

**GENDER, TRAUMA AND THE HORRORS OF WAR IN YVONNE VERA'S *THE STONE VIRGINS***

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**Abstract**

Studies in Zimbabwean war novels, especially Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins*, have been examined from diverse theoretical frameworks like historicism, structuralism, Marxism, eco-criticism, post-colonialism among others, while some have narrowed their critical orientations of the novel to gender discourse contemplating the societal status, roles, positions and subjugation of women during and after the liberation struggle. However, those works as informed by gender realities focus on the pains, sufferings, horrors, terrors, violence, trauma among others, meted out to women without employing the theory that effectively reflects these traumatic experiences effectively. In spite of the peculiar meanings derivable from the afore-mentioned theories, they are not adequate to fully expose and grasp the sufferings the victims were subjected to during the liberation struggle. This apparent gap is what this paper seeks to bridge by employing Trauma theory with emphasis on insidious trauma. Since Trauma theory reflects both the psychological and physical wounds accessible in war conflicts, it seems to be a comprehensive theory that captures the traumatic encounters of victims in war ravaged societies.

**Keywords:** Gender, Trauma, Zimbabwean War, Yvonne Vera, *The Stone Virgins*.

**Introduction.**

After the violent and protracted liberation struggle of Zimbabwe, many narratives focus on the celebration of sacrificial and heroic versions of the war. While few writers focus on the aftermaths of the war, trying, among other things, to underscore the kind of individuals the war has produced and the dangers it posed for the society particularly the womenfolk who seemed to be the most vulnerable, most of those who participated actively in the struggle were abandoned without any form of rehabilitation. War veterans like Benjamin in *Harvest of Thorns* (1989) and Munashe in *Echoing Silences* (1997) are left to cater for themselves after the war without plans to integrate them fully back to the society. While the likes of Benjamin and Munashe seek for their individual

rehabilitations without minding the government's abandonment, others become a menace to the society. Apart from the fact that many ex-combatants are on the loose, inflicting injuries on the defenseless civilians after the liberation war, the state sponsored massacre unleashed on the Matabeleland becomes a subject thoroughly silenced in the history of Zimbabwe.

However, given the various versions of the narrative, the crisis has been identified by the state government as "stopping the activities of dissidents". But Yvonne Vera's pioneering fiction offers an alternative version of the historical past. Her work becomes the first to break the almost twenty years of silence that has trailed the massacre. According to Driver and Samuelson (2007), "While Kanengoni, in *Echoing Silences*, and Hove, in *Shadows*, touch upon aspects of the conflict, neither representation offers 'direct indictment of government-sponsored violence' against civilians as Vera does in *The Stone Virgins*" (p.101). Yvonne's fictional narrative reveals the terror ridden massacre that depleted the population of Kezi village in the wake of Zimbabwean independence. The novel basically revisits the horror unleashed on two sisters, Thenjiwa and Nonceba who were murdered and raped respectively shortly after the beginning of the "civil war" by Sibaso, an ex-combatant. Significantly, the novel has been subjected to various critical theories like historicism, structuralism, Marxism, eco-criticism, post-colonialism among others, while some have limited their critical orientations of the novel to gender discourse considering the societal status, roles, positions and suppression of women during and after the liberation struggle. However, these gender realities center on the pains, sufferings, horrors, terrors, violence, trauma among others meted out to women without employing the theory that effectively reflects these traumatic experiences. This gap demands to be bridged, and that is what this paper seeks to accomplish by subjecting the novel to the critical theory of insidious Trauma.

### **Literary theory and Trauma Discourse**

De Mey (2011) argues that "Trauma as field of study goes back to the early twentieth century which is the time when Sigmund Freud developed his theory of psychoanalysis. He was the one who changed the meaning of the term "trauma" from indicating "physical injury" to psychological injury" (p.34). This theory started with his study of the cause of neurosis in hysterical women whose investigation parallels that of the French neurologist Charcot (qtd, in Bessel Van Der Kolk and Onno Van Der Hart (1995, p.158). Charcot's examination of hysterical women led to the comparison between mental illness and trauma, paying particular interest to the uniqueness of traumatic symptoms like sudden paralysis, amnesia, sensory loss and convulsions.

