and violence", *Cultural Anthropology* 22 (California: University of California Press, 2007), 318

The stereotypes also spread to the narration of this type of violence in the same way that other types of violence are related, and this is what Briggs makes the object of his study. He attempts to analyse how the link between violence and the narration or representation of violence has become naturalized, established, and powerful. There is hardly ever an attempt to understand the context or situations of the women especially considering the unfair nature of the society we live in. This is also reminiscent of the character of Sethe in Toni Morrison's *Beloved,* who kills her infant after running away from slavery, determined to murder all her children to save them from slavery. Normally, women are left stranded with children to take care of, yet they are still expected, even in the most extreme situations, to be natural, stereotypical women who are caring. When they do not display these emotions and in distress kill their children, they are considered monsters and are condemned even in the narration of these stories because,

> In general, society views women as innate nurturers who are expected to remain joyful and happy during their pregnancy and throughout motherhood. Consequently, when new mothers…experience negative emotions, they often suffer in silence and guilt that often accompany such feelings.[46]

This assumption inherent in both the ideas of women as innate nurturers and the subsequent narration of acts that are contrary to this idea is important to recognise. In order to not only challenge the existing stereotypes but also create new forms of perception, Vera moves away from these stereotypes and like many other black women writers, challenges herself to find new locations of language. Both Morrison and Vera signal that motherhood, and the expression of motherly love and nurturing can be based

[46] Shwartz, Lita and Isser, Natalie, *Child Homicide: Parents who Kill* (New York: CRC Press, 2007), 128

on actions that seem to oppose what is considered "natural". That being a black or African mother has different implications for mothering, and that needs to be accounted for in expressions of motherhood within fiction. According to Hayden White language "is not merely a neutral discursive form that may or may not be used to represent real events in their aspect as developmental processes but rather entails ontological and epistemic choices with distinct ideological and even specifically political implications."[47] This causal link between experience and narration therefore seems presumptuous and has to be broken down especially in trauma narratives. In light of the idea of a new cultural language of trauma, it is important to understand how these links can be disassembled in order to allow for new forms of representation.

2.3 Writing madness

In her study of particular texts by Bessie Head and Calixthe Beyala, Brown notes the importance of questioning and undermining the ideas of rationality that are assumed in the normal representation of trauma and violence[48]. This is essential considering that trauma itself is irrational. When one experiences a traumatic event, the event goes into the 'active memory'[49] part of the brain, an abnormal form of memory which breaks into the conscious and present and this memory invades normal life. "It is as if time stops at the moment of trauma."[50] Kopf states "Traumatising violence, however, cannot be integrated

[47] White, Hayden, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987), 4
[48]Brown, Caroline, "A divine madness: the secret language of trauma in the novels of Bessie Head and Calixthe Beyala", *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 28 (Duke University Press 2008)
[49]Herman Lewis, Judith, *Trauma and Recovery* (London: HarperCollins, 1992)
[50]Ibid., 43

into narrative memory, as it puts the self and its usual functions out of order."[51] The nature of these traumatic memories is very different from normal memories in that they cannot be assimilated into the narrative part of the brain that contains memory as they are not linear, they overwhelm the mind which cannot process the event.[52]

Trauma divides the victims' subjectivity, rendering them unable to speak of the event that in their right mind has not occurred.[53] Due to active memory, the experience has not occurred therefore their ability to refer to it or testify it is rendered difficult. Trauma therefore has no referent and a narrative can only be created using predetermined language and words that will satisfy an enquiry and yet these words do not represent the experience itself.[54] Murray articulates this notion by stating that:

> The traumatized subject's interiority is scarred to such an extent that the subject's own interiority becomes a kind of foreign land. They cannot express what is going on inside them because they cannot know it. They cannot know it because they have not experienced it in the full sense of the word. This is why the interior of the traumatized subject is "non-self-coincidental." It does not coincide with the self because, as something that has not been fully experienced, it is not yet a part of the self. They have, in fact, only encountered it as an 'unexperienced experience.'[55]

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[51] Kopf, Martina, "Writing Sexual Violence: Words and Silences in Yvonne Vera's *Under the Tongue*", *Body, Sexuality and Gender: Versions and Subversions in African Literature.* Ed. Veit-Wild, Flora (Amsterdam: Humboldt, 2005), 245

[52] Herman Lewis, Judith, *Trauma and Recovery* (London: HarperCollins, 1992)

[53] Ibid

[54] Ibid

[55] Murray, Jessica, "Tremblings in the distinction between fiction and testimony", *Postcolonial Text 4.2* (2008), 4

It does not exist in the realm of common reality, hence the difficulty experienced in the fields of medicine and human rights where there is a necessity for testimony and yet pain and trauma resist articulation within language.

The pressure on the victim is to present a rational, chronological testimony that is factual and can be immediately understood within the realm of reality. Kopf maintains that

> The person who speaks can do so only by following predetermined speech patterns, effecting a further dissociation through assimilation to pre-existing stereotypes. Their words will not transmit personal and contradicting experiences, but will instead freeze into a confession and be easily dismissed as such."[56] Murray contends that "The point here is also to insist on the importance of the experience that has no referent in this conventional reality or, in other words, the experience that has never been present even though it has already taken place.[57]

This is to highlight, then, that testimonies of traumatic experiences are fictionalised to a certain extent due to their absence in the victim's sense of cognisant experience.

This analysis is very important in light of the expectations of testimony to relate one's experience 'factually', implying chronology. It is largely due to the chronology in narratives that a direct correlation between linearity and truth, and therefore rationality, is assumed. However, when the chronology is dismantled, so is the linearity and therefore rationality is questioned. Outside of linearity we are forced to question the nature of the

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[56] Kopf, Martina, "Writing Sexual Violence: Words and Silences in Yvonne Vera's *Under the Tongue*", *Body, Sexuality and Gender: Versions and Subversions in African Literature.* Ed. Veit-Wild, Flora (Amsterdam: Humboldt, 2005)
[57] Ibid., 9

implied truth, therefore "the author erodes the logic through which we determine chronology or truth"[58] by not using time as a point of reference. Therefore, Brown's analysis of Head and Beyala's work is apt in exploring a different cultural language to speak of traumatised subjectivities. This analysis is also very relevant to Vera's texts in this research report. In a move to destabilise the rigid nature of the master tongue that has subjugated African women narratives, these authors have also created ways in which to evade the same language that cannot narrate trauma and be creative in finding new ways to articulate these subjectivities.

These authors also focus on the protagonist and the protagonists' unbalanced nature which forces the reader to question whether it is the protagonist or the system which is the problem[59]. The language the author uses to do this is a destabilized language, a turning of language inside out and creating new ways of expression that redirect the readers' perception and goes a long way in "recreating the subjective reality of women."[60]

Beyala and Head use 'madness' to re-imagine the world of the traumatized woman. Brown writes how these two authors write narratives that render violence to the language of trauma and representation of women's subjectivities while giving truth to the 'madness' of their female protagonists. I note Brown's analysis mainly because she attributes to Beyala and Head precisely what Vera does in the texts of concern to this study. There is not only a destabilization of language in their writing but also a

[58]Brown, Caroline, "A divine madness: the secret language of trauma in the novels of Bessie Head and Calixthe Beyala", *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 28 (Duke University Press: 2008), 96

[59] Ibid

[60]Brown, Caroline, "A divine madness: the secret language of trauma in the novels of Bessie Head and Calixthe Beyala", *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 28 (Duke University Press 2008), 96

destabilization of ideas about sanity, truth and essentially, reality. This is not only for the characters within the text, but the readers' idea of truth and reality is challenged too in the same way that the characters in the texts are eluded by it. Samuelson describes Vera's work as "A search for language and voice to relate the experiences of women's marginalisation and violation under the often brutal social, cultural and political forces operating in Zimbabwe."[61]

2.4 Writing Vera in the present

The congregation of black women writers around beautiful expression in order to capture women's experiences is clearly defined in Vera's work and continues on after her. It is therefore important to place her work in this lineage. Writing women outside of both the white and male patriarchal gaze, to witness themselves, through generations, to create a universal voice, as well as creating several forms and new languages to locate themselves on their own terms.

In *Under the Tongue,* we encounter Grandmother, whose daughter Runyararo has murdered her husband for raping her daughter. When her child experiences the unspeakable in their home due to the shroud around abuse within patriarchal African culture, grandmother becomes present in that very silence:

> Grandmother's face says many things to my mother, her hands moving here and everywhere saying many unspoken things which the mouth cannot carry, the

[61] Samuelson, Meg, "'A river in my mouth': writing the voice in *Under the Tongue*", *Sign and Taboo: Perspective on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera* ed. Robert Muponde and Mandi Taruvinga (Harare: Weaver Press, 2002), 16

> things of inside, not spoken. She says the things women say when they have met each other in water, seen their faces in puddles of mud. Grandmother looks closely at mother and her looking is her speaking of the things they understand between each other, which they speak and speak, in their silence. Not a word from Grandmother. Then Grandmother gives mother a large white cup full of water. The cup is white with a black rim. Her hand, giving, speaks and speaks, with the curve of its elbow, with its length and its grasp. Water is good, says Grandmother. Mother drinks. Her teeth are heard beating against the cup, her bottom trembles. It bears a red gash in the middle. It is swollen with the suffering which visited her…she speaks and speaks with her drinking and Grandmother listens, moving her shaking shoulders forward to hear the unspoken things of her mouth. Mother drinks without pausing, and hands the cup back.[62]

This silence can be characterised by what Jill Stauffer describes as "ethical loneliness":

> Ethical loneliness is the isolation one feels as a violated person or as one member of a persecuted group, has been abandoned by humanity, or by those who have power over one's life possibilities.[63]

I posit this is the general feeling among black women in Umebinyuo's *Offerings* speaks to this:

There you were at thirteen tracing back your age

To find truth you tried burying, tracing

[62] Vera, Yvonne, *Under the Tongue* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1996), 30

[63] Stauffer, Jill. *Ethical Loneliness: The Injustice of Not Being Heard.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2015

Two years back, the smell of the dark room,

Tracing three years back

The sound of your siblings playing outside,

Tracing four years back

He said, “Do not tell anyone.

