ZIMBABWEAN WOMEN'S WRITINGS: A STUDY OF THE FICTION OF BARBARA MAKHALISA, YVONNE VERA AND TSITSI DANGAREMBGA.

BY

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DECLARATION

I declare that the dissertation hereby submitted to the University of the North for the degree of **Master of Arts** has not previously been submitted by me for a degree at this or any other university, that it is my own work in design and in execution, and that all material contained therein has been duly acknowledged.

Signed.....F Donga.....

Date.....30 January 2002.....

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my dearest family: Beula, Joy, Jeremy, and Janielle Donga whose patience helped me throughout this study.

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Abstract

This dissertation is organised into six chapters that highlight the representation of the female protagonist in the works of selected female Zimbabwean authors. To investigate this representation in the selected works, an analytical method is adopted so as to attain insight into these texts.

Chapter One introduces the problem under investigation while Chapter Two examines Makhalisa's short stories: The Underdog and Other Stories (1984) and Eva's Song (1996). These stories present emotionally and physically bruised women, who despite gendered subjectivities, seek alternatives to their plight. Makhalisa's focus is the family as an institution, focusing on the plight of the girl child, and barrenness. Eva's Song interrogates not only the 'private' lives of women but the public ones also, as they act as breadwinners in the family. The female protagonists in these stories are engaged in a sisterhood in which the plight of one sister is shared and means for alleviation sought, as is the case with Bongiwe and Jessie.

In Chapter Three, this project analyses how Vera exploits language in imaging her protagonists as they contend with social and patriarchal forces. This researcher contends that in Without a Name (1994), Under the Tongue (1996) and Butterfly Burning (1998) Vera's imaging of the female situation intensifies and it challenges cultural tendencies that seek to silence women. To break this silence, she calls for the female to inscribe her experiences into text, thus enabling her protagonist to find a voice.

In Chapter Four this investigation examines Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions (1988) where the politics of gender and male dominance come under focus. This chapter examines the female characters, the father figure as well as the impact of entrapment on various characters.

This investigation merges the three authors in Chapter Five to find if there are any shared visions and concerns in their writing. Makhalisa's protagonists are multi-faceted beings: as victims, and even as combatants challenging, contesting and even subverting the patriarchal construction. Vera's imaging depicts a bitter female who, in her quest for an independent life, would stop at nothing even if it means taking her own life. Finally, despite the merging points established in this dissertation, Makhalisa, Vera and Dangarembga take divergent routes in their pursuit of the female experience. Placed on a time scale, Black Zimbabwean female writing has moved with the times and contested various forces that seek to silence the female voice.

ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THIS DISSERTATION

NC – Nervous Conditions
ES – Eva's Song
TUOS – The Underdog and Other Stories
WAN – Without a Name
UTT – Under the Tongue
BB – Butterfly Burning
TPNB – Teachers, Preachers, Non Believers
TJOM- The Joys of Motherhood

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

1. 1 Outline

This study intends to look at the representation of the female protagonists in the works of selected female Zimbabwean authors. The basic operational framework is that these authors centre their work on contentious issues that they renegotiate in the context of a larger social, cultural and political landscape. Their voice, however, is on a shifting plain and it keeps on shifting and intensifying: from Makhalisa's general preoccupation with the communalistic and didactic concerns, to Vera's and Dangarembga's solitary protagonists whose individuality and quest for space becomes their strength.

To this end, the study will focus on the novels of Yvonne Vera, namely Without A Name (1994), Under The Tongue (1996) and Butterfly Burning (1998); Barbara Makhalisa's The Underdog and other Stories (1984) and Eva's Song (1996); as well as Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions (1988). It will further deal with how the three writers define their protagonists in coping with those forces that delineate female life.

In line with the above, this dissertation will examine a number of forces operational in these works. In Without a Name, for instance, Vera interrogates patriarchal forces[1] that seek to overwhelm Mazvita, the

protagonist. The study of this novel will focus on the city that is personified as a symbol of modernity and progress: an agent that is unfriendly and traps unwary individuals such as Mazvita. This protagonist single-handedly confronts and challenges it while getting bruised in the process. In this dissertation the researcher will expose how in Under the Tongue, for example, Vera centralises language as the main weapon that the female can use to define her life while in Butterfly Burning she interrogates the family, marriage and other social constructions as functionaries of the larger conspiracy of the patriarchal force. Makhalisa's short stories invoke in the reader's mind the plight of the girl-child, the single mother, sexism in places of employment, as well as abuse both within and without the family. In Dangarembga's case the text exposes colonial and patriarchal forces that seek to dominate the female. Although there could be other factors that thwart the well being of the female, these authors single out patriarchy and its offshoots as the dominant forces at the centre of the plight of the woman.