The study, however, led to the discovery that these hysterical women were victims of rape, domestic violence and sexual abuse which underscored the agonizing experiences they were subjected to. The important information of trauma, however, is essentially held

as the upsetting of the victim's crucial conviction of him/herself and humanity. Before defining trauma, it is vital to consider its etymological meaning. Trauma originates from the Greek word "wound", which originally means an injury to the body. This shows that trauma is previously referred to a wound or external bodily injury. But, now Trauma has taken both the physical and mental or psychological dimension of injury. Trauma is commonly defined as a devastating situation that affects the psychology of people who are threatened with an injury. Kai (1995) defines "trauma as generally taken to mean a blow to the tissues of the body-or more frequently now, to the tissues of the mind- that result in injury or some other disturbance" (p.183).

As efforts to further comprehend the complex nature of trauma increased. The American Psychiatric Association came out with what is called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) because of the similar symptoms they shared with the theory of trauma. A lengthy reference to Caruth's (1995) exposition is indeed relevant:

... the fields of psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and sociology have taken a renewed interest in the problem of trauma. In 1980, American Psychiatric Association finally acknowledged the long- recognized but frequently ignored phenomenon under the title "Post Traumatic Stress Disorder" (PTSD), which included the symptoms of what had previously been called shell shock, combat stress, delayed stress syndrome, and traumatic neurosis, and referred to responses to both human and natural catastrophes (p.3).

The above explanation elicits the resemblance between PTSD and trauma, revealing the effects of a distressing event on a victim. After seven years of acknowledging Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, the American Psychiatric Association's (1987) Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM 111-R) reveals that trauma happens when "The person has experienced an event that is outside the range of human experience" (p.250). Such an event is capable of exhibiting traumatic symptoms like flashbacks, nightmares, withdrawal syndrome, psychic numbing, hyper vigilance, disturbed sleep, distracted mind among others.

However, while writing on the feminist perspective of trauma, Brown (1995) completely disagrees with the above definition of trauma given the fact that events like rape and incest are obviously excluded "as an event that is outside the range of human experience". She argues against the patriarchal dominant group considering rape or incest as "normal" experience. She further contests:

This picture of "normal" traumatic events gives shape to my problem as a feminist therapist with the classic definition of appropriate etiologies for psychic trauma. "Human experience" as referred to in our diagnostic manuals, and as subject for much of the important writing on trauma, often means "male human experience" or at least, an experience common to both women and men. The

range of human experience becomes the range of what is normal and usual in the lives of men of the dominant class; white, young, able-bodied, educated, middle class, Christian men. Trauma is thus that which disrupts these particular human lives, but no other. War and genocide, which are the works of men and male-dominated culture, are agreed-upon traumas; so are natural disasters, vehicle crashes, boats sinking in the freezing ocean (p.101).

The foregoing thought which questions what qualifies to be trauma negates the earlier findings of both Freud and Charcot. These theorists recognized that rape, incest, sexual abuse and domestic violence and so on are what induce trauma in a victim's life.

Therefore, for the purpose of this study, the string of trauma theory employed is insidious trauma as advanced by Brown. This is because not just that Brown's conception of trauma has foundation on the works of Freud and Charcot which studied hysterical women but her theory uses rape and incest victims as case studies. Moreover, Brown (1995), quoting Maria Root, describes this kind of trauma as insidious Trauma. "She refers to the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to the bodily well-being at the given moment but that they do violence to the *soul and spirit*" (emphasis added, p.107). Ostensibly, it naturally follows that this study which explores the trauma of rape in Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins* should adopt the theoretical framework advanced by Brown since both (Brown and Vera) have rape victims as their common case studies.