No one will believe you,”

Tracing four years back

Your mother asking why you hurt so much.

You quietly swallow the truth:

He offered you darkness,

At twenty-two he touched you,

You flinched,

At twenty-four he asked,

“So, how come you’ve never

Had sex or even a boyfriend?”

Your response

Should have been

Because a child given darkness as a gift

Cannot comprehend how to let the sun in

Without thinking

It would take from her again.[64]

The internalisation of this 'darkness' of the implied sexual abuse speak directly to Herman's surmisation of the alienating nature of trauma, not just from relating outwardly to, in this case, a man, but a physical alienation from her own body. She can no longer feel pleasure from a sexual experience to which Umebinyuo characterises as letting the sun in. The idea of silencing is also signalled severally and while it may seem effective as a coping mechanism in the moment of trauma, it is understood and expressed simply as "darkness". This implies that while the silence exists to limit expression, both imposed by the perpetrator and the nature of the trauma on the body and mind, the text itself offers an intervention that highlights that even within silence, expression can be found, and found within the aesthetic, the poetic. This is an element central to this study, as silence becomes an avenue of forging new locations of rendering traumatic experiences and thereby highlighting Vera's work as contributing to a cultural language within African literature. A language that continues and places Vera's work, and the contemporary black women writers noted here, in a lineage of beautiful expression in relation to black women's experiences.

For Mazvita "The land has forgotten us. Perhaps it dreams new dreams for itself"[65] alluding to the man who has raped her in the name of fighting for the land- suggesting that

[64] Umebinyuo, Ijeoma, 'Untitled' in *Questions for Ada* (2015), 13
[65]Ibid

maybe even those who claim to fight may have forgotten whom they are fighting for since they now make victims of those they claim to be serving. As an 'archetypal patriot' Vera uses this faceless guerrilla to highlight not only the masculine nature of the struggle but the exclusive nature of narratives written about the war. Only a glorious history is written, one of victory and triumph and yet the narratives of victimisation and personal loss are forgotten.

At night when Mazvita sleeps next to Joel, her memories weigh on her. Although she has embraced silence, the trauma is written on her body and is evidenced by the child in her belly. She experiences flashbacks, a growing dissatisfaction and claustrophobia with Joel because the new beginning she searches for is not materialising. The past she is running away from is not going far enough for her to start afresh. The silence she has embraced is threatened as her memories are growing and begin to burst at the seams as her pregnancy grows and Joel becomes aware of her pregnancy. Like most women who commit infanticide, her denial of her pregnancy is a denial of the trauma associated with the pregnancy[66]. However, it all eventually comes to a head:

> She heard herself cry. She cried till only she could be heard. Joel interrupted her crying with his breathing. She felt him breathe, he did not feel his actions at all, though he truly held her tight. She heard only her cry which expanded into the hollow spaces within her, into the silence she had conceived for herself, into the past of her memory. She lingered in her remembrance. The cry was a divine healing in which she stood alone, and whole. The cry was a triumph of her will, prolonged and full of her weeping, full of her laughter. She did not understand why she needed to laugh

[66]Shwartz, Lita and Isser, Natalie, *Child Homicide: Parents who Kill (*New York: CRC Press, 2007)

> when the moment was so painful for her but she laughed in a breathless, broken spasm, in a distressful abandon. The laughter mixed with her tears. It was Joel she laughed at, she was sure. So when her laughing had struggled enough with her crying she reached her arms toward Joel and held him close to her breast till her tears fell downward past her temples and made her pillow wet.
>
> But Mazvita did not understand that the cry had defeated the silence in her body, that the cry was a release dangerous and regrettable. The cry was not the lulling freedom she sought. After her discovery Mazvita would once again long that the solitude had protected her, long that the hollow spaces within her had remained hollow, the silence supreme.[67]

In the moment of her rape Mazvita heard a "strange bird she heard cry a shrill cry in the distance, so shrill and loud that she had had to suppress her own cry which had risen to her lips. The unknown bird had silenced her when she needed to tell of her own suffering."[68] Within that moment she embraced silence as a coping mechanism as the trauma overwhelmed her body and her senses. However, after the trigger she experiences with Joel and the bursting seams of her traumatic memory, in this moment with Joel she seems to let go of the silence and allows herself to cry. It is a difficult moment, however, it is also a step forward because by crying she is finally beginning to accept the existence of her trauma and the need to express and release her feelings. It is a moment of relief in that she gets to shed the tears she was holding inside. However, it is also opening up what she has been struggling to cover up and move on from for so long.

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[67]Vera, Yvonne, *Under the Tongue* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1996), 60-61.
[68]Ibid.,

Remembering therefore gives the opportunity to speak the unspoken narratives, providing an opportunity to open old wounds with the intention to heal. However, opening wounds does not guarantee healing, which is highlighted in the ambiguous nature of memory within Vera's texts. "Grandmother says that a woman cannot point to the source of her pain, saying it is here and there. A woman finds her sorrow in her dream and everywhere. She is wounded even in her awakening".[69] The silence is a burden and yet the sorrow of the painful experiences remains as a constant reminder of traumatic memory.

In Shire's poem *Fire*, a common case of prolonged domestic violence occurs to a young woman. Leaving is a very difficult thing to do because policing of married women, culturally, involves the whole community including older women who have also endured the same. I will quote the following line: "*What do you mean he hit you? /Your father hit me all the time/But I never left him. /He pays the bills/And he comes home at night, /What more do you want?"*[70]

Shire continues with this theme of isolation and belonging (or lack thereof) when she speaks of the ejection of certain bodies, especially in light of forced migration. There is an invibiliation of migrant bodies while simultaneously rendering them non-human, homeless, stateless, and non-human which characterises migrants, especially those of war, she writes:

> I know a few things to be true. I do not know where I am going, where
> I have come from is disappearing, I am unwelcome and my beauty is

[69]Vera, Yvonne, *Under the Tongue* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1996), 40
[70] Shire, Warsan, 'Fire' in *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth,* (Manchester, Flipped Eye Publishing, 2011), 17

> not beauty here. My body is burning with the shame of not belonging, my body is longing.[71]

In the same poem she further elaborates on this experience, expressing something that is unique to women in this position. She continues:

> But Alahmdulilah all of this is better than the scent of a woman completely on fire, or a truckload of men who look like my father, pulling out my teeth and nails, or fourteen men between my legs, or a gun, or a promise, or a lie, or his name, or his manhood in my mouth.[72]

It is women who bear most of the brunt of forced migration due to their vulnerability to both physical and sexual abuse which characterises these illegal paths of migration.

Applicable here is Dori Laub's theory of witnessing[73]: that for healing to occur, witnessing in necessary. Laub points to three forms of witnessing: witnessing yourself in the experience, witnessing the testimony of others, and witnessing the process of witnessing.[74] References to mothers, grandmothers and a whole lineage of women that came before, make up a significant portion of contemporary black women's poems, which highlights a very deliberate witnessing of others' testimonies, and where that fails, there is a deliberate re-imagining of these testimonies.

In *Poem No.3* Umebinyuo writes:

We are writing

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[71] Ibid.,26
[72] ibid
[73] Laub, Dori, "An event without a witness: truth, testimony and survival", *Testimony* by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (London: Routledge, 1992), 75.
[74] ibid

for our mothers' mothers

and

their mothers.

We are writing

for our daughters

and the daughters of our daughters.

We are writing

for our ancestors

and generations to come."[75]

She continues in *"*Poem No.4*":*

You call me

"Sister"

Not because

you understand the kind of tragedies

we both have endured

to come back into loving

Ourselves

again

[75] Umebinyuo, Ijeoma, *Questions for Ada* (2015), 31

&

again.[76]

The first stage of witnessing, witnessing yourself in the experience, is reflected in the first-person poems in the collections. There is also a clear implied sisterhood based on a commonality in experience which is echoed by all three poets, which echoes Stauffer's idea of ethical loneliness, and an insistence on creating a lineage of experiences and a space to witness these experiences by writing them intentionally. This reflects the second stage of witnessingwhich works to acknowledge the generational nature of the silence previously mentioned and to pose the readers themselves as further witnesses to this witnessing. Furthermore, Umebinyuo writes:

so many women

so many women

whose blood I carry

so many glorious lives

living inside me.[77]

She continues in "Narratives":

Our mothers

Our great-grand mothers

[76]Umebinyuo, Ijeoma, *Questions for Ada* (2015), 50
[77] Umebinyuo, Ijeoma, *Questions for Ada* (2015), 53

All the women whose blood

We carry.

All of them

and none of them

needed to be saved

by someone who

called them exotic

or tries to write their guilt

away by researching them.

All our mothers have

always known the power

of sisterhood,

you didn't teach them

how to use their weapons.[78]

This reflects Laub's third stage of witnessing, making these texts healing texts in some way. We the readers, as a result, are posed as witnesses too and witness the process of witnessing. This creates an intimacy not only within the text, but a connection is made in

[78]Umebinyuo, Ijeoma, *Questions for Ada* (2015), 58

which we are co-opted into the process of rememory and become invested in the wellbeing of the characters. Vera says of her own work:

> To explore, not with romanticism, women's characters. But with accepting the violence that accompanies their existence. That's what I've done differently. And to have understood the intimate complexity of their mental worlds, and their emotions, and to have explored those moments of tragedy without, you know, withdrawing from them; without covering them up. To go into the moment of the abortion, and say it; and moment-by-moment of a woman's feeling of tenderness towards herself, and violence towards herself: not those things.[79]

In her notion of witnessing, Kelly Oliver moves beyond the simplistic need for eye witnessing or listening and points to something larger in the witnessing process. She speaks of the idea that victims are not simply looking for someone to listen to their testimony, but someone to witness what is 'beyond recognition'.[80] This is what makes the notion of witnessing distinct from mere eye-witnessing. Eye-witnessing is more aligned to historical fact and accuracy while witnessing refers to "the sense of bearing witness to a truth about humanity and suffering that transcends those facts."[81]

Both protagonists in Vera's texts of concern to this study, Mazvita and Zhizha, encounter the need to witness themselves by acknowledging their experiences and being able to recount them. By writing the texts as re-memory it becomes a process of inner

[79] Vera, Yvonne, "'The Place of the Woman is the Place of the Imagination': Yvonne Vera interviewed by Ranka Primorac, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 39(3) (SAGE 2004),
[80] Oliver, Kelly, "Witnessing and testimony", *Parallax 10* No.1 (2004), 83
[81] Ibid., 81

witnessing for the characters as Vera writes their memories as they remember them even in their fragmented and seemingly haphazard manner.