In pursuing the above issues, this dissertation is organised as follows: Chapter One carries the introduction while Chapter Two intends to show the various locations where the female experience has been fundamental in articulating challenges and trials the female has to confront in life. Chapter Three discusses decentredness as a psychological condition in some of Vera's characters. This chapter will furthermore

closely analyse how the female character is in a quest for space and a voice, hence she constantly pushes for life beyond the boundaries erected by male culture. Dealing with Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions, is Chapter Four where the researcher reveals the politics of gender and shows how male dominance stifles life from those it dominates, as is the case with Nyasha in this novel. Chapter Five will serve as the merging point for the three positions charted above. In this chapter, the researcher will closely analyse the portrayal of the protagonist of each work and ultimately use this analysis to establish if there is any intertextuality among these authors. Finally, Chapter Six will present the conclusion.

1. 2 Broad Aims

The purpose of this study is to analyse the portrayal of the protagonist in selected works of fiction; compare how the three authors define their views regarding patriarchal domination in their works; and present the selected authors as representative of the dynamism of female Zimbabwean writing in English.

1. 3 Specific Aims

This study will specifically discuss Vera's portrayal of decentred characters in her works. Furthermore, the researcher will analyse the presentation of

gendered roles and chores in the family sphere as depicted in Makhalisa's short stories. Next will be a comparative view of how the female experience variably changes from one text to another even in works by the same author. Finally, Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions will be investigated for the centrality of the patriarchal force in power relations between males and females as well as between the coloniser and the colonised.

1. 4 Delimitations of this study

This study will look only at the selected authors' works written in English. These authors were chosen because they stand out among black Zimbabwean women prose writers and in addition, they span different generations, with Makhalisa occupying what Veit-Wild classifies as 'the lost generation of the seventies' (1993: 148). In Zimbabwean literature, writers such as Rev. Ndabaningi Sithole, Rev. C. Banana and Stanlake Samkange belong to what Veit-Wild describes as the first generation whose writings were mostly influenced by missionary education. Unlike the first, the second generation includes those writers who went to school in the fifties and sixties when Zimbabwe was experiencing increasing racial tension under colonial rule. This is the 'lost generation' – writers whose writings express anger towards the colonial establishment of the day. Makhalisa, Marechera, Mungoshi, and Hove among others, belong to this generation

while Dangarembga and Vera, unlike Makhalisa, came onto the scene only in the eighties and nineties respectively.

1. 5 Limitations of this study

The three authors discussed in this study are not the only women fiction writers in Zimbabwe as many more have published in Ndebele and Shona, the two main indigenous languages in Zimbabwe. This study could, therefore, have utilised various perspectives from both vernacular and English writings by Zimbabwean women. Moreover, a comparison of the portrayal of the female character by both female and male writers would have enhanced this study.

1. 6 Literature review

This section will review salient texts that address the literary works of the three authors selected for this study. Commenting on the imaging[2] of women, Gaidzanwa (1985: 14), in Images of Women in Zimbabwean Literature, reveals a consistent image of women as mothers - a theme that dominates Zimbabwean literature - by stating that:

> Motherhood is respectable and held in high esteem as long as it goes with or is preceded by socially approved wifehood ... the characterization of mothers differs a great deal, ranging from unreasonable, evil, fearsome, to beloved and comforting ones.

Concurring with Gaidzanwa is Bourdillon (1976: 50) in an

ethnographic study among the Shona people of Zimbabwe, in which he reveals that women had status in traditional African societies. This status came largely through motherhood where a woman could gain respect because of the children she has had in marriage. With reference to the authors under discussion, the image of the woman is depicted differently: ranging from prostitute, hawker, girl-child, scholar, alienated girl, restless and searching soul, to a distraught individual seeking escape from conditions that overwhelm the soul.

Msiska and Hyland (1997: 112) view Maiguru in Nervous Conditions as the 'simpering reinforcer and pacifier of the patriarchal ego, demeaning herself as a woman or demeaning women and regarding her career potentials as subservient to those of her husband'. Read from a different position, Maiguru's conduct in this marriage is a critique of the life-denying nature of patriarchy over those it dominates. A significant number of critics have pondered what else could Maiguru have done in the face of Babamukuru's unbridled rule? She is an example of an abused woman whose western education has been rendered unproductive. Evans (1995: 80) describes the likes of Maiguru as oppressed 'materially, physically, psychologically, devalued and defamed'. Maiguru is made to surrender her salary and is treated as one of the children in her own home.

