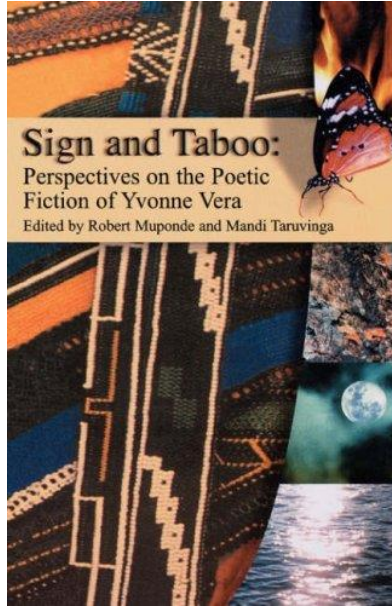


BOOK REVIEW: Sign and Taboo: Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera

A TRIBUTE TO ZIMBABWE'S LATE FEMALE WEAVER OF WORDS



AARON MUPONDI

Renowned local and international academics and critics, most of whom are women, came up with a groundbreaking reader on Yvonne Vera's fictional works entitled, *Sign and Taboo: Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera* edited by Robert Muponde and Mandivavarira Maodzwa-Taruvinga and published by Weaver Press in Harare, Zimbabwe in 2002. This critical reader covers Vera's prose narratives in English such as *Nehanda* (1993), *Why Don't You Carve Other Animals* (1994), *Without a Name* (1994), *Under the Tongue* (1996), *Butterfly Burning* (1998) and *The Stone Virgins* (2002). The reader is made up of 17 brilliant essays divided into five parts with a very useful interview with Vera by Jane Bryce at the end.

Vera has attracted much critical attention because of her consistent focus on women's problems and her commitment to women's struggles for freedom. In her fiction, Vera maintains a no-holds-barred confrontation with African men and the colonial system as she sees both of these as sources of women's domination and oppression. The writer, therefore, belongs to the category of radical feminists in Zimbabwean literature. Another element that makes her works outstanding is her unique style, characterised by poetic prose and the blending of African orature with modern techniques.

Sign and Taboo deals with the above issues in Vera's creative writing. For a reader of Vera's fiction, the title is very appropriate. The 'sign' part of the title refers to Vera's use of symbols and images to signify meaning and reality in her works. The 'taboo' part refers to such events as rape, incest, abortion, suicide, murder and women's other expressions of freedom in the author's works. Vera smashes "taboos" by her courageous interrogation and challenge of the colonial system in Rhodesia and of African patriarchy and by offering an alternative vision for the embattled colonial and post-colonial society in her works.

In part 1, Kizito Z. Muchemwa, in his essay "Language, voice and presence in *Under the Tongue*," argues that Vera's main concern in *Without a Name* and *Under the Tongue* is the recovery of the repressed discourse of women. Thus, in Muchemwa's view, the two novels are "a strategy of re-inscription and recovery" (p. 9) of women's identities and their ability to represent themselves. Like Muchemwa, Meg Samuelson, in "A River in Mouth: writing the voice in *Under the Tongue*" shows how sexual violence perpetrated on women by men in Vera's novels traumatises women into silence. Samuelson argues that Vera sees the redemption of victimised women coming from other women, as is the case with Zhizha, who is helped to recover her voice by her mother, Runyararo, in *Under the Tongue* after being raped by

her father Muroyiwa. The critic sees the assistance given to Zhizha by her mother as an act of empowerment. She also observes that Runyararo's artistry, mat-weaving, represents Vera's search for "a specific post-colonial writing that will retain the features of pre-colonial morality, which the mats connote, while simultaneously managing to offer African women a moment of intervention." (p.23) In the same section, Carolyn Martin Shaw, in "The habit of assigning meaning: signs of Yvonne Vera's world," points out that Vera vividly freights her stories through an elaborate use of signs and images. Shaw explores the use of colours and images in Vera's story "The Shoemaker" in *Why Don't you Carve Other Animals* and in novels, such as *Butterfly Burning*, *Without a Name* and *Under the Tongue*, in a very informative and refreshing way.