According to Oliver:

> The inner witness is produced and sustained by dialogic (and I would add nonlinguistic forms of communicative) interaction with other people. In order to think, talk, act as an agent, the inner witness must be in place. This is to say that we learn to 'talk to ourselves' – to think – by talking to others. Our experience is meaningful for us only if we can imagine that it is meaningful for others. And, our sense of what is meaningful, our sense of meaning itself, comes through our relationships with others. Creating or finding meaning for oneself is possible only through the internalization of meaning for others.[82]

This dialogic of finding meaning through others is personified in the relationship between Grandmother and Zhizha. It is a special relationship in which Grandmother teaches Zhizha to the easiest way to carry the burden of their memories. Grandmother witnesses Zhizha's pain even without language. She uses song to reach into Zhizha in order to release her from her sorrow:

> Grandmother's song enters into my growing and finds parts of me hidden and still alone, full of the forgotten things of the earth. She moves nearer to me and touches me with her shadow. The shadow falls from her mouth, falls from deep inside her dream. I am swallowed by the shadow which grows from Grandmother and bends deep into the earth, lifting me from the ground, raising me high. It is warm inside

[82] Oliver, Kelly, "Witnessing and testimony", *Parallax* 10 No. 1 (2004), 83

> the shadow. It is warm like sleep. I meet the sky in that warm place and the sky is inside Grandmother and it is filled with voiceless stars.[83]

This internal dialogue between the two of them begins to allow Zhizha to relate to her own grief in this same way. The warmth shared between them through this non-linguistic interaction allows Zhizha to begin to have a sense of herself once again. It is an intimate space that we are made privy to and due to the visceral nature of the language we feel ourselves part of this unique experience of witnessing. Our position as witnessing the process of witnessing extends this sense of intimacy to us as readers and we almost feel ourselves being engulfed by this same 'shadow' and 'warmth' that Zhizha experiences.

Zhizha, with Grandmother's help and the return of her mother, is able to get back her voice and tongue and begins to learn to speak again. Her interaction with Grandmother has taught her how to witness herself and Grandmother has witnessed her trauma and spoken for her. Kopf extends this notion when she states "Zhizha is an intense and imaginative listener to her grandmother's own hidden story. In a mutual process of giving and taking words from each other she brings forth her grandmother's power to tell and she grows to 'inherit' her voice and words"[84] In the end she is once again learning how to speak and is able to remember the experience of the rape.

However, it is also clear that Grandmother herself is in a constant struggle with memory and Zhizha says "I am afraid to listen to Grandmother, to discover her places of silence. I know there is a wide lake in her memory, a lake in which ripples grow to the

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[83]Vera, Yvonne, *Under the Tongue* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1996), 41

[84] Kopf, Martina, "Writing sexual violence: words and silences in Yvonne Vera's *Under the Tongue*", *Body, Sexuality and Gender: Versions and Subversions in African Literatures 1.* Ed. Veit-Wild, Flora and Naguschewski, Dirk (Amsterdam/ New York: Rodopi, 2005), 8

edges of the sky, a lake in which all our grief is hidden. Her word rests at the bottom of silent lakes but she will find the word and give it to me"[85] It is these words that contain memories and when these words are revived so are the memories, making it difficult to always keep the past at bay.

Grandmother stores a word which she holds close to her heart and speaks when she is in need of comfort:

> There is only one word kept safe in that secret place: "Tonderayi". I hear my grandmother say it. Grandmother carries the moon on her face, bright and lingering. Her eyes are closed. She hums a lullaby, about flowers opening, greeting the sun. The lullaby grows faint, wilts, dries up. She sits very still and I hear her mutter "Tonderayi". I take this one word from her mouth, pull it out like a cobweb and put it in a safe place and give it to her. I keep it safe for my mother too, because she says words are precious, like drops of rain, like milk. Words can heal old wounds.[86]

When Zhizha discovers this word, she decides to store it for a later time when Grandmother is low and use it to comfort her once again. However, when Zhizha does use it, it incites a strong reaction of anger from Grandmother:

> What did you say, Zhizha?
>
> Her voice is slow and searching full of unremembered things. Her voice rises from silent worlds. I have stirred the cries of her silence. I have found the lake of her

[85]Vera, Yvonne, *Under the Tongue* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1996), 70
[86]Ibid., 58

> sorrow. Something has flown from her eyes, dropped from her chin, departed. I keep my silence to protect her trembling voice and her shaking arms.[87]

Even after all these years, the mention of the name of her dead son incites a strong reaction of pain and sorrow, drawing on Dori Laub's definition of trauma as "a danger, a nightmare, a fragility, a woundedness that defies all healing."[88] The memory of Tonderayi and the instruction to remember are both a burden on Grandmother and women in general but also necessary and bring relief. It is a burden because of the painful nature of traumatic memory but it is also only in remembering and recovering that they find comfort.

It is in this word that Zhizha witnesses something beyond recognition in Grandmother's memory. A simple word brings about Grandmother's narration of her first child Tonderayi and the painful experience she went through as a woman and a mother. "Her word rests at the bottom of silent lakes but she will find the word and give it to me. Finding the word is difficult and fills Grandmother with all the thorns of her growing…"[89] Her son Tonderayi is born with a disorder in which water is retained in his brain. This is painful since it is her first child, and she is encouraged to "place him in a clay pot and bury him"[90] by everyone around her and she could not bring herself to do so. Being the woman, she is blamed entirely for this child's condition and "His relatives whispered that the child's existence was evidence of my talent for untold evils".[91] Despite all this, Grandmother's pain comes from the death of her child "My son drowned one night while

[87]Vera, Yvonne, *Under the Tongue* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1996), 59-60
[88]Laub, Dori, "An event without a witness: truth, testimony and survival", *Testimony* by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (London: Routledge, 1992), 75
[89]Vera, Yvonne, *Under the Tongue* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1996), 70
[90] Ibid
[91]Ibid., 71

he slept. He drowned a fierce drowning. I buried him in the voiceless inside of my heart. He is the son of my ground. Tonderayi. One who remembers."[92]

"Tonderayi*"* meaning "recall" or "remember" in Shona[93] seems to be an instruction to remember and holds the memory of the suffering of women as Muchemwa opines:

> The trauma of violence, physical and psychological, teaches silence. The questioning and rejection of acquiescent silence leads to a recovery of redemptive memory. The moment when the word Tonderayi is spoken, the narrator and Grandmother are relocated in the old and new sites of women's self-definition. Memory is used to indicate the history of women, their suffering, their silence and the existence of a rich tradition of women's orature.[94]

It is after the death of Tonderayi that Grandmother gives birth to Runyararo, whose name means silence. Her name represents the silence Grandmother is forced to live in. It represents her condition as a woman who cannot speak her sorrow and she expresses to Zhizha that after Tonderayi's death she gave birth to silence. Zhizha was born of this silence too and it is this very silence that Runyararo blames for the rape of her daughter.

This is made evident in the scene in which Runyararo comes home to her mother and "Her face says she has found herself in a forest, lost and bewildered."[95] We are made aware that Runyararo may have just murdered Muroyiwa, and Grandmother is already

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[92]Vera, Yvonne, *Under the Tongue* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1996), 72
[93] Downloaded from http://vashona.com/dictionary on 11 October 2011
[94]Muchemwa, Kizito, "Language, voice and presence in Under *the Tongue* and *Without a Name*", *Sign and Taboo: Perspective on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera* ed. Robert Muponde and Mandi Taruvinga (Harare: Weaver Press, 2002), 8
[95]Vera, Yvonne, *Under the Tongue* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1996), 30

aware just by looking at her that a tragedy has occurred as Runyararo is clearly in a state of shock. The three of them, Zhizha, Runyararo and Grandmother sitting there without saying much yet still in communication draws us to the concept of bearing witness beyond words and details. Although language fails them, trauma limits them and pain remains elusive of coherent language, the mere presence of each person in this moment and the gesture, especially from Grandmother, is sufficient to bear witness to each other's pain and tragedy. Vera creates a space covered in love and familial bonds that is so intimate and beautiful in these horrendous circumstances that allows us as readers to join in bearing witness and feel honoured to do so. We feel even in ourselves the comfort and nurture that exists within this space and breeds in us a hope for healing and leads us to see the spiritual connectedness of all women in suffering.

In her historical book on the lives of transient young black women in New York in the early twentieth century, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments,* African American historian Saidiya Hartman recovers the aspirations to freedom these young women expressed. Although imprisoned and policed heavily, their intimate lives reflected how they loved their freedom even in their confined nature, they loved defiantly, and their denial of respectability created a radical social transformation. I refer to this because Hartman chooses an interesting vehicle in her recovery of these intimate stories: a chorus. She chooses this location to contain this phenomenon and describes it as thus:

> The chorus bears it all for us. The Greek etymology of the word chorus refers to dance within an enclosure… What better articulates the long history of struggle, the ceaseless practice of black radicalism and refusal, the tumult and upheaval of open rebellion that the acts of collaboration

> and improvisation that unfold within the space of enclosure? The chorus is the vehicle for another kind of story, not of the great man or the tragic hero, but one in which all modalities play a part, where the headless group incites change, where mutual aid provides the resource for collective action, not a leader and mass, where the untranslatable songs and seeming nonsense make good the promise of revolution. The chorus propels transformation. It is an incubator of possibility, an assembly sustaining dreams of the otherwise. Somewhere down the line the numbers increase, the tribe increases. The chorus increases. So how do you keep on? She can't help it...The struggle is eternal. Somebody else carries on.[96]

It is the same chorus that Baby Suggs leads around a tree in the forest for former slaves to come to salvation in *Beloved*[97], a congregation that Vera imagines in *Under the Tongue* where all women meet in the water to lay down the burdens of their lives[98]. It is in this clearly articulated lineage that I read Vera's work in contemporary African literary studies: the congregation of beautiful expression to record and encapsulate black women's experiences.

