

Yvonne Vera's Narrative Craft

Majahana John Lunga

Dr. Lunga is a Senior Lecturer

Department of English Communication

Polytechnic of Namibia

mlunga@polytechnic.edu.na; or mlunga2003@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract

This article addresses Yvonne Vera's narrative craft because the numerous studies on Vera's works have not fully discussed this aspect of her writing. Moreover, the failure to appreciate Vera's narrative style may explain why her writings have sometimes been misinterpreted. Based on a critique of Vera's six creative works, the article is informed by a reading strategy called postcolonial critical theory whose objective is to bring to light in literary texts all the implications of colonial domination (Walder, 1998, p. 3). The article argues that despite the huge challenges sometimes posed by Vera's unconventional narratology, her oeuvre is recommended for study in tertiary institutions.

Key Terms

Yvonne Vera, Zimbabwe, postcolonial critical theory, patriarchy, surreal(ism), African feminism(s), imperialism, colonialism

Yvonne Vera's Narrative Craft

Introduction

Arguably Zimbabwe's most prolific woman creative writer in English, Vera was born in 1964 in Bulawayo, where she lived and completed her education as a secondary school teacher of English. Regarded by many as almost a female equivalent of Marechera in their shared 'daring approach to subject, bold use of language, a symbolic style and willingness to use the surreal' (Brickhill, 2005, p. 13; Landow, 2003, p. 1, Primorac, 2004, p. 165), Vera's literary genius earned her numerous awards, both in and outside her country. By the time of her unfortunate passing on in April 2005, Vera had published six texts: *Why Don't You Carve Other Animals* (1992), *Nehanda* (1993), *Without a Name* (1994), *Under the Tongue* (1996), *Butterfly Burning* (1998) and *The Stone Virgins* (2002). These are the works this article addresses as it grapples with Vera's narrative craft.

Vera's Narrative Craft:

A good example of critics who, as a result of their failure to appreciate Yvonne Vera's narrative style, have misinterpreted some of her texts, to the extent of even changing some of the facts in the stories, is Guchu (2001, p. 1). In some cases, even when no factual information has been altered, some critics have come up with diametrically opposed views about Vera's works, as the example of Wilson-Tagoe and Dunphy will demonstrate shortly.

One of the outcomes of European imperialism and colonialism – the latter is almost always a consequence of the former (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 1998, p. 46) – was the acquisition of a colony in southern Africa by the British, Rhodesia. Colonised Africans resisted European domination, and the fight to regain self-determination started as soon as the colonisers made their intentions to stay forever clear. Both African men and women fought for independence, and '[n]owhere was independence won easily. In some colonies, it took armed struggle to bring it about; in others it took strikes, demonstrations and protest marches' (Lazarus, 1990, p. 4).

As the African men and women were fighting their oppressors, the Whites, African women discovered that they now had two evils to contend with, imperialism and patriarchy, the latter having been entrenched in traditional societies by the former. Even after the defeat of colonialism, in the wake of the attainment of independence, African women still have patriarchy to grapple with. Aidoo explains the 'double yoke' on women thus: 'Ours has been a double quarrel. Not only as Africans, but also as women. Colonized by the colonizer, then by our own men, with their new power ...' (Iyer, 1996, p. 123).

This strong relationship between the African people's fight against British foreign subjugation and the African feminist struggle for equality is the focal point of Vera's oeuvre. This article has also been guided by Vera's words: 'I'm writing, in a way, the biographies of unknown women, but I'm also interested in our national history; so they [biographies] are against the backdrop of a particular time' (Bryce, 2002, p. 223).

Not surprisingly, then, a major thrust of this article is the historical sweep of Vera's corpus, which spans the entire period of Zimbabwe's pre-colonial, colonial and post-independence history – from the last years of the nineteenth century, when the British established Rhodesia as their colony, 'to the present political crisis' (Ranger, 2005, p. 1). This article has no intention to turn Vera into a historian, or to suggest that her texts should be read as socio-historical treatises; but rather to underscore that they are works of art, and should still be shelved in the FICTION, HISTORY section of any library. The 'history' in Vera's works must not be taken as 'an authoritative or closed articulation of history; rather the narratives are personal and cannot be merged into a unison articulation of history' (Christiansen, 2005, p. 215).

Undoubtedly, Vera is aware that official history is selective and supports those in authority at the time when the history is written (Muchemwa, 2005, p. 195). Vera is on record as totally rejecting the colonial version of the history about Nehanda, and then she also admitted to distorting history in her texts (Bryce, 2002, p. 220 – 1; Ranger, 2002, p. 203). Vera uses her imaginative powers to construct her version of Nehanda's story, so that in the end readers are presented with a representation of history in fiction.