The 'double colonisation' of the female is a theme that is supported

by Gaidzanwa (1985: 26), when she argues that Independence in 1980 did not herald an end to the domination of women. This position is augmented by Weiss (1986: 102) who describes the condition of the woman after the war as 'negated': one where some women have 'continued to work arduous hours without acknowledgment' (*ibid*). This picture of post-independence Zimbabwe is a pertinent theme of these women writers, especially Makhalisa, whose short stories portray the woman as still struggling to eke out a living from hawking, for example. Writers, such as Vera in Nehanda[3] (1993), chronicle the liberation struggle from a historical perspective, where the woman is placed at the centre of the political movement. Having fought alongside the man, the woman's struggle is seen to continue even after independence, a condition that further emphasises the secondary position of the female.

One postcolonial Zimbabwean writer whose text negotiates the 'colonisation' theme is Dangarembga whose novel, Nervous Conditions, analogously deals with imperialism and patriarchy. The domination of the female by the male is thus depicted as analogous to what the forces of imperialism did to the colonised as they exploited and subjected them to the rule of the coloniser. Just as a colonised individual is not free to do as he wills, the female is confronted with related forces where the male is the denominator and sole ruler of the former.

Smith and Watson (editors)(1992: 207) view colonisation as 'the

structure of domination and oppression that is not just linked to the colonial empires of Britain and France but is inclusive of other cultures ... and other such diverse contexts'. In her article, 'Killing the Hysteric in the Colonised's House', Thomas (1997: 30) views the 'Shona patriarchal system of domination of Shona women as a parallel system of the repressive authority of the English'. Smith and Watson concur with Thomas about the despised condition of the female in patriarchal societies such as Zimbabwe.

Most postcolonial writing is a 'unique expression of self' (Buuck, 1997: 119) where the experiential is inscribed into text. This view is shared by Cixous in Laugh of the Medusa in which she calls for a writing where the woman 'must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies' (Eagleton, 1986: 106). The above experience may be treated by some writers as a:

> ...private search for an image to explain herself to herself. Women are writing in order to assess what life has made of them.... Their work concentrates on forming a new identity out of an overlooked and misunderstood past and a turbulent present (Abel, 1986: 386).

Yet there are different dimensions to the female experience and how the female is imaged in some literary works. In their article, 'Political Feminism', Millet and Barrett (in Selden, 1985: 134-136) expose what they

describe as the exploitative language of the male writer. They further cite the male exploits of the female subject as rooted in a 'sexist ideology - a blanket of oppression which all male writers inevitably promote'. It does not, however, follow that all male writers propound a sexist ideology in their literary works. In Zimbabwean literature, for example, writers such as Hove, Mungoshi, Katiyo, and Nyamfukudza do not denigrate the female figure but locate her in the larger social milieu against colonisation both within the family and outside it. For instance, Old Mandisa in Mungoshi's Waiting for the Rain (1975) and Marita in Hove's Bones, (1988) are portrayed as relatively strong women. In the case of Marita, the reader sees a larger than life portrait of a Zimbabwean peasant worker reeling under colonisation and exploitation.

It is, however, not by coincidence that Vera, Makhalisa and Dangarembga celebrate the female protagonist while using the male as an antagonist or foil, always thwarting the steps of the former. Although the ideology of gender affects the way in which writings of men and women are read and canonized, the above authors inscribe a rare image of the woman in their works.

Makhalisa's tone in The Underdog and other Stories has been described as 'radicalised' (TPNB: 248). This is a view this researcher differs with and would posit that this collection is neither radicalised nor reactionary in any way but progressively interrogates patriarchy as it seeks

to inscribe into society's conscience the primacy of the humanness of the female subject prior to any gender division. While Veit-Wild (1993: 249) views Makhalisa's collection of stories as including 'elements of more or less unconscious protest against the modern male dominated society', Gaidzanwa seemingly maintains that Makhalisa's 'portrayal of women is stereotypic' (1985: 80) by remarking that the women in 'The Rat-race Syndrome', for example, 'all whine about how hard they have been done by in the world' (*Ibid*).

Whereas Veit-Wild and Gaidzanwa chart the above courses, their positions almost sound a fatalistic escape since Makhalisa's stories prove not to be as resigned in their tone as assumed. This is evident in the much-acclaimed 'The Underdog' that exposes social institutions as negative forces arrayed against the female subject. Furthermore, it is in this story that a strong and resilient Netsai confronts the suffocating patriarchal construction that relegates women's issues to the periphery.