[96]Hartman, Saidiya, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company), 347-348.
[97] Morrison, Toni, *Beloved* (Vintage International, 2004), 35-36
[98] Vera, Yvonne, *Under the Tongue* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1996), 30

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

3.1 Trauma and rememory

According to Caroline Garland "when we call an event traumatic, we are borrowing the word from the Greek where it refers to a piercing of the skin, a breaking of the bodily envelope…the mind too can be pierced and wounded by events, giving graphic force to this description of the way in which the mind can be thought of as being enveloped by a kind of skin, or protective shield."[99] Trauma therefore is a breakdown of the mind, the invasive penetration of the human mind and psyche from which one can never completely recover. This penetration wounds the mind such that the reactions, actions, emotions and more that occur afterwards are outside of the realm of the normal bodily functions of the mind.

After the act of violence, in victims and perpetrators to some extent, as Vera tries to show - "Traumatic symptoms have a tendency to become disconnected from their source and to take on a life of their own".[100] They become separate from the main event and become a presence in the daily life of the survivor. This is evidenced by Zhizha in *Under the Tongue* where her tongue seems held down and she can no longer speak due to the brutality of her traumatic experience: "My tongue is a river. I touch my tongue in search of the places of my growing. My tongue is heavy with sleep. I know a stone is buried in my mouth, carried under the tongue. My voice has forgotten me."[101] The nervous

[99] Garland, Caroline, "Thinking about trauma", *Understanding Trauma: A Psychoanalytical Approach*. Ed. Garland, Caroline (London: H. Karnac (Books) Ltd, 2002), 9
[100] Herman Lewis, Judith, *Trauma and Recovery* (London: HarperCollins, 1992), 3

[101]Vera, Yvonne, *Under the Tongue* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1996), 1

system becomes disconnected from the present and the survivor finds it difficult to live in the present. Since the mind does not have the capacity to process the trauma, the traumatic memory remains in a special part of the brain referred to as 'active memory'[102] which repeats the event until the mind has developed the capacity to deal with the trauma.

The trauma therefore manifests itself in numerous ways. Zhizha is haunted by her experience of incest, which continuously breaks into her present while Mazvita's traumatic symptoms manifest physically in her hallucinations. They all experience loss of ordinary reality, slow motion, detachment, passivity and "surrender of voluntary action, suspension of initiative and critical judgement, subjective detachment or calm, enhanced perception of imagery, altered sensation, including depersonalization, derealisation, and change in the sense of time."[103] This change in their sense of time is noted in the structure of the texts. They are not chronological, and it is as if we are following the minds and memories of the characters themselves. This is what separates Vera's writing from the usual historical representation and categorises her work as memory work and even more so rememory.

In her work on memory Pumla Gqola explores numerous theories on memory, especially how it works to define the present[104]. Firstly, what is clear from Gqola's work is that memory has roaming qualities - it is always present. Once something has happened it continues to exist, hovering somewhere in the depths of the mind. Secondly memory is like a shadow, a constant presence, yet does not have a clear and distinct form. Thirdly, memory is mobile and open. This means that the way we relate to memory changes and

[102]Herman Lewis, Judith, *Trauma and Recovery* (London: HarperCollins, 1992)
[103]Ibid., 42
[104] Gqola, Pumla, *What is Slavery to Me?* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2010)

moves with the way our lives and minds change as well while its description is subject to the individual's understanding of that particular memory and is contingent upon the moment.

Memory is also, obviously, fragmented and is not subject to linear and chronological time. In *Beloved*, Morrison creates what is called 'rememory' which is best described by Sethe, the protagonist, who states

> I was talking about time. It's so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place the picture of it - stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened.[105]

The idea of re-membering that has become the focus of many feminist and womanist writers, mainly African and African American, is based on the idea that certain groups of people have been excluded from history and their role in the overall history, hence the desire to re-member history and to imagine these sites that have been left out. It is important to note that it is considered 'memory' and not necessarily history and this difference points to the idea that memory does not attempt to base itself on historical fact but recognises itself as simple re-imagination of a previous existence. Memory is in the

[105] Morrison, Toni, *Beloved*, (Vintage International, 2004), 35-36

details of history. It is the ordinary lived experiences of what remains of the past as perceived in the present and how we relate to it. In this sense, Vera writes the stories of those whose stories were not only silenced due to the patriarchal nature of the society at the time, but also whose stories have been left out of history because of the continuing patriarchal nature of this society.

To re-member is to do exactly that, put together, to rememory – a very present action in line with what Morrison considers the fresh and alive nature of memory itself. It is not about accuracy but its meaning and perception in the present. Re-membering therefore gives the characters within the text an opportunity to witness their own experiences in the text and Vera does this by allowing them to re-member in their own way even if it seems fragmented and confusing. She also creates vehicles for their expression, deploying beauty and nature in order to express themselves and re-member these experiences.

3.2 The function of beauty

Art in many forms has the ability to move beyond the norms of language and register and use the imagination to express and articulate pain and traumatic experiences. Within art there is not that necessity in medicine, human rights, or law to convince another of pain and suffering but there is the desire to convey the reality of the experience for the traumatised person. There is no need for coherence, rationality, logic, or precision, thus the mind has a free space in which to articulate truth that is not subject to norm, historical discourse, a limited language register or pressure for others to understand. This study

therefore adopts several theories on beauty which Vera employs to convey the narratives of trauma her characters endure.

One of the elements that enables art to convey something that ordinary discourse cannot do is beauty. Beauty is "the quality present in a thing or person that gives intense pleasure or deep satisfaction to the mind, whether arising from sensory manifestations (shape, colour, sound etc.) or a meaningful design or pattern or something else (as a personality) in which high spiritual qualities are manifest."[106] There are a number of things to take note of in this definition. The first is the idea that something beautiful requires us to use not just our sight but other senses too in the process. The response to beauty is sensory on many levels and goes beyond the object by inspiring a spiritual experience that is beyond the physical while it engages and seduces the mind.

The second concept is that beauty gives some level of satisfaction or pleasure to the beholder. This satisfaction may be superficial or intense. For Scarry, "Beauty quickens, it adrenalises. It makes life more vivid, animated...worth living."[107] She gives the example of the Greek story of Odysseus. He is caught in a storm and is shipwrecked and when he washes onto shore, he encounters something beautiful. The beauty he sees stirs something inside of him that makes his suffering fade in the background. Based on this example Scarry states that "...whenever one sees something beautiful, it is as though one has suddenly been washed up onto a merciful beach: all unease, aggression, indifference suddenly drops back behind one, like a surf that has for a moment lost its

[106]Downloaded from www.dictionary.com on the 26th of January 2022.
[107]Scarry, Elaine, *On Beauty and Being Just: The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*- delivered at Yale University, (March 25 and 26 1998), 18

capacity to harm."[108] An encounter with the beautiful can essentially inspire the desire to live and the ability to see beyond the present suffering.

Experiencing beauty is experiencing something sensual that not only brings pleasure but seems to hold the promise of something more, beyond the tangible and present.[109] According to Scarry "Beauty holds the promise of certainty and is an icon of hope. It is the representation of freedom. A beautiful thing appears to be free, whether or not it really is free does not take away this appearance."[110] The highly sensual reality of trauma therefore makes beauty a very attractive gap within which traumatised characters within the literary realm can express the reality of their experience and create possibilities for healing, freedom, and hope. The trauma the characters experience alters their consciousness, limiting their perspective of reality and the world and Vera takes advantage of this. Wilson-Tagoe notes that although the characters occupy particular physical spaces, they create alternative "linguistic and psychological spaces…In the township where the earth is only dry clay without hope, it is the sky, high and bottomless, that presents an open space for tracing opportunity and dream."[111]

It is important to note that the concept of beauty and the aesthetic, similar to the English language, is not innocent and has violent and political implications. As Simon Gikandi points out, the development of the concept of beauty and taste in art was based on a thesis that black people, particularly slaves and the colonised were the very opposite

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[108] Ibid

[109] Scarry, Elaine, *On Beauty and Being Just: The Tanner Lectures on Human Values* (delivered at Yale University, March 25 and 26 1998)

[110] Ibid

[111] Wilson- Tagoe, Nana, "History, gender and the problem of gender in the novels of Yvonne Vera", *Sign and Taboo: Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera* ed. Robert Muponde and Mandi Taruvinga (Harare: Weaver Press, 2002), 168

of this category. According to Terry Eagleton beauty "is simply the way social harmony registers itself on our senses, imprints itself on our sensibilities. The beautiful is just political order lived out on the body, the way it strikes the eye and stirs the heart ..." [112] To which Gikandi adds that "if there was anything that united the major theoreticians of the aesthetic - British and continental European - it was the fundamental belief that blacks were out of the orbit of aesthetic judgment."[113]

However, Gikandi continues to point out that while the aesthetic is informed by this, it is inherently, itself the result of violent processes that belie it, particularly colonialism therefore "the aesthetic needed to be distanced from colonial culture so that the new order of society and its defining categories - civility, art, and virtue - could be autonomized and thus be freed from the violent, uncivil, and perhaps unpleasurable events that had enabled the ideal claims of modernity."[114]

The aesthetic itself, therefore, has never been a pure category — but there is a difference between what is implied and what is known or received. The existence of beauty has always existed alongside or within the gruesome as displayed by the irreconcilability of the aesthetic and the colonial moment. Similar to language: both have rather violent roots. This is why Harris' analysis of both Vera and Morrison becomes appropriate. In her study of Vera and Morrison, she puts forward the idea that the English language itself is violent and marginalising and how both writers have made the English language very flexible, moulding it for their purposes in order for it to contain the

[112] Eagleton, Terry, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) 37-38.
[113] Gikandi, Simon, "Aesthetic reflection and the colonial event: The work of art in the age of slavery", The Journal of the International Institute 4(3), (1997)
[114] Ibid

repressed narratives of which they speak and find gaps within it to express the inexpressible. Similarly, she recognises how the notion of "Beauty eclipses trauma because beauty is speakable, narratable, and through such language trauma is able to be, indirectly articulated."[115]

In the next chapter I analyse Vera's use of beauty within the texts that forces us to abandon our perspectives on violence and trauma as Vera weaves beauty into narratives that are usually infused with horror. By using beauty and the sublime Vera draws us into the experiences of her characters as they too deploy beauty as vehicles to carry their stories which defy ordinary language.