In the past few years, an impressive amount of research has been carried out on Vera's books, but virtually all of this critical output has been on individual Vera texts. Each critic has emerged with an appreciation of Vera's work based on the text studied, very similar to the story of blindfolded people who had never seen an elephant, and who were

asked to describe this animal by touching it. Each person is said to have described the elephant depending on which part of the elephant's body had been touched. The person who touched the tusk exclaimed that an elephant is like a spear, the one who touched the trunk remarked that an elephant is like a python, and so forth. This single-text criticism explains why there are such conflicting views about Vera's writing, as, for example, Wilson-Tagoe concluding that Vera's work is fiercely political (2005, p. 13), while Dunphy insists it is not political (2005, p. 1).

Primorac, one of the leading critics on Vera's writing, is on record as stating that *Under the Tongue* is 'arguably [Vera's] most "difficult" text' (2001, p. 78). Vera's work itself is often described as 'dense poetic prose', and Vera's style 'allusive' (Muponde & Taruvinga, 2002, p. xi). Chan confirms this: 'At first reading, it is almost cloyingly poetic, affective in a lyricised manner' (2005, p. 374).

The whole intention of writing, needless to say, is to communicate with readers.

Whatever topic has been chosen, 'the writer's language should not be tuned to some idiosyncratic perceptual matrix which obscures it for the public' (Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa & Ihechukwu, 1980, p. 249). Africa's first Literature Nobel Prize winner is alleged to be 'obscure' and 'privatist' in his writing, and some of Soyinka's detractors have even called him a charlatan 'who delights in masquerading as the quintessential literary force' (Ibid).

According to Chinweizu et al., there is a privatism of *matter* as well as that of *manner*, both of which lead to 'obscurantism' – a term these critics equate with obscurity. The first type of obscurity is that due to a privatism of matter. In this case, allegedly incommunicable experiences, or those experiences said to be beyond verbal expression, are presented. But, these critics ask, quite rightly too, why should anyone bother writing about experiences that are intrinsically incommunicable in words? Secondly, there is obscurity due to privatism of manner. This time, matter that are quite capable of communication in words are presented in a manner that is incomprehensible (Ibid).

If Vera's fiction is not obscure and privatist, why are her texts then said to be difficult? My view is that Vera's style is certainly challenging, but it is definitely not in the same league as Soyinka's, for example, in terms of difficulty. Consider just a single example from the opening sentence of *The Interpreters*: 'Metal on concrete jars my drink lobes' (Soyinka, 1965, p. 1). The context later clarifies that 'drink lobes' are ears, and that the speaker is complaining about an irritating screech of iron tables as they are being dragged on a concrete surface. In his creativity, Soyinka plays about with words, and no doubt also means to say something about Sagoe, the man whose 'drink lobes' are being assaulted by the screeching sound. But it takes a great effort to puzzle out what Sagoe means.

Vera does not coin words. In her fiction, an ear is an ear, a mouth a mouth, a tongue a tongue, and so forth. But these lexical terms are of course sometimes used artistically, which then gives them new, metaphorical meanings, at which level they are then packed

with so many connotations that it becomes a huge challenge for the reader to unravel the meaning, or to peel away all the layers of meaning. Herein lies part of the explanation as to why Vera's texts are said to be difficult. But it should be remembered that, as a creative writer, Vera does what is expected of her – to use words artistically – as opposed to a lawyer, or doctor, who should use words lexically, that is to say non-artistically.

Publication dates do not tell us when books were written. *The River Between*, published in 1965, was actually written before *Weep, Not Child*, which was published in 1964 (Wilks, 1995, p. 13, 15). It took John Eppel twelve years to publish his first book of poems, *Spoils of War*, and fifteen years to publish his first novel, *D. G. G. Berry's The Great North Road* (Musiyiwa, 2007, p. 2). It is, however, safe to assume that *Why Don't You Carve Other Animals* is Vera's first book. In this text, Vera's style, though undoubtedly literary, is largely straightforward. A look at any sentence on any page will confirm this. For example, in 'Crossing Boundaries', it is clear, from the first sentence, who some of the characters are, what they are doing, or saying, to whom, when, where, and so forth. Virtually all the sentences are the simple type; there is a sprinkling of compound, but very few complex sentences. The vocabulary is not complex, nor is the plot, as there are no confusing time-shifts. In the end, then, it is quite easy to explain virtually any literary aspect of this story: the symbolism of the title, the significance of the names 'James', 'Moses', and so forth.