Jane Bryce, in her essay "Imaginary snapshots: cinematic techniques in the writing of Yvonne Vera" at the beginning of Part Two, argues that photographic and cinematic texts help Vera to capture ideas in a convincing and all-encompassing way. She says that even taboo subjects—incest in *Under the Tongue*, infanticide and rape in *Without a Name*, female resistance and heroism in *Nehanda* – "are brought under the lens into focus, where they can no longer be ignored." (p.43) Jessica Hemming's forte, in "The voice of cloth: interior dialogues and exterior skins," is Vera's use of cloth to convey meaning. She indicates that in *Under the Tongue* cloth refers to the fragile relationships between characters and the poverty that afflicts them as they use cloths to create physical boundaries between them in one room. The critic further points out that in *Without a Name* cloth is a metaphor for Mazvita's alienation and suffering as Mazvita "sees herself as part of a torn social fabric encased in a body that is worn to the bone through years of unrelenting hostility".(p.60) In the last essay in Part Two, Lizzy Attree's "Language, kwela music and modernity in *Butterfly Burning*," the view that in *Butterfly Burning* Vera fuses poetry with prose, poetry being the 'private language of

beauty and emotion.’ (p.64) Attree says that these artistic forms are woven around the fabric of kwela music that ‘threads through the novel.’ (p.64) Attree indicates that kwela music and the poetic prose in the novel are suitable devices to express freedom, resistance and soothe characters in very difficult situations.

The first essay in Part Three by Shaw, “A woman speaks of rivers: generation and sexuality in Yvonne Vera’s novels,” reflects on the perennial the suffering of women. The critic observes that from *Nehanda* to *Butterfly Burning* Vera shows women suffering from generation to generation. Shaw thus points out that the archetypal symbol of water in Vera’s novels refers to women’s “tears” as well as to their healing and biological identity as child-bearers. In her discussion of rape and recovery in *Without a Name* and *Under the Tongue*, Samuelson, in “Remembering the body: rape and recovery in *Without a Name*,” shows rape as a form of oppression of women by men and also points out that women can only genuinely recover from rape through memory, confronting the incident and thus coming to terms with reality.

According to Samuelson, trying to repress the memory of rape leads to self-destructive tendencies, as shown by the case of Mazvita in *Without a Name*. Ranka Primorac, in “Iron butterflies: notes on Yvonne Vera’s *Butterfly Burning*,” views women in *Butterfly Burning* as ‘iron butterflies’ due to their resilience and vulnerability. These women are marginalised by both men and colonialism. The critic points out that the protagonist, Phephelaphi, makes a fruitless search for a space of her own and chooses death rather than stillness. Hence, in Primorac’s view, Vera’s novel reflects “a new perspective on what is meant to be a black woman in the country called Rhodesia.” (p.104) However, ten years before the publication of *Butterfly Burning*, Tsitsi Dangarembga, in *Nervous Conditions* (1988), had expressed concern about the double suffering of black women from patriarchy

and colonialism. In “Yvonne Vera’s *Without a Name*: reclaiming that which has been taken, “Ruth Lavelle is of the opinion that Vera’s depiction of Mazvita is meant to make the reader understand the character’s situation and even sympathise with her and also other women in similar circumstances. This ensues from the fact that Mazvita commits infanticide to salvage her freedom and heal “the wounds of the past”.