[115] Harris, Ashleigh, "Toni Morrison and Yvonne Vera: an associative fugue", *Scrutiny* 2 No 9. 1 (2004), 12

Chapter 4: “We have acquired beauty even within the tensions and betrayals.”-Writing beauty in violence and the deployment of beauty to articulate traumatic memory.

In this chapter, this study will look at Vera’s writing style noting the use of aesthetics, particularly the use of beauty. This use of beauty is on several levels. I will refer to the stylistic devices, mainly photographic images that Vera uses in her work that are woven so well within her text and draw us closer to the scene both physically and emotionally. She creates scenery and imagery that visually stimulates the mind even though she invokes very violent events. This aestheticisation of violence and trauma allows us to re-imagine violence and trauma as she offers us new insights and perspectives into its nature and the victims.

This chapter also seeks to highlight the ways in which the very characters Vera creates are also drawn to the beauty that surrounds them and they deploy this to create aesthetic experiences for themselves that allow them to transcend their present lives and escape in search of healing and hope. They do this by creating alternative, non-linguistic forms and psychological spaces like song, nature, music, and even physical beauty.

The characters use the beautiful to not only create alternative spaces for themselves and invent possibilities of healing but also to fulfil their desire for certainty and to maintain hope. For them, beauty becomes a locality for both escape and healing. While there is hope created, Vera does not create certainty nor do her characters have a guarantee they will be healed. This is to highlight the limited room within the society she represents for women to articulate themselves and experience healing.

Muchemwa writes that in "Zimbabwean orature, traditional and modern, as pointed out by H. Chimhundu (1995) is patriarchal. The language is sexist and women are denied the power of agency; they are perceived as passive recipients of men's actions."[116] This leaves little space for the explorations of the position, feelings, and experiences of women in these oral and written narratives. Language, voice, and presence are therefore not innocent sites and are subject to the power dynamics of the cultural context. Women are silenced and cannot speak their pain. This is evidenced in the character of Grandmother in *Under the Tongue* as she is the woman who has experienced most of this injustice. Grandfather ignores her constant pleading and turns away from her. Grandmother seems to understand that her voice has no place and will not be considered, hence her pleading hoping Grandfather will understand the desperation of her position. This is very similar to Runyararo's lament when she shows up at her mother's house after killing her husband: "Did he not teach me silence, this husband, that a woman is not a man? I am silent. Just silence to speak my silence against the husband who is not a man…"[117]

It is important to note that although Vera's work is fictional, what she represents is something that exists in the context she writes in. As mentioned earlier, violence within what was termed the domestic sphere has been ignored and victims have had to suffer in silence. This adds a larger burden to the victims themselves who are already suffering from the trauma of the event. Vera explicitly states that writing has become the only space in which these issues can be raised and the nature of violence against women and children can be articulated. It is the writing space in which women can be given a voice and yet

[116]Muchemwa, Kizito, "Language, voice and presence in *Under the Tongue* and *Without a Name*", *Sign and Taboo: Perspective on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera* ed. Robert Muponde and Mandi Taruvinga (Harare: Weaver Press, 2002), 5
[117] Ibid., 31

even the writing space is not neutral as evidenced by the earlier look at the representations of women in African literary works. As a result, Vera places her characters in a familiar historical context that makes it easier for readers to be able to take these narratives seriously and as having a large element of reality.

The silencing of women manifests itself in a real absence of voice in Zhizha after her rape. Zhizha's absence of voice signifies her sense of absence as she no longer has a sense of herself and does not know how to live in the world or relate to it anymore. "My voice has forgotten me. Only Grandmother's voice remembers me. Her voice says that before I learnt to forget there was a river in my mouth."[118] Her tongue is heavy, and she can no longer speak. Her voice comes to represent her presence, her being, her subjectivity and the disruption is evident in her articulation of her memory.

> Father whispers an embrace of lightning…My voice is sinking down into my stomach. My voice is crumbling and falling apart and spreading through my fingers…Lightning finds me, embraces the moon, finds me fallen from the sky.[119]

Like this extract it seems every memory is within the present and has not been assimilated into memory due to its overwhelming nature. Even after she is told that her father has died, she still refers to him in the present tense: "I see father, his forehead bruised…."[120] And still "He pulls at my dream and I sink beneath the pounding which falls through my eyes."[121]

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[118]Vera, Yvonne. *Under the Tongue* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1996), 1
[119] Ibid., 3
[120]Vera, Yvonne, *Under the Tongue* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1996), 5
[121] Ibid

In *Without a Name* we meet Mazvita as she is waiting for a bus in the hot sun and it is evident from the beginning of the text that her consciousness is also in an altered state as the objects surrounding her come to life and her paranoia is evident. "Mazvita felt the intense heat which circled her with the simmering voices and brought the red glow of the bus to her face. The ominous hue spread down her arms, and sought her fingers."[122] She is carrying the dead child on her back, while her guilt manifests itself in the form of her skin peeling off and her whole body moving itself into a lump on her neck. She has already killed her child by twisting its neck and it is this act that has triggered this state she is in, and she can no longer hold herself together.

Her act of infanticide has initiated a slow breakdown of her mind and self, loosening the false hold she had on her centre and allowing the effects of the initial trauma she experienced to finally take full form. She is evidently confused and broken.

> Her neck was twisted. A bone at the bottom of her neck told her that her neck had been turned and turned till it could no longer find a resting place. Her neck had been broken. She felt a violent piercing like shattered glass, on her tongue where she carried the fragments of her being.[123]

Vera's language is visceral, and we begin to feel, along with Mazvita and Zhizha, their sense of their broken bodies which symbolise their wounded consciousness caused by the physical harm they have experienced, and in Mazvita's case, inflicted. Since Vera does not give a back story nor does she explain her characters' experiences we are lost along

[122]Vera, Yvonne, *Without a Name* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1994), 2
[123]Ibid.,3

with our characters, brought into their blind journey in search of the pieces of themselves that have been lost.

Zhizha's world and life are intertwined with that of Grandmother, who mediates in many ways for Zhizha and Runyararo. Grandmother, having been through a lot of trauma herself after losing her son Tonderayi and suffering abuse from Grandfather and his family, takes it upon herself to help Zhizha after her ordeal. Grandmother begins to teach Zhizha through song, story, visual imagery and words the ability to create a beautiful world for herself so as to heal. She shows her how to create new perspectives outside of the realm of language and within her imagination of which she has more control- "Her voice says we can touch the sky even if it is so far away. We cannot fear our silence, our desire, our release. When our voices reach the sky with their crying, rain will fall and cover the earth." She teaches Zhizha how to search for beauty within her surroundings in order to create spaces which can contain or relieve her of some of her pain.

The first thing we learn about Zhizha's father is that "It was during the war that Muroyiwa looked for butterflies in the mountains"[124] and it is this statement that embodies Vera's re-imagination of violence. Muroyiwa is obsessed with finding beauty and the surface of anything in his pursuit of living. This statement in many ways also personifies the aim of this chapter. Muroyiwa's journey into the mountains is to find the beauty even during the war and in some respects the beauty of the war itself.

[124]Vera, Yvonne, *Under the Tongue* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1996), 7

> The war made him see clearly the objects he wanted to see. It was like seeing thunder when the sky is black with rain. Muroyiwa was not blind to lightning, its tantalising beauties…beauty purified war.[125]

In the same way, Vera looks for the beauty in even the most brutal of these women's experiences.

Beauty is always present, even within the most gruesome of times, spaces or experiences as evidenced by Muroyiwa, one must locate it within their surroundings. What it motivates however is what differs. In *Under the Tongue* Runyararo seems to be the epitome of beauty. It is through her that Vera weaves beauty and her union with Muroyiwa, though plagued in the end by his behaviour, epitomises Muroyiwa's search for beauty and how he found it in Runyararo. It is as if she is not only surrounded by beauty but creates it and her every move personifies it:

> Runyararo woke very early to sew her mats. She would sit in the half-light of the morning while her husband slept. She liked to work in the morning with the early light. There was a soft light over the houses. There was silence, except often a dog barked, something was heard falling, but there was a kind of peaceful light that surrounded her in her work. She felt the light on her fingers as she worked while sitting beside her stoep. She would have left some water in a small dish the previous night, and this water would have strange coolness to it that she liked. There was a soft milkiness to the water because it was early morning and some silent smoke had grown over it. She would dip deep into the basin and her fingers

[125]Vera, Yvonne, *Under the Tongue* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1996), 7

> tingled with the smoke, and then she would dip her reed into the water too. If she left a bundle of reed in there it would be a certain scent to the water that she liked.[126]

Runyararo creates the most beautiful mats from scrap material and finds joy in the small things, in creating the mats – an ironic thing in the midst of war and the suffering in the township and as a woman in a text that highlights the burdens of women in this context.