### **Gender, Trauma and the Horrors of war in Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins***

The distinguishing aspect of *The Stone Virgins* is that it probes the silence that characterizes the massacre of Matabeleland, given the fact the official version thwart the truth about the carnage. Divided into two parts and narrated by various voices – typical of trauma narrative - *The Stone Virgins* chronicles the traumatic journeys of various characters particularly the characters of two sisters, Thenjiwa and Nonceba, whose violent encounters during the crisis are perpetuated by an ex-combatant, Sibaso. Sibaso's obsession with violence finds expression in the murder of Thenjiwa and the rape as well as mutilation of Nonceba's lips. Describing the horrific nature of Thenjiwa's murder, the narrator underscores also its inherent trauma: "How did a man slice off a woman's head while a bucket was carried above it? How did a man slice a woman's throat and survive? what did he use to cut Thenjiwa's head off, so invisibly, so rapidly?" (pp.73-74). The above questions simply call to mind a battered psyche! Not only is the narrator –who functions as witness to the barbaric act- troubled by the kind of instrument, used in carrying out the dastardly act, but by the sheer display of an inner will demonstrated by the perpetrator? Wondering how such a person survived after the murder reveals that such incidents always haunt the perpetrator. According to Laub (1995), "No observer

could remain untainted, that is, maintain an integrity – a wholeness and a separateness—that could keep itself uncompromised, unharmed, by his or her very witnessing” (p.66). But, then it is not revealed in details whether Sibaso was haunted or not. However, a clue is given after the murder which suggests that he is, after all, traumatized:

Then he holds the dead body up, this stranger, clutching that decapitated death like rainbow. He holds Thenjiwa up. Then he seems to hold Nonceba’s body up, too, for it is impossible for her to continue standing, for her own mind to survive by its own direction. He holds both their bodies up. *Frozen*. (Emphasis added p.74).

That he froze, after the incident, betrays his traumatized psyche. Freezing reveals a state of shock. Shock is, also, a clear manifestation of a traumatized self. Krystal (1995) underscores that “freezing and immobility represent another basic response pattern” (p.79). Moreover, notwithstanding the fact that Sibaso had been a terror before, given the narrator’s account, it does not shelve him from being haunted:

In that quickness, moments before that, Nonceba sees the right arm pull back and grab the body by the waist, a dancing motion so finely practiced, it is clear it is not new to the performer. It is not the first death he has held in his arms, clutching at it, like a bird escaping. It is not the first death he has caused... Then he changes his thought and looks over his shoulder and over the body. *He looks all around. Frantic, he turns, heaving the body with him; he turns around again, twice, then stops*. (emphasis added, pp.75-76).

The italicized sentences underscore the physical description of a troubled and traumatized mind. Being “frantic” suggests the mental anguish that has overwhelmed him. Not being satisfied with the murder of Thenjiwa, Sibaso turns his heinous act on Nonceba. However, the above passage reveals that Sibaso had been enmeshed in deaths of many people.

While recovering from the trauma of her murdered sister, Nonceba surrenders to the terror of Sibaso’s rape and subsequent mutilation of her lips. To Krystal (1995), “with the surrender to what is perceived as inevitable, inescapable, immediate danger, an affective process is initiated... it consists of a paralysis of initiative, followed by varying degrees of immobilization leading to automatic obedience” (p.80). In that perceived obedience, according to the narrator, he moves swiftly towards Nonceba and pulls her towards him. Nonceba fears that “Each measure of touch anticipates a violence she already knows.”(p.77). Apparently, Sibaso humbles her in a most frightening manner by cutting off her lips after the rape:

At first, the moment is painless and I do not react, knowing nothing; then a piercing pain expands, and my body turns numb, motionless, with a searing pain. He has sought my face. Held it. His fingers, the

gap between my eyes, the length of my brow, the spread of my cheekbones, my lips, moving or silent. He cut. Smoothly and quickly. Each part memorized; my dark blood, my voice vanishing. My mouth, a wound. My mouth severed, torn, pulled apart. A final cut, not slow, skillfully quick; the memory of it is the blood in my bones (p.109).

What a traumatic description! Nonceba's narrative of her ordeals in the hands of Sibaso clearly pictures the helplessness that characterizes women's world in moments of wars and conflicts. According to Tal (1996), "Women, by contrast, almost never control the tools of violence. Their traumatic experience – rape, incest, battering – is the most extreme form of the oppression visited on them by a society that generally reduces them to victims" (p.139). However, Brown (1996) labels this kind of incident as "real trauma". She explains that "A feminist perspective on trauma of war is different because it includes acknowledgement of the social context and because it factors the presence of daily and insidious trauma into an analysis of what is now the 'real trauma'" (p.111). Nonceba's step by step narrative reflects the calculated efforts reckless men "creatively" display in doing evil instead of channeling such a skill in providing solution to the crisis that brings the war. Typical of trauma strategy, the narrator reveals that same event in a different episode showing how Nonceba reacted after the incident:

... but more than that. For a moment, all this was painless. I felt nothing. He sought my face. He touched it with a final cruelty. He cut smoothly away. He had memorized parts of me. Shape and curve; lips unspoken. He closes her hand. Her wrist bends, veins striated. *Nonceba mourns with a hunger caught between rock and sky. Her mind inert. She shivers, like smoke rising.* (Emphasis added, p.79).