The woman writer's task is consequently a manifold vocation in that she has to write against the grain[4], hence her works are placed under scrutiny for flaws but when she writes in the male tradition, she is complimented. In The Women's History of the World, Miles (1988: 287) underlines that the dominant mind-sets in the traditional literary culture still locate the male at the centre of power where 'everywhere men still mediate between women and power ... women and freedom, women

and themselves'. One other writer who takes a militant stance is French (1987: 68) who views the above constraints as the very walls that should be dismantled and 'outwitted' to allow women to view themselves straight from the mirror of life. If French and Miles are representative of the western world, a key testimony on the image of 'wife-mother' from a Zimbabwean perspective is given by Agnes Mapfumo who argues that 'our women have been fenced in for many years by culture, customary and colonial rules. They should come out of their shells' (in Bond-Stewart, 1987: 13).

The various positions emanating from this review reveal the female experience as a contentious plane where two contending parties - the male and the female – fight different battles. While French (1977: 211) portrays the female's life as 'a bombed out terrain, full of craters and overturned rocks and mud holes' there is, however, one remarkable entity that remains as the hope for change for the woman – her life though bombed out, it is still a source of inspiration. This suggests that if the female dares move from a position of subordination towards challenging patriarchy – the centre of power and control – such a move is likely to result in her taking charge of her life where her choices are a conscious act towards liberating the self.

1. 7 Research Methodology

This research will rely on a close reading of the selected novels and short

stories, which will then be analysed and discussed, incorporating views from African and Western critical works. The interpretation of these novels and short stories will be open-ended.

Endnotes

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[1]. Patriarchal forces – the focus here is on how these forces seek to dominate and even silence the female voice. See Uwakweh's article: 'Debunking Patriarchy: The Liberational Quality of Voicing in Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions (1988). Also see Judith Evans' Feminist Theory Today (1995), especially the chapter entitled 'Domination of Women'.

[2]. Imaging – key texts utilized for this study are Gaidzanwa's Images of Women in Zimbabwean Literature (1985) and Bourdillon's 1976 study of the Shona in which he probes the status of the woman in traditional Shona society.

[3]. Nehanda – a renowned spirit medium/female leader of Zimbabwe's struggle against colonisation. Vera has written a historical novel of the same title in 1993 in which she celebrates Zimbabwe's past and takes a realistic view of the socio-cultural landscape in the face of colonisation.

4.Writing against the grain is a postcolonial stance in literature where not only the formerly colonised seek to rewrite their history, but widens to include the way in which women challenge patriarchal constructions by daring to chronicle their own experiences. Some arguments on whether women write differently from men or not, are advanced by Virginia Woolf in her essay, 'Women and Writing' (in Barrett, 1979) as well as by Uwakweh in his article cited above.

CHAPTER TWO

Barbara Makhalisa and the female experience

2. 1 Introduction

One female Zimbabwean writer who has ventured to write in English is Barbara Makhalisa. She has written widely in Ndebele as well where her works include Qilindini (1970), a novel highly acclaimed for its social realism. When The Underdog and Other Stories was published in 1984, the 'harsh realities of women's victimisation in male society' were centralised (Veit-Wild, 1993: 248). For her earlier works in Ndebele, Makhalisa has been labelled a 'strong moralist' (*ibid*). The above collection of short stories, however, portrays the female experience from a protest landscape where the female occupies a peripheral position. This chapter will then analyse the family as an institution, show the activities women engage in as they seek space in their peripheral location. In closing, this chapter will discuss Makhalisa's choice of the short story as a genre to present her concerns.

In 'The Underdog', for example, the protagonist is Netsai whose early experiences as a girl-child locate her in an 'underdog' position. Unlike her brother, she reveals: 'I did all the household chores I was taught to do, like a good girl. I sought firewood in the fast-depleted woodland. I fetched water from the well' (TUOS: 7). Netsai grows up in a war situation coupled with a patriarchal setting where the female occupies a secondary stratum

in life. Her brothers are given preferential treatment in educational matters. She is, nevertheless, saved by her brilliance and thus escapes being married off to a 'poor struggling man' (*ibid:* 8). Makhalisa's text addresses the social milieu from different angles by taking the very male social constructions to task. The writer further portrays a challenging scenario, which applies sarcasm to unveil the trials encountered, as well as the pains endured by the female characters within the family circle.