What Cook says about Ngugi's use of language in *A Grain of Wheat* is true of Vera in her short story anthology, namely, that the writer uses all the resources of English without

over-burdening the readers in any way (Cook, 1977, p. 107 – 8). The point I am making is that in the early part of her literary career, Vera's simplicity is not at the expense of artistic excellence. Consider one more example from Vera's anthology – the absence of a question mark in the title 'Why Don't You Carve Other Animals'. To think of this as a punctuation error would be as preposterous as it would be to say Armah misspelt 'beautiful' in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. These are examples of 'the flexible use of punctuation [and spelling] to bring out the full effect of such dramatic arrangements' (Cook Ibid). 'Why Don't You Carve Other Animals' is a story in which things are upside down, bearing in mind that it is set during the colonial era, a time of racial tension between Blacks and Whites in Rhodesia. The wrong punctuation in the title is therefore symbolic of the wrong things that are being done in the country because of the prevailing political order. In the story itself, there are more examples of symbols of wrongs that need to be corrected, for example a carving of a *red* elephant *with no eyes*.

After *Why Don't You Carve Other Animals*, Vera's literary style begins to assume a poetic flavour. Significantly this text is not included in a book that discusses Vera's 'dense poetic prose', *Sign and Taboo: Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera*. From *Nehanda*, right through to *The Stone Virgins*, matters are presented in ways that make them difficult for readers to comprehend. This is what Primorac means when she says Vera's texts are 'difficult'.

It is worth remembering that Vera's themes in the rest of her texts are first intimated in her first book. So if these themes have been easily communicated to readers in

Why Don't You Carve Other Animals, why is it difficult to do so in the subsequent texts? Moreover, Vera's vocabulary in these books still consists of fairly easy, everyday words; very rarely, if ever at all, does one encounter unfamiliar coinages such as Soyinka's 'drink lobes'.

The sophisticated narrative style in Vera's five novels could be a result of the confidence Vera may have gained after completing her postgraduate degrees in English. I have already suggested that *Why Don't You Carve Other Animals* was probably written during Vera's undergraduate days. I further intimate that *Nehanda*, *Without a Name* and *Under the Tongue* were possibly written after her master's degree. It is almost certain that *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins* were written after Vera had obtained her doctorate in 1995.

Nehanda is about spirituality, ancestors, myth, and so forth – very complex phenomena indeed. Vera must therefore find the appropriate language to convincingly put her point across. It must also be remembered that *Nehanda* is also about a restoration of a people's dignity in the face of foreign domination, and, equally important, the advancement of a feminist point of view.

Not surprisingly, therefore, *Nehanda* is complex. To start with, the storyline is unclear. The imagery, of which there is much, is also very difficult to unravel. Moreover, it is not clear at all what is happening at the beginning of the story in the first paragraph, and so forth. And yet it has to be understood that in a novel whose aim is to affirm woman's

pivotal role in society, Vera must create this complex woman leader in a correspondingly complex manner. Nehanda must be mysterious in *Nehanda*, just as African myths and legends say she was. At the same time, Vera must create a human being in *Nehanda*, a woman who must physically confront the invaders. This is an enormous challenge for the writer – hence Vera's apparently confusing narrative technique.

Where the symbolism can be explained, the message of the book emerges quite clearly. For example, the imagery of vultures hovering over the valley is symbolic of the destruction already caused, and still to be caused, by the predatory and rapacious European invaders. For a change, Vera uses unusual, but appropriate terminology such as 'seances', to enhance the spiritual, surreal aspect of Nehanda's story.

The surreal, dream-like narrative is also used in *Without a Name*, as a result of which there is much difficulty in this novel because of frequent time-shifts. The reader is never clear as to which period of time is being referred to, hence, for example, the mistake of interpreting the opening pages of the novel as its beginning, when in fact they are referring to events at the end of the novel. These time-shifts do not imply that this novel is poorly structured; instead, they are testimony to Vera's skill in narratology. These shifts symbolise Mazvita's state of mind, her stream of consciousness as a result of her tragic experiences. As Mazvita sleeps, as she walks around, her troubled mind is in a swirl, re-living the turbulent past. Memories, mostly unpleasant ones, flood Mazvita, and do not come chronologically.