Samuelson concurs and writes:

> In Runyararo we find an accomplished mat-maker, what Walker would describe as 'an artist' who left her mark in the only materials she could afford, and in the only medium her position in society allowed her to use…. Runyararo is an artist who works with her body and memory in order to create a braided symmetry, by creating her own pleasure out of her creativity she is freed from the oppressive state.[127]

It seems as if everywhere Runyararo goes, she notices the beauty that surrounds her, even in the middle of a township of shacks. In the squatter camps there are butterflies, ripe peach trees that produce fruit and remind Runyararo of nature's ability to evoke emotions that go beyond present misery. Nature is a constant reminder of birth, growth, and beauty. It presents beauty as constant and a promise of certainty that things will always grow, and certainty that something good still exists in the world. Runyararo enjoys the small

[126]Vera, Yvonne, *Under the Tongue* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1996), 90

[127] Samuelson, Meg, "'A river in my mouth': writing the voice in *Under the Tongue*", *Sign and Taboo: Perspective on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera* ed. Robert Muponde and Mandi Taruvinga (Harare: Weaver Press, 2002), 21

pleasures she gets from the beauty of nature and her ability to note them in detail, giving credit to the life-giving nature of the beautiful. She notes of the peaches

> Pink and soft in that dense and dark place, a pink glorious spray of light blossoms floating and endlessly falling. You could pick the colour from the ground like a dream. So tender and trusting, this spread of colour it made you hope and feel indescribable passions, it made the mind clean and hopeful.[128]

The peaches refresh her mind and body, and it is "such a tenuous glory, this blossoming and ripening".[129]

It is this same gift that Zhizha inherits. Looking at the moon, Grandmother tells Zhizha about the woman on the moon, who sees all and carries the burdens of all women in the world who have called out to her and surrendered their sorrows to her.[130] The beauty of the sky and the stars is riveting for Zhizha, and she discovers the power that lies within it: "She gives me the moon saying the moon is in my growing and my sleep. I look far into the mirror and the moon travels silent and whole, breaks into small fragments, scatters to the ground in showers of joyful light".[131] By directing Zhizha to the beauty of nature and her surroundings Grandmother helps her see herself as part of this beauty. She is able to see herself as one with nature, part of something bigger than herself that looks upon her and is perhaps a witness to her struggles. This gives Zhizha the opportunity to trust in the world again for it is in seeing herself in the world that she will find presence again.

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[128]Vera, Yvonne, *Under the Tongue* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1996), 76
[129] Ibid., 77
[130]Vera, Yvonne, *Under the Tongue* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1996)
[131]Ibid., 81

Wilson-Tagoe recognises the ability of the characters to create and occupy spaces that transcend the physical in which they are suffering.[132] Their present circumstances as evidenced by the squatter camps Runyararo lives in and the trauma that Zhihza and Mazvita live in make it almost impossible for survival and sanity. They therefore are given the ability to deploy beauty and create spaces for themselves in which they can articulate their pain, and which can contain their burdens in some way. These same spaces are meant to contain the memories which are best forgotten and relieve the pain that cannot be spoken or contained within language or the cultural spaces the women occupy.

Harris, pointing to Morrison's work in *Beloved,* noting that due to the violence inherent in the master's tongue that when used continues to inflict further violence, African American writers have had to find gaps within this language in order to write narratives of healing. This involves creating an 'unconscious desired locality' to contain these experiences. This locality, in terms of Morrison's work has to be something related to the culture of African Americans. In her study Harris points to music and song in the form of jazz as

> a locality which emerges out of specifically African American cultural practices. Song and music are associated in this novel with healing: perhaps, like the gaps in narrative discussed above, non-linguistic sound and music are likely localities with which to associate healing because they are, like trauma, unable to be represented and controlled by the master's language.[133]

[132]Wilson- Tagoe, Nana, "History, gender and the problem of gender in the novels of Yvonne Vera", *Sign and Taboo: Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera* ed. Robert Muponde and Mandi Taruvinga (Harare: Weaver Press, 2002)

[133]Harris, Ashleigh, "Toni Morrison and Yvonne Vera: an associative fugue", *Scrutiny* 2, 9. 1 (2004), 12

Music becomes the non-linguistic space in which trauma is articulated.

In *The Stone Virgins* Vera uses jazz to articulate the trauma and pain of the colonised locals and Harris comments

> Louis Armstrong's jazz allows this community to imagine freedom: an imagining that is made possible only insofar as this community identifies with Armstrong's African American context, and shared blackness becomes a point of trans-Atlantic identification with one another, and more significantly, with the role of music in their respective oppressive contexts. It is this black Atlantic identification that allows this community to trust Louis Armstrong with their music.[134]

Jazz then becomes the space in which they can imagine their freedom as the nature of the music is free and espouses notions of liberation. It is a free space within which to articulate their agency.

In the same way, in *Butterfly Burning,* Vera uses Kwela music, a music born out of the struggle and speaks to the difficulty of being enslaved, political arrest, deviation and resistance[135]. It is a sound of resistance and allows the people to escape to a space where they can imagine freedom and speak to their oppressors without fear of reprimand.

Similarly, as Tagoe mentions, the characters in Vera's texts are open to these transcendent gaps within their context and Grandmother uses the locality of song to contain their trauma, escape and seek healing. In traditional Shona culture song has many functions and some of them are specific to gender. For women in a culture in which they

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[134] Ibid

[135] Attree, Lizzy, "Language, kwela music and modernity in *Butterfly Burning*", *Sign and Taboo: Perspective on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera* ed. Robert Muponde and Mandi Taruvinga (Harare: Weaver Press, 2002)

could not openly express their grievances or specifically tell another how they feel, they would do it through a song. A lot of traditional Shona songs sung by women were for the express purpose of articulating their lives and documenting their history, the history of their experiences. It is within this same tradition that Vera writes Grandmother and her songs to Zhizha. She uses song as a non-linguistic form to articulate the experiences of these women. What Grandmother gives to Zhizha are songs from long ago, forgotten songs that contain the experiences of women before her. Song becomes a locality in which Grandmother escapes and teaches Zhizha to do the same.

Grandmother sings to Zhizha in order to help her forget, and to move beyond the present pain. "She sings about the river and its children. She says the river is wide like the sky and the sunset. In it all things begin and end. The river is horizon and cloud"[136]. This gives Zhizha a perspective of life beyond what she is feeling, and it is within these songs that she unearths other beauties of nature. Nature is at her disposal to use within her imagination, in her daydreaming. Zhizha says, "From far away Grandmother comes again dressed in water, saying this river is life. If you listen closely to the river you will hear a lullaby in its meandering banks, you will see birth."[137]

Influenced by Grandmother, in her imagining she hears music within the lake that holds the possibility of newness, a new birth. The water is a space that carries all the tears that have ever been cried by women, proving its capacity to contain her pain, becoming a psychological space to contain grief and memory – "I know there is a wide lake in her memory, a lake in which ripples grow to the edges of the sky, a lake in which all our grief

[136]Vera, Yvonne, *Under the Tongue* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1996), 96
[137]Ibid

is hidden."[138] The capacity of the water to hold the grief of all women informs Zhizha that she is not the only one who has suffered what she has, pain is not exclusive to her and she is not alone in her suffering. This is necessary for her healing process, in order for her to regain her faith in the world.

In *Without a Name,* as Mazvita is on the bus on her way home, haunted by guilt and the presence of the dead child on her back she hears a man playing the *mbira*. The mbira is a traditional Zimbabwean instrument, usually used ceremonially to summon the ancestors in spiritual ceremonies. The sound of the music "reached her in generous waves of sustenance"[139] as it begins to calm her. The beauty of its rhythm reaches into the depths of her pain and "the tightness disappeared along her neck."[140] This moment is profound as the *mbira* finds its way into Mazvita's darkness: "…there was this darkness so deep and silent, and now this glorious searching sound visited her, sought her out, found parts of her which were still whole, which held some sweetness and longing."[141] The music holds a promise for her in a time of death and destruction, just like Odysseus on the beach after the shipwreck when he beholds the beautiful woman. It opens her up to herself again and the possibility of healing, her own desire for healing and to hope again.

Due to the violent nature of what happens during a traumatic event, most victims of trauma according to Herman, experience a sense of helplessness. Given that they have no control over what is happening and are violated, this sense of helplessness affects them even after the violence is over. When Mazvita is raped, she goes into this state of surrender

[138] Ibid., 70
[139] Ibid., 69
[140] Ibid.
[141] Ibid., 70

in which she numbs herself from what is happening to her. "When a person is completely powerless, and any form of resistance futile, she may go into a state of surrender...the helpless person escapes from her situation not by action but by altering her state of consciousness."[142] Mazvita does not even see the face of the perpetrator but because she is very aware of the land, and the fact that this man is a guerrilla, she sees the land as her perpetrator:

> She connected him only to the land. It was the land that had come towards her. He has grown from the land. She saw him grow from the land, from the mist, from the river. The land had allowed the man to grow from itself into her body.[143]

Her consciousness shifts from the actual violation and translates into the land swallowing her, violating her and this is how her brain processes this traumatic moment. This becomes a fascinating conversion of the metaphor of the land as nurturing and caring which is portrayed in nationalist discourse. In this scene, the land becomes masculine, violent, and monstrous.

The sense of helplessness overwhelms Mazvita's body which goes into the mode of surrender after efforts to fight or flee are fruitless. It is as if she preserves what she can within her, gets up from the experience of the rape and her village being burnt down and is determined to run away from it all. Her sense of betrayal from the land and the brutality of her rape drives her to run away and to seek her independence from the war and take control of her destiny:

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[142]Herman Lewis, Judith, *Trauma and Recovery* (London: HarperCollins, 1992), 42
[143]Vera, Yvonne, *Without a Name* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1994), 31

> She wanted to conquer her reality then, and not endure the suspension of time. She felt a strong sense of her own power and authority, of her ability to influence and change definitions of her own reality, adjust boundaries to her vision, banish limits to her progress.[144]

The suspension of time she refers to is very common in traumatised people. Herman speaks of how traumatic memory is recurring and sense of time is lost on the victim, who relives the memory continuously and it seems impossible to move away from the incident even though time is moving on.[145]

Mazvita therefore gears herself to seek something beyond the presence of her traumatic experience, the helplessness she is made to feel as a result of the rape and also as a woman in the war whose vulnerability was made obvious by the violation of her body. She is determined not to be rendered helpless and outside of the control of her own life, space and body. What Mazvita seeks in her helplessness is to control her destiny, to find a different reality where she can be free, and she does this by moving to Kadoma first and then Harari. She strives to create a new psychological space that is not controlled by the masculinist nationalist principles in which all freedom and self-actualisation is tied to the war. The beauty she seeks is an intangible one which she can possess – independence and self-actualisation.

In her pursuit of freedom and self-actualisation, Mazvita seeks certainty, a stable and controlled idea of herself and therefore control of her life, surroundings, and future. As Scarry notes in *On Beauty and Being Just*, "...the beautiful, almost without any effort

[144]Ibid., 35
[145]Herman Lewis, Judith, *Trauma and Recovery* (London: HarperCollins 1992)

of our own, acquaints us with the mental conviction, and so pleasurable a mental state is this that ever afterward one is willing to labour, struggle, wrestle with the world to locate enduring sources of conviction – to locate what is true."[146]She decides to pursue this freedom, a freedom whose possibilities are so beautiful in the distance that she stops at nothing to gain it and carry it within her hands.