How does one reconcile both the physical and psychological reactions of Nonceba? Her mind is inert, that is still, but her body shivers. These contradictory responses could only be obtainable from a traumatized self and it is quite revealing! A mind that is still should reflect calmness on the outside, not trembling! This experience is what Erikson (1995) defines as "The classic symptoms of trauma range from feelings of restlessness and agitation at one end of the emotional scale to feelings of numbness and bleakness at the other" (p.183-184). Paradoxically both end of the trauma's scale happened to Nonceba at this same time. This incident marks the beginning of Nonceba's traumatic occurrences. While in the hospital undergoing palliative treatment, her memory becomes deeply haunted by the voices she heard:

It is a different place in the hospital, a less private ward. Nonceba feels bare, exposed. She has to deal with other people, looking, watching, turning their bodies toward her, wondering about her. *She can hear many different voices all around her before she notices that*

*no one is awake; these are the murmurs of those who sleep in pain, with wounds that no one can heal; the wounds are in their hearts. These are the wounds that no one can heal; bandages and stitches cannot restore a human being with a memory intact and true inside the bone. Only skin heals (emphasis added, p.95).*

The reference above fully underscores the nucleus of trauma that captured Freud's attention. Nonceba hears different voices from those whose minds had been wounded. They are murmuring pains in their dreams. That means they are completely overwhelmed by trauma. While awake they are troubled, even in their sleep they are also disturbed. Typical of trauma, the wound of the body is a healable one but the wound of the mind is lasting and devastating. The narrator simply reechoes the words of Caruth (1995) when he says that "Only skin heals". If bandages and stitches are only used for physical wound then what can be used to heal a wounded psyche? That Nonceba felt "bare and exposed" merely represents not only her physical condition but her psychological disenchantment. It is noteworthy that Nonceba's hospitalization brings to view a harrowing incident of the crisis. Not too long after being hospitalized, Nonceba notices that a particular woman is screaming. "Her voice is high. Something pitiful is pouring out of it, something unstoppable... the woman is destroying a thought in her mind. She is getting rid of something." (p.87). Then one would ask, what is it her mind is trying to purge? According to Kyrystal (1995), "this condition is similar to pseudodementia, in which individuals are so hurt, so deeply wounded beyond the possibility of recovery through grieving, that they constrict their mental functions, and function as if they were partly demented" (p.92). Emblematic of a traumatized victim is confession. This is necessary for a hunted soul seeking for healing. It is only confession that can get rid of any burden bothering the mind. It is important to note that it is the mind that is doing the cleansing! In other words, the woman's burden is psychological as well as traumatizing. Though, it is not obviously stated that the woman later confessed or what became of her? But her being hospitalized as well as her traumatic manifestations shows that she was deeply disoriented. Nonceba hears the story of the woman's predicament from voices in the corridor of the hospital:

"She has killed her husband. Two soldiers walked into her house and sat her husband on a stone. They handed an ax. These men were pointing guns at her two grown up sons, threatening to shoot them if she did not listen. She fell on her knees and begged them to let her sons go. One soldier pushed her away with the butt of his gun. She fell down and wept for her sons as though they had already died, and for the heart of the soldier, which she said had died with the war. her husband raised his voice toward her and said, 'Kill me... Kill me'. He pleaded. He was desperate to die and save his two sons. She stood up silently repeating what her husband had said, with her own

lips, with her own arms. She opened her eyes and raised the ax above her shoulders till he was dead... ” (p.89).