Moreover, in *Without a Name*, Vera is not a slave to grammar. While still maintaining the use of simple sentences, mainly, whenever the need arises, single words or short phrases stand alone where one would expect a complete sentence. This departure from strict grammatical rules symbolises Mazvita's sense of freedom when she first arrives in the city. It is as if she cannot believe that she has finally achieved her lifetime ambition to live life in her own way. Her excitement that she is finally free is captured in stand-alone expressions such as 'Harari', 'Ambi', 'A carnival', and so forth. On other occasions, though, agony, disappointment, and similar emotions are aptly expressed by the use of these short statements, as, for example, when Mazvita fears that Joel may discover her pregnancy: 'Joel' is repeated three times to show how terrified and worried Mazvita is (Vera, 1994, p. 64 – 65).

Vera's doctorate seems to have influenced her style and subject matter in texts such as *Under the Tongue*, *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins*, considering that issues of voice, silence, speaking, violence, resistance, and so forth are at the heart of postcolonial studies – Vera's field of research in her doctoral degree. It should be noted that *Under the Tongue* begins with numerous expressions that metaphorise speaking, or the inability to speak. The phrase 'under the tongue' itself aptly encapsulates the notion of the 'unsayable'. And then Runyararo (Silence) is brought into the story to reinforce the idea that men expect women (and girls) to remain silent all the time.

Also of particular significance is Vera's sentence construction in *Under the Tongue*. As in *Without a Name*, she uses both long and short sentences, again mostly simple ones.

This is the case in sections where Zhizha is the narrator. These simple sentences help to bring out this little girl's innocence, thereby heightening the reader's sympathy for her, both before and after her misfortune. The staccato arrangement of some of the sentences enhances the uncertainty, anxiety, fear and insecurity experienced by Zhizha (Vera, 1996, p. 3 – 5, 9 – 10, 20 – 23).

Although *Butterfly Burning* is alleged to be Vera's most accessible work since *Why Don't You Carve Other Animals* (Primorac, as cited in Muponde & Taruvinga, 2002, p. 103), this accessibility, in my view, is limited to imagery and vocabulary. The simple vocabulary is meant to drive home the point of the lack of sophistication of the two major characters in *Butterfly Burning*, but mainly of Phephelaphi. This lack of sophistication in Phephelaphi keeps the reader on the watch, always fearful for her, because it is clear Phephelaphi does not fully comprehend Bulawayo, very similar to Mazvita's naïve perception of Harari. The fact that the story in *Butterfly Burning* is told by an omniscient third person narrator further emphasises that Phephelaphi, as the main character, is not in full control of her destiny. In fairness to her, though, it must be pointed out that she has two formidable odds to contend with – the twin evils of sexism and racism.

Amidst all the squalor and deprivation of Makokoba, the people in *Butterfly Burning* seem happy. Vera creates this impression exactly in the same way she does in *Without a Name*; she frees herself from grammatical rules.

One could continue to give examples of Vera's unique narrative style, but it should be clear by now that she does not engage in 'obscurantism'. Where Vera seems 'privatist' or 'obscure', the reader will have failed to notice the match between matter and manner. As has been shown already, this is the case in all the five novels, where the narrative style, in particular surrealism, is adopted because it is the appropriate literary manner of expressing what is 'unsayable' in Zimbabwean society – 'unsayable' in the sense of describing taboos (rape, infanticide, incest, foeticide), as in her last four novels.

Conclusion:

Unlike *Nervous Conditions*, or Nzenza's *Zimbabwean Woman: My Own Story*, for instance, whose meaning is clear to any reader after only a single reading, there is a great possibility that Vera's texts may be fully comprehensible only to a chosen few – those trained in literary appreciation. Despite the fact that Yvonne Vera is not for the faint-hearted, her writings should be studied in senior secondary schools, colleges and universities, where the texts can be used in courses such as Cultural, Gender, or Postcolonial Studies, African Women's Writing, Stylistics, and so forth. One can imagine that this is already happening in some institutions.

Vera's contribution to Zimbabwean literature written in English cannot be over-emphasised. Publishing six books in ten years is impressive, by any standards, but in Vera's case, these are award-winning texts that have undoubtedly added value not only to Zimbabwean, but also to southern African and African literature in general, in terms of both genre (African women's writing) and style (unconventional).

References

Primary Texts

Vera, Y. (1992). *Why don't you carve other animals*. Harare: Baobab Books.

Vera, Y. (1993). *Nehanda*. Harare: Baobab Books.

Vera, Y. (1994). *Without a name*. Harare: Baobab Books.

Vera, Y. (1996). *Under the tongue*. Harare: Baobab Books.

Vera, Y. (1998). *Butterfly burning*. Harare: Baobab Books.

Vera, Y. (2002). *The stone virgins*. Harare: Weaver Press.

Secondary Texts

Armah, A. K. (1968). *The beautiful ones are not yet born*. London: Heinemann.

Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (Eds.). (1998). *Key concepts in post-colonial studies*. London: Routledge.

Brickhill, P. (2005, April 22). Yvonne Vera: A personal tribute. *The Zimbabwean*, p. 13.

Bryce, J. (2002). Survival is in the mouth: An interview with Yvonne Vera. In R. Muponde & M. Taruvinga (Eds.). *Sign and taboo: Perspectives on the poetic fiction of Yvonne Vera*. Harare: Weaver Press.

Chan, S. (2005). The memory of violence: Trauma in the writings of Alexander Kanengoni and Yvonne Vera and the Idea of unreconciled citizenship in Zimbabwe. *Third World Quarterly*, 26(2), 369 – 382.

Chinweizu, O. J., & Ihechukwu, M. (1980). *Toward the decolonization of African literature (vol. 1)*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension.

- Christiansen, L. B. (2005). Yvonne Vera: Rewriting discourses of history and identity in Zimbabwe. In R. Muponde & R. Primorac (Eds.). *Versions of Zimbabwe: New approaches to literature and culture*. Harare: Weaver Press.
- Cook, D. (1977). *African literature: A critical review*. London: Longman.
- Dangarembga, T. (1988). *Nervous conditions*. Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House.
- Dunphy, C. (2005, May 23). Zimbabwean writer hailed for work on taboo subjects. *Toronto Star*, pp. 1 – 3.
- Eppel, J. (1989). *Spoils of war*. Cape Town: Carrefour.
- Eppel, J. (1992). *D. G. G. Berry's The Great North Road*. Cape Town: Carrefour.
- Guchu, W. (2001, August 3-9). Vera offers no hope to women', *The Standard Plus*, p. 1.
- Hawley, J. C. (Ed.). (1996). *Writing the nation: Self and country in the post-colonial imagination*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Iyer, L. H. (1996). The second sex three times oppressed: Cultural colonization and coll(i)u)sion in Buchi Emecheta's *Women*. In J. C. Hawley (Ed.). *Writing the nation: Self and country in the post-colonial imagination*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Landow, G. P. (2003). Yvonne Vera on authors who influenced her. *The Culture and Literature of Zimbabwe*, 1, 1.
- Lazarus, N. (1990). *Resistance in postcolonial African fiction*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Muchemwa, K. Z. (2005). Some thoughts on history, memory, and writing in Zimbabwe. In R. Muponde & R. Primorac (Eds.). *Versions of Zimbabwe: New approaches to literature and culture*. Harare: Weaver Press.

- Muponde, R., & Primorac, R. (Eds.). (2005). *Versions of Zimbabwe: New approaches to literature and culture*. Harare: Weaver Press.
- Muponde, R., & Taruvinga, M. (Eds.). (2002). *Sign and taboo: Perspectives on the poetic fiction of Yvonne Vera*. Harare: Weaver Press.
- Musiyiwa, A. (2007, April 2). Poetry and race relations in Zimbabwe: An interview with author John Eppel. Retrieved from <http://english.ohmynews.com>
- Ngugi wa Thiong'o. (1964). *Weep not, child*. London: Heinemann.
- Ngugi wa Thiong'o. (1965). *The river between*. London: Heinemann.
- Ngugi wa Thiong'o. (1967). *A grain of wheat*. London: Heinemann.
- Nzenza, S. (1988). *Zimbabwean woman: My own story*. London: Karia Press.
- Primorac, R. (2001). Crossing into the space-time of memory: Borderline identities in novels by Yvonne Vera. *Journal of Commonwealth Literatures*, 36.
- Primorac, R. (2004). The place of woman is the place of the imagination. *Journal of Commonwealth Literatures*, 39(3), 157 – 171.
- Ranger, T. (2002). History has its ceiling: The pressures of the past. In *The stone virgins*. In R. Muponde & M. Taruvinga (Eds.). *Sign and taboo: Perspectives on the poetic fiction of Yvonne Vera*. Harare: Weaver Press.
- Ranger, T. (2005, April 24). Yvonne Vera: Township girl to celebrity. *The Standard Plus*, p. 10.
- Soyinka, W. (1965). *The interpreters*. London: Andre Deutsch.
- Vera, Y. (1995). The prison of colonial space: Narratives of resistance. Unpublished PhD. thesis, York University, Toronto.

Walder, D. (Ed.). (1998). *Post-colonial literatures in English: History, language, theory*.

Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wilks, R. (1995). *Notes on Ngugi's The river between*. Nairobi: Heinemann.

Wilson-Tagoe, N. (2005, April 22). Literary world mourns. *The Zimbabwean*, p. 13.