Mazvita arrives in Harari in 1977, the latter years of colonialism in the capital city where black people were living in the margins. They lived crowded in the filthiest parts of the city while witnessing the glorious lives of the whites in the city whom they worked for. Because colonialism came with the insistence that black was inferior and treated black people as such, it was difficult to form a positive identity outside of what was psychologically imprinted into their minds. Creating a positive black identity was complicated because the years of oppression had created a solid sense of alienation and trauma.

Pacteau explains that:

> Western discourse construes blackness as palpable, entirely visible, and yet empty, null – the presence of an absence. It opposes the reflective 'power' of white – black does not reflect – to the absorptive property of black. Blackness, thus defined in a parasitic role, feeds off light, ever threatening its luminosity with total absorption and extinction.[147]

[146]Scarry, Elaine, *On Beauty and Being Just: The Tanner Lectures on Human Values* (delivered at Yale University, March 25 and 26 1998), 22
[147]Pacteau, Francette, *The Symptom of Beauty* (London: Reaktion, 1994), 177

Considering how difficult it is to create any positive sense of self in this colonial environment, there is a desperate search for meaning and visibility within the city amongst the black Africans who struggle to make sense of who they are and to find meaningful freedom.

The city offers a sense of anonymity and room for individuality to be expressed. Bright lights, opportunity, joy, and escape frames the horizon of the city and the promise of freedom from the land and the war. There is the sense that you could be anyone in the city and be free to do whatever you want and determine a path for yourself. This is how Mazvita sees the city. Harari is a place for her to forget – "Harari banished memory, encouraged hope."[148] It is also a place full of discovery – "Harari challenged the demarcations between day and night, offered distance from time, for part of being here was the forgetting of boundaries to days, of challenging futures...The discoveries offered by the city were tempting and endless..."[149]

However, with time Mazvita realises the emptiness of the city, the emptiness of its inhabitants and the warped idea of freedom that they hold:

> Mazvita did not have to know anyone. Not herself, not anyone. Knowing was a hindrance. It pinned you down. After that you started recognising people. Recognising yourself. That was the danger. It was best to remain anonymous. Some things you just can't figure out. Harari was like that. To be here was not to be here at all, that's what made being here. It was special. The absence filled you up. It didn't creep up on you, try to surprise you gently and anonymously. You

[148]Vera, Yvonne, *Without a Name* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1994), 55
[149] Ibid., 55-56

> walked right into it. Hard hitting hardness. Concrete and rock hit you on the forehead and if you were lucky it broke your skull, then there was nothing to remember, the absence was total. A new life began, grew around you, embraced you like a hurricane. Sometimes it killed you. That was what was good about absence...[150]

This seems to suit Mazvita quite well initially since it does not demand any interrogation of the self nor is there any expectation from herself or others.

Afro wigs, light skin, red lips, bellbottoms, and tags stating "Revolution" summarised the freedom that could be obtained; a superficial freedom found in superficial beauty. "You had to wear your own freedom to be sure it had arrived".[151] Physical beauty espouses freedom, one which can be bought. "The city women conjured freedom from chaos. They had red lips.... They chose red for the colour of their fantastic realisations.... The women picked colours from a burning sun, from the lips of white women...."[152] The pursuit of this beauty highlights the desire for freedom and the attempt to claim anything accessible that points to this freedom.

In this context it is whiteness that embodies physical beauty, and it is by being closer to white that the black women can achieve a sense of beauty in the middle of a war and a system that considers them oversexed and undesirable. As Pacteau explains, "The culture of ethnicity altering cosmetology carried within it the notion that people of color had to overcome their blackness in order to be successful."[153]

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[150]Vera, Yvonne, *Without a Name* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1994), 45
[151] Ibid., 47
[152] Ibid., 62
[153] Pacteau, Francette, *The Symptom of Beauty* (London: Reaktion, 1994), 187

By 1977, Africans had been waiting for independence for a long time. Freedom was an idea, and every sense of unfulfillment was encapsulated in this idea. This freedom was on the horizon – their dreams, a promise, a rainbow in the distance that had not materialised. Their reality is a constant fight to stay alive and afloat leaving them open to taking whatever relief and escape they can, so for them "the use of Ambi is at once an act of imprisonment in European ideals and a source of liberation from the current realities."[154]Vera articulates how they do not know how freedom tastes, feels, or looks and yet they do know its promise and they yearn for it. This inspires a willingness to occupy any space that allows them room to live a different reality:

> Newspaper headings covered the dark alley, promised no freedom to the agitated people. But there were ample signs of the freedom people had already claimed for themselves– empty shells of Ambi, green and red. The world promised a lighter skin, greater freedom. It was 1977, freedom was skin deep but joyous and tantalising. *Ambi*. Freedom was a translucent nose, ready to drop.... Reality had found a double, turbulent and final. Freedom spoke from behind a mask, but no one asked any deep question, no one understood what freedom truly was. To be sure, it was boisterous. Ambi would do for now, certainly. No one questioned the gaps in reality. If there was a gap anywhere, there was an opening too. Freedom was any kind of opening through which one could squeeze. People fought to achieve gaps in their reality. The people danced in an enviable kind of self-mutilation.[155]

[154] Ibid., 181
[155] Vera, Yvonne, *Without a Name* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1994), 26

They remove what causes their discrimination in favour of what is acceptable, considered beautiful and therefore closer to freedom than the black skin that imprisons them. Fanon implicitly states,

> For several years certain laboratories have been trying to produce a serum for 'denegrification'; with all the earnestness in the world, laboratories have sterilised their test tubes, checked their scales, and embarked on researches that might make it possible for the miserable Negro to whiten himself and thus to throw off the burden of that corporeal malediction.[156]

Success, beauty, and freedom belonged to the whites and what was left to the black population is what they could purchase for themselves: proximity to this whiteness and even this remains elusive.

Jane Bryce studies the power of the image as depicted in the work of a few African writers, not only as imagery but giving precedence to the visual experience of the narrative as a new way of narrating the post-colonial experience. This 'predominance of the visual' is a narrative technique that Vera uses to not only describe but also to create a particular point of view, highlighting the possibility of creating and performing multiple perspectives. Photography constructs reality and in the African context the representation of Africans in colonial photography has always been voyeuristic. Africans were portrayed as objects of discovery and exploration and this has, to a large extent, informed the ways in which non-Africans have constructed African identity and the ways in which Africans too have constructed their identity. Photography therefore "…can never be innocent, being

[156] Fanon, Frantz, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 111

already implicated in the way we have been taught to see ourselves, as simultaneously observers and objects of the gaze."[157]

It is important then to challenge the ways in which the image has been used and bring to attention what has been rendered invisible and hidden. Through the photograph one can bring to view aspects of experience that are normally hidden and get the audience to question or change their relationship to reality. The photograph therefore "stands metonymically for the voice of the powerless, who call themselves into being through the image."[158]

In an interview, Vera comments:

> When I'm writing, I start with a moment- visual, mental that I can see, and I place it on my table, as though it were a photograph. This moment, frozen like that, so powerful that I can't lose sight of it, visually or emotionally. From it I'll develop the whole story, the whole novel. Everything ripples around that, the story grows out of the image for me, an entire history is contained in such a moment.[159]

In *Without a Name,* it is precisely the moment where Mazvita puts her dead baby on her back that Vera captures, and it is from this that she builds her novel. This element of photography, Bryce states, allows for the writer to create reality, to bring new perspectives that are usually hidden and a new way of relating to reality. The use of strong imagery in

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[157] Bryce, Jane, "Imaginary snapshots: cinematic techniques in the writing of Yvonne Vera", *Sign and Taboo: Perspective on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera* ed. Robert Muponde and Mandi Taruvinga (Harare: Weaver Press, 2002), 40

[158] Ibid., 45

[159] Bryce, Jane, 'Survival is in the mouth' an interview with Yvonne Vera, 1 August 2000, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, *Sign and Taboo: Perspective on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera* ed. Robert Muponde and Mandi Taruvinga (Harare: Weaver Press, 2002), 219

Vera's writing is not merely an accompaniment to her writing but can be seen as "constituting an alternative linguistic system."[160]

In the scene of Mazvita's infanticide, Vera paints quaint, delicate, and calculated images that show not only the brutality of the act, but the consciousness and thought pattern of a confused mother taking the life of a child she has not yet acknowledged or considered a child or human being from conception. Vera writes:

> Her rejection was sudden and fierce and total…. She took a black tie from a rack in a corner of the room and dropped it over the child's neck. It rested over the child in a huge loop…. She claimed her dream and freedom. She was winged and passionate. She drew the bottom end of the tie across the baby's neck. She pulled at the cloth…She strained hard and confidently though this pulling choked her and blinded her and broke her back…She felt the neck break and fall over her wrist.[161]

The movement of her hands are described in a trance-like manner, Mazvita dazed and distant from the act she is committing. Vera creates the scene as a ritual – the sacrifice of a child for the greater cause of 'freedom' and the beauty Mazvita hopes to find in self-determination.

The images Vera creates surrounding the infanticide are contrary to dominant representations. According to Charles Briggs narratives of infanticide in the media "are highly generic, producing the sense that the cartography of infanticide is familiar,

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[160] Bryce, Jane, "Imaginary snapshots: cinematic techniques in the writing of Yvonne Vera", *Sign and Taboo: Perspective on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera* ed. Robert Muponde and Mandi Taruvinga (Harare: Weaver Press, 2002), 42

[161] Vera, Yvonne, *Without a Name* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1994), 95-96

knowable, and contained within the stories."[162] There is extreme sentimentalisation of victims and the dehumanization of defendants, making them monstrous and unnatural.