In Part 4, Robert Muponde, in “The sight of the dead body: dystopia as resistance in Vera’s *Without a Name*, “attacks Vera for her limited understanding of the machinations of colonialism and the nature and role of the liberation war in Zimbabwe as reflected in *Without a Name*. In this novel, Mazvita blames the land for her rape and abandons the national struggle for land in search of personal freedom in the city which is, ironically, the centre of colonial oppression. However, Muponde reads Mazvita’s victimisation as an “indictment of the predatory and exclusionary revolutionary theory of the nationalists”.(p.123) The critic further indicates that in *Without a Name* Vera shows that liberation of self is also possible in the context of liberation of the land and nation. In his essay, “Spirit possession and the paradox of post-colonial resistance in Yvonne Vera’s *Nehanda*,” Maurice Vambe is of the view that in *Nehanda* the positive contributions of women to society, especially by Nehanda, shatter the identity of black women as mere victims of patriarchy and colonialism. Nehanda was a national spirit medium (*mhondoro*) in Zimbabwe who played a very influential role in the 1896-97 Uprisings known as The First Chimurenga. The critic goes on to say that, in this respect, Vera challenges both the patriarchal and colonial ideologies and puts at the centre of the novel a woman-centred vision of society and meaning of independence. Vambe, however, observes that Vera’s vision is embattled with contradictions based on the politics of gender, ethnicity, class and Vera’s use of the coloniser’s language (English) in her novels.

Khombe Mangwanda's essay in Part Five, "Re-mapping the colonial space: Yvonne Vera's *Nehanda*," sums up a novel such as *Nehanda* as "a tale of land re-appropriation that deconstructs the imperial narrative of appropriation." (p.141) Like Vambe, Mangwanda notes that in *Nehanda*, Vera re-maps colonial Zimbabwe using Shona mythology and symbolism that excludes whites. In "History, gender and the problem of representation in the novels of Yvonne Vera," Nana Wilson-Tagoe shows how Vera's novels reconstruct history by recreating the images of women and also by creating space for women in a patriarchal and colonial society. She claims that the revolutionary story of *Nehanda* "unsettles the collective ethic and its assumptions and paves way for a possible re-constitution of leadership, authority and the social order." (p.163) Emmanuel Chiwome, in "A comparative analysis of Solomon Mutswairo's and Yvonne Vera's handling of the legend of *Nehanda*," indicates that both Vera and Solomon Mutswairo depict *Nehanda* as a symbol of resistance and liberation and pay attention to cultural details in their novels about *Nehanda* to revitalise the legend vis-à-vis its distortion and suppression by the colonisers. Chiwome, however, notes that unlike Mutswairo, Vera's depiction of *Nehanda*'s death is "from a supernatural rather than an organic point of view." (p.189) The critic also attacks Vera for misrepresenting some of the African traditional norms and practices in *Nehanda*. He says that this act will unfortunately reinforce the outsider's stereotypes about traditional African societies. Chiwome echoes Vambe when he reflects Vera's dilemma of attempting to represent the African world in new ways using the English language.

In "Between the pause and the waiting: the struggle against time in *Butterfly Burning*," Violet Bridget Lunga is of the view that space, time and memory shape identities and destinies in *Butterfly Burning*. She shows how women such as Phephelaphi, Deliwe, Getrude and others are affected by the colonial space and time as

black women. She reflects how colonial constraints and patriarchal restrictions in the form of Fumbatha stifle Phephelaphi's ambitions, causing her to committing suicide. The well-known Zimbabwean historian, Terence Ranger, in "History has its ceiling: The pressures of the past in *The Stone Virgins*," argues that although *The Stone Virgins* pursues the victimisation of women by men, the novel marks a change in Vera's engagement with history as the book is not one 'in which narratives are compressed into a private tragedy' but is 'about people caught up in and destroyed by a public disaster.' (p.206) In other words, Ranger is saying that *The Stone Virgins* is not gender-biased but has a national perspective as its real focus. It is not Thenjiwe who is beheaded by government soldiers but the national tragedy in Matabeleland in the early 1980s during which several thousands of civilians were killed during the *Gukurahundi* campaign. *Gukurahundi* (a heavy storm) was the code name of the North Korean-trained Zimbabwe's Fifth Brigade that was sent into Matabeleland and Midlands provinces to suppress "dissidents" soon after independence.

After going through *Sign and Taboo*, readers will realise that some critics of Vera's work and the poetics of her novels and short stories tend to pay more attention on style while, on the other hand, other critics are more socio-historical in their approach as they highlight Vera's perception of social reality as a woman. Nevertheless, I find the critical reader very suitable for teachers' college and for university students and lecturers studying the late author's works.