From this lengthy chilling narrative, the woman killed her husband in order to save her two sons. Being subjected under duress to kill one’s husband is not only heinous but absolutely traumatic and humiliating. Then what is she doing in the hospital? The trauma of killing her own husband in such a disturbing manner has caught up with her. In fact, the narrator finds it difficult to properly describe the killing: “and raised the ax above her shoulders till he was dead”. Raising up the ax and till he was dead do not capture the exact and entire incident. It only shows that the narrator cum witness is unable to find the appropriate language to describe the event. Felman (1995) posits that what testimony (narration) does not offer is, however, a completed statement, a totalized account of those events. In testimony, language is in process and in trial; it does not possess itself as a conclusion, as a contestation of a verdict or the self – transparency of knowledge” (pp.16-17). Within a short period of time, she finds herself as the murderer of her own husband with a crude instrument. That she was weeping for her children and suddenly became silent when the husband pleaded for his own death reflect the shock and confusion she experienced during that moment. This woman’s narrative reenacts Munashe’s helpless and traumatic encounter with the woman with a child on her back in *Echoing Silences* whom he killed with an ax. The after effects of their disgusting actions are quite similar and revealing! However, Munashe’s confession comes rather too late. He still dies after confessing of killing the woman because he has been terribly traumatized for a very long time.

However, it becomes surprising that Nonceba was thrown into hallucination after learning what happened to the woman:

Now Nonceba can see the woman with the ax. She is tall and thin and her legs do not reach the ground. Her body is suspended in the air. It is though she is hanging from a tree. “Is she hanging from a tree?” Why does Thenjiwa ask that? Why ask at all? The woman is a tree and all the branches are in her head, moving back and forth. The woman wants to cut the tree down with the ax... (p.89).

Nonceba is apparently possessed in tandem with Caruth’s (1996) assertion that “to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (pp.4-5). How can Nonceba notice a woman she has not seen in person, holding an ax? How can she also describe the woman as tall and thin? Why is Tenjiwa, who has died before this event, ask if the woman is hanging from a tree? What is Nonceba’s relationship with this woman in the first place? Why is she troubled by the woman’s sordid action? Typical of a traumatized self, Nonceba experiences hallucination together with the psychological burden of her condition. Nonceba’s traumatic case heightens as she is subjected to medication:



Her tongue is moving in her mouth. She is thirsty; her throat is burning. She moves her tongue over and over, searching for saliva. She wants to reach the bandage with her tongue. To loosen it. To breathe through her mouth, not her nose. She is hazy, befuddled, and dazed from medication. She sees two shapes out of every object- a dark part of the shadow and a lighter part. Her world is superimposed. When she hears the woman's voice in the corridor, she hears her own voice beside it (p.90).

From the foregoing, the horrible encounters that have defined the world of Nonceba and the woman who had murdered her husband reflect the micro brutalities of what goes on during the crisis. These women's psyches have been battered tremendously and have changed their perception of life even if for a moment. Nonceba's disposition is aptly described:

She is alone now, looking out through the window... Everything is changing. She has a desperate feeling that everything has already changed, gone not to be recovered...her own arms have changed, her body... she was safe before now, safe because she remembered different things, remembered them differently, without her heart pounding, blinding her. *No one had died in her presence and made such an absolute claim on her memory; ...* (emphasis added, p.90).

The death she has witnessed, the rape she has survived, the mutilation of her lips she has endured and harrowing story of the woman with the ax she has heard, all have constantly lay claim on her memory, thereby haunting her severely. Nonceba's trauma continues unabated. Typical of a battered psyche, she wants to narrate her ordeals but could not. Not just because of the psychological burden but her physical inability to speak as a result of the lips mutilation. She bemoans:

I try to speak. I try hard to move my lips. I want to tell them everything I have seen. The water falling from the bucket that Thenjiwa was carrying. The sliding mud, red with blood. The man, Sibaso... I want to describe him, each word he spoke, each strand of his hair, his violent contempt of the living. I want to speak (p.114).