However, in *Without a Name* the first signs of maternal instincts we see in Mazvita are after she kills her child when she sings a lullaby to the dead baby and cradles it. Even in this bizarre moment Vera creates an intimate moment between mother and child and

> …by ascribing to this moment of uncanny horror the quality of a ritual or ceremony of liberation and redemption, on the other side of which awaits an imaginable and attainable pleasure, Vera ultimately celebrates not only her protagonists' survival but her unwillingness to give up her desires.[163]

After killing her child, Mazvita does not find the respite she was seeking. It seems as if from the moment she kills her child she begins another journey. She thus heads back to what she was running away from. Mazvita's journey home becomes a journey in search of redemption and atonement, through which Vera creates hope and possibility. Mazvita now seeks anything that will help her escape, that will give her respite and allow her some release of her burden. The first opportunity she encounters is the woman selling aprons who call to her "Apron Amai! Apron Amai!", *Amai* being the Shona for Mother.[164] When Mazvita hears this voice, it is familiar and, in this woman, selling aprons, she considers release.

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[162] Briggs, Charles, "Mediating infanticide: theorising relations between narrative and violence" in *Cultural Anthropology* 22 (University of California Press: 2007), 325

[163] Palmer, Felicity, "Sex in the post-colonial city: desire, kinship, and freedom in Yvonne Vera's *Without a Name*", *Stichproben, Wiener Zeitschrift fur kritische Afrikastudien* Nr 11 (2006), 41

[164] Downloaded from http://vashona.com/dictionary on 11 October 2021

> Mazvita bought the apron in a state of quiet nervousness. Her fingers trembled, not yet certain whether or not to confess or escape. Some kinds of truths long for the indifferent face of a stranger, such truths love that face from the neck up, from the forehead down. There is little to remember in a face with which no intimacy has been shared, to which there is no kinship. There is nothing to lose between strangers, absolutely no risk of being contaminated by another's emotion; there are no histories shared, no promises made, no hopes conjured and affirmed. Only faces offered, in improbable disguises, promising freedom.[165]

Mazvita does not find this certainty in the beauty that she seeks and sacrifices her child for, and she realises herself that "Morsels of freedom desperately snatched were bitter, soaked with a remorseful after-taste. It was not worth the effort, the risk."[166] In the same way, Muroyiwa "seeks the beauty, the fragility and the playing with/in life and death that butterflies do. This is something that resembles his own getting into and out of the calabash of death. He finds his utopian moment by rupturing societal taboos via incest and rape."[167]

It is evident at the end of *Under the Tongue* that Zhizha has gained a level of understanding about her experience. She is finally able to speak about her rape, albeit incoherently in terms of language but the imagery is very distinct. As Atree states "…perhaps they cannot significantly alter their circumstances, but their experiences can

[165]Vera, Yvonne, *Without a Name* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1994), 10-11
[166]Vera, Yvonne, *Without a Name* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1994), 11
[167] Muponde, Robert, "Reading girlhood in *Under the Tongue*", *Research in African Literatures* 38. 2 (Summer 2007), 41

be aestheticized, seen from many perspectives, and a certain freedom claimed."[168] This is how Zhizha relates her rape, and her language reflects the nature of the use of imagination and deployment of beauty she has been taught by Grandmother.

She notices a snail and it is that which she focuses on:

> He enters into me breathing hard. A snail spreads on stone, climbing upward, pushing forward, its shell curled hard over its body, hiding from day in a deathly silence. The snail moves slow and searching over the rock, spreading through rock.[169]

She follows the movements of the snail, the details of which ease the burden of her traumatic memory. "A snail moves over broken bones on rock. A trail of saliva, of dew. My cry creeps from beneath rock".[170] The snail carries the time within the moment, just like the moon carries her burdens and the lake her grief. The snail represents her helplessness as a small girl molested by her father and yet the snail also marks her survival. The sight of this snail instils in her a desire for life. In her memory she makes vivid the image and presence of the snail that instils in her a sense of something more, larger – a beauty that gives her life. The snail makes what she is going through at that moment fade into the background.

In the same way, the image of the tortoise reflects her fragility and eventual violation and brokenness:

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[168]Attree, Lizzy, "Language, kwela music and modernity in *Butterfly Burning*", *Sign and Taboo: Perspective on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera* ed. Robert Muponde and Mandi Taruvinga (Harare: Weaver Press, 2002), 63
[169]Vera, Yvonne, *Under the Tongue* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1996), 105
[170] Ibid., 106

> A tortoise moves slowly forward, carrying a broken shell. It pulls its head inside, and hides. It pulls its legs in and hides. Its shell is broken and crushed because it has swallowed its own head, swallowed its own legs. Its stomach is hard like the earth, hard with the things it has swallowed. The neck twists and turns and swells slowly to one side. It totters slowly forward, wobbles on hidden legs, digs the ground slowly, frantically, burrows in the gathering earth. It hides, survives, moves slowly forward.[171]

The tortoise metaphor captures Zhizha's shattering moment both of her body and her mind, and she cannot make out what is left of it. This ability to identify with the tortoise makes Zhizha transcend her loss of voice and tongue by giving her presence in a different form. In her own narration of her rape- the traumatic experience that eroded her sense of self and personhood- she sees herself in the tortoise. She is present and although fragile, she can see herself as part of the world as well as part of the beauty of nature that Grandmother has taught her to see herself as.

Vera therefore manages to stage both redemption and tragedy within *Without a Name* and *Under the Tongue* to highlight the tragic situation of African women who face violence and silence, yet her beautiful representations of her characters reflect the possibility of hope even if it does not materialise. In "The Writer's Place", Vera rightly states, "We have acquired beauty even within the tensions and betrayals. We are at a fine place…."[172]The journeys of the women in this text, especially Zhizha and Mazvita reflect

[171]Vera, Yvonne, *Under the Tongue* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1996), 90- 91
[172] Vera, Yvonne, "The writer's place", *Indaba 2000: Millennium Marketplace* (Harare: Zimbabwe International Book Fair Trust, 2000), 29

this notion. The search and demand for beauty and pleasure become a prerequisite to freedom and self-discovery in the midst of violence and trauma.

While the argument on beauty goes beyond this to question whether or not the beautiful leads to truth, this study of Vera only seeks to establish that within the narrative space the victims of trauma seek the beautiful. What they find and what Vera insists on in most of her works is the contradictory nature of the world and our society that eludes truth and certainty.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This thesis began by noting the limited nature in which women characters were written by the canon of African literature with an equally limited take on women's experiences in the literature during the time Vera was writing. Vera's work occupies a unique place in African writing on violence, gender and the discourse on the nation and identity. And as the study shows, became a part of the concerted effort to not only write women's experiences, but do so congruously with the efforts of fellow African literary feminists who also believed in blurring the lines between the "private" and "public" sphere.

The introduction focuses on Vera's first novel *Nehanda*, which forms her genesis in many ways began by questioning the premise of Zimbabwean identity and the exclusionary nature of the imagined nation of Zimbabwe and choosing to rewrite Charwe outside of nationalist politics. Furthermore, more of her work unpacked another silence in Zimbabwean history, the Gukurahundi, a genocide that is yet to be formally acknowledged by the Zimbabwean government. I highlight further in the introduction how this becomes central to her work as she continued to write the books of concern to this study *Under the Tongue* and *Without a Name*; by placing her work during the liberation struggle of Zimbabwe, Vera chose to write about other forms of violence and foreground them: incest, infanticide, and rape.

In presenting the literature review and theoretical frameworks, I specify my choice of these particular books because of how the violation of women's bodies, as Vera shows, was relegated mostly as a metaphor to the violation of the African continent, adding to

several layers of silencing that African women were subjected to. In this light, the nature in which Vera provides an interiority to the traumatic experience of women in these texts, led me to apply Judith Herman's work on trauma in order to unpack these two novels in two ways. One: how understanding the nature of trauma helps us understand that Vera creates characters that are within a mentally "disordered" world, outside of linearity and chronology. This gives us an appreciation and understanding of the characters as we enter their worlds on their terms, outside the need for testimony or coherence which most victims are subjected to. Secondly, the use of Herman's work leads to the understanding of how trauma leads to silence as the traumatic experience creates a psychological barrier to language, normal language, due to the unspeakable nature of the act and the brain's inability to absorb the traumatic incident. Incoherence and silence present a limitation on language but also an opportunity that Vera takes up: the creation of a new cultural language that expresses this incoherence and silence in a manner that maintains the dignity of the characters and allows us to reimagine violence, not as voyeurs, but as witnesses that participate in witnessing beyond recognition.

In acknowledging Vera's use of aesthetics to narrate women's experiences of violence, I then make clear how Vera's work can be seen as pioneering in many regards, particularly when looking at the reception of her work, but also, as I show in the second chapter, how her work is reflected in contemporary African women's literary work. The use of beauty as a writing technique to form an intentional gentle carrying of women's narratives, a tool against invisibiliation and a locality to allow women to witness each other is evident in the works of poets such as Warsan Shire, Upile Chisala, Ijeoma Umebinyuo as well as black women feminists such as Saadiya Hartman. Not only this

lineage, but a lineage within the confines of Morrison's notion of rememory, which Vera also writes through in order to memorialise women's lives that are neglected within history or mistreated/alienated.

The journeys of the characters in the two texts form the core of this study, as they navigate the violence, the tragedy, the pain, and the trauma they're facing. And how they re-member, re-memory, find ways to express themselves, and witness each other. The chapter delves into strong literary analysis into the metaphor, imagery, use of song, as well as the madness of the characters as a manner of exploring Vera's use of the aesthetic as well as how the aesthetic is an essential intervention in overcoming the silence and barriers to language. Eventually leading to the conclusion that while the application of beauty as an intervention may provide some relief for the characters in the novel, beauty, while giving the promise of hope, does not guarantee healing.

However, it remains that "Vera's novel is a public gesture that nonetheless explores very private and personal experiences of pain. And the aesthetics of her literary art have been seen to produce, but to maintain her stories' individuality and humanity."[173] This study has essentially highlighted how Vera removes a shroud of silence from rape, incest, infanticide, and domestic violence and contributes to, what in her time, was a new cultural language of speaking to these kinds of violence in the African literary sphere. A cultural language along a lineage of black women's writing that congregates around beautiful expression in order to witness black women's experiences.

[173] Padfield, Debra; Hurwitz, Brian; Pither Charles, *Perceptions of Pain* (Dew Lewis Publishing 2003), 8

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