Nonceba's desire to speak will help her a lot towards recovery. This is because voicing out her feeling will help purge her of the burden the event had placed on her. Up until that moment, nobody has heard how or who killed Thenjiwa, or what happened to her (Nonceba)? According to Laub (1995), "This imperative to tell and to be heard can become itself an all-consuming life task... there is never enough words or the right words, there is never enough time or the right time, and never enough listening or the right listening to articulate the story that cannot be fully captured in thought, memory, and speech"(p.63). Like the woman who murdered her husband, Nonceba really wishes

to cleanse herself by speaking out. However, her efforts in trying to speak out end in chaos:

My voice is low; not even I can hear it. I fall deeper and deeper, till no voices can be heard. I cannot feel my lips moving, or find the shape of my words; a shape to match my words. *My mind struggles till I am breathless and a dark pain penetrates my body, and spasms shake me to the root.* (Emphasis added p.114).

Characteristic of a battered psyche, any feeling or thought that stresses the victims would always trigger and throw them into shock. Remembering Sibaso coupled with her inability to narrate what happened unsettles Nonceba greatly. “Though, I am awake, I am unconscious to the frenzied passage of time. There is a storm in my head. I reach the end of an eternal darkness. When I think of Sibaso, I feel revulsion so deep that my body heaves forward...” (p.116). This parallels Van Der Kolk and Van Der Hart’s (1995) observation that “memories are reactivated when a person is exposed to a situation, or is in somatic state, reminiscent of the one when the original memory was stored” (p.174). She could not reconcile herself with the perpetrator of her predicament not even in her thought. She also wonders in her ability to have survived these ordeals and still live. “Sihle whispers that I should keep still. She holds my body down... surprised to be alive, to be at the other end of this blank horror and be alive”(p.116). Her surprise should not be misconstrued in any way given the height of trauma she had encountered and survived. After all, the murderer of her sister could have killed her as well! Nonceba also suffers hallucinations even in daytime because of her traumatized life. Occasionally, her battered memory keeps haunting her with thoughts of her murdered sister:

My mind dulls everything till I swim in a vast opaque liquid. Speckles of light float in the room in which I dream while I am awake, yet not truly alive. I wake in a sweat, drenched. I wake with Thenjiwe’s name held on my tongue; my mouth is filed with saliva. My limbs are stiff. No part of my body can move; my fingers, my arms, every part of my body is again still. I lie on the bed, listening to my body turning slowly into stone. My jaw is held tight. I do not shout.(p.123).

The above scenario could be termed a double tragedy because a person with lips can voice out his or her anguish while being tormented by hallucinations. But a victim like Nonceba finds it difficult and stressful trying unsuccessfully to voice out her pains during a nightmare thereby,

compounding her predicament. However, Nonceba finds solace and healing after one year or thereabout by the invaluable support of Cephas who facilitate her rehabilitation. While in his house with Nonceba, he pulls out the hospital card of Nonceba which summarized her predicament “ ...inflicted as by a sharp object... could be a blade... victim did not see the instrument... grievous harm... lips cut off... urgent surgery

required... skin graft.”(p.184). These breaks marked by ellipsis is typical of trauma narrative.

It is striking that the author employs a poetic language to reflect the human devastation and its attendant trauma on the victims. In as much as the author is free to use her poetic license, her meticulous engagement of the language nearly blurs the seriousness of the novel’s theme. It has the propensity of diverting the reader’s attention from the gravity of the subject matter. Such a solemn narrative should have been relayed through a language that will enhance its meaning per se not a flowery language that has the capability of encasing the terror and horror of the story.

#### Conclusion

In conclusion therefore, the above analyses so far on *The Stone Virgins* show the author’s fidelity in handling the traumatic encounters that defined the Matabeleland crisis which ensued not many years from Zimbabwe’s independence. Delving into the various individuals’ gory experiences and bringing out their traumatic reactions, Yvonne Vera poetically underscores the micro reflection of devastations that occasioned the crisis as well as the collective trauma on the memory of the community especially the womenfolk whose social realities were traumatically reconstructed. The traumatic experiences of both sisters in Kezi town are capable of truncating and submerging the developmental potentials of the female folk. It is recorded that after the massacre many inhabitants fled. Among those that fled are women whose micro and macro potentialities to the Kezi society also departed with them. Even though, women’s entrepreneurial and developmental contributions during war periods have been recognized, the insidious trauma witnessed by Nonceba which unsettled her psychologically, can impede such strides by influencing the womenfolk negatively.

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