2. 2 The institution of the family.

The centrality of the family and the gendered roles manifested in it will be the main focus of this section. In 'The Underdog', for example, Netsai suffers inside and outside the family circle. The war robs her of both her father and one of her aunts who has promised to fund her education. As poverty looms, circumstances force Netsai to seek work in the city but instead of the city being a haven for the fatherless, it mercilessly exposes her to male malevolence. This journey to the city thus turns into a nightmare as she is abused, raped and her privacy violated.

At this stage she has nowhere to turn to - she has suffered under the notoriety of the District Assistant's soldiers who have forced girls of her age to 'provide entertainment in their camp' (*ibid:* 9). Compounding this ordeal, her uncle demands his right to take Netsai for a wife as soon as she arrives in the city. This 'young wife syndrome' was prevalent in

Zimbabwe especially in the eighties. According to Veit-Wild (1993), Makhalisa's work portray a conservative tone, quite unlike the one marking Vera's work, for instance. During the nineties, the picture, however, has shifted to the farms and mining settlements where young girls are still forced into marriage[1].

The controlling gaze of the male imposes as a centre of power that seeks to dominate the female and delineate how she can relate to the dominant culture. Makhalisa projects a worrying scene where 'man still holds the decision-making posts which means in most areas one must be interviewed for a job by a man. One must be recommended by a man. And most men demand a price' (TUOS: 14). The novel thus portrays the female subject as the world's 'underdog' – someone at the mercy of the male. Netsai, for instance, verbalises the abject condition of the female: 'I had thought this body was mine... who was I if part of me was no longer mine?'(*ibid: 15*). Her realisation affirms a female condition where the self is a product of socialised[2] subjectivities. Makhalisa's protagonist, however, leaves the battle at the level of protest – a plane that does not address the core of the problem. Thus, having been raped by her uncle (her aunt's husband), she bottles up her feelings and forces the experience to the subconscious.

Unlike Zhizha, who resolves to explore the unconscious and vocalise her experiences, Netsai escapes into silence. This portraiture itself is a

critique of the extent of the 'radicalised' views alluded to in Veit-Wild's text (1993: 248). Instead of viewing Makhalisa as radicalised or simply moralising in her text, the dominating biblical allusions are not necessarily moralising positions. She roots her stories in a polemical plane and traces the gendered identities to the Creation text itself where the biblical Adam and the privileged position he enjoys are interrogated.

She calls Adam blessed, one who plants the seed and has 'his crime going unpunished' (TUOS: 42) whereas Eve, 'the underdog, has to nurse it [the seed], water it and cultivate it till it bears good fruit' (*ibid*). Such conclusions cannot be labelled moralist in any way but forcefully serve as an attack on the traditional African family unit where the mother has to toil under the yoke of motherhood. Makhalisa's poetic end to this story echoes a prevalent theme portrayed in Emecheta's The Joys of Motherhood (1994) as well. In this novel, Nnu Ego's life takes on an ironic twist after she has sacrificed everything for the improvement and education of her sons. She, however, dies alone and 'quietly ... with no child to hold her hand and no friend to talk to her' (TJOM: 224).

Without moralising the issue of family, Makhalisa starkly juxtaposes the male signifier against the female. The former populates the power plane where social institutions such as the family, the school and the church find meaning. The above condition is enacted in 'Baby Snatcher', where Ntombi's concept of self has endured some knocks against a

gendered or socialised subjectivity. When Ntombi's marriage fails to *produce* a baby, she accuses herself of barrenness[3]. From this point, she lives under social pressure where her in-laws incessantly demand that she proves her fertility and motherhood. For her, the way to self-fulfilment is determined by her husband Lizwe's views – a husband whom she regards as representing orderliness and the standard against which she measures herself – only to fail miserably.

Lucy Irigaray sums up the above scenario as man-made (in Weedon, 1997: 60), showing that the woman's self-portrait is tied up to patriarchal definitions. In Ntombi's case, Makhalisa has tied her protagonist's future to Lizwe's life. This, however, is not a weakness in the story since the author's point is to expose the shortcomings of a patriarchal construction. Therefore, the degree of flatness in Ntombi's character is not by error, but by design, thus, making her lack of development and ability to cope with her plight a swipe at the very society that has constructed her.

Another story that stands out is 'The Rat-Race Syndrome', where Makhalisa focuses on a women's commune that hosts meetings under the 'Ladies-Get-Together' concept (TUOS: 94). Central to these meetings are sentiments such as:

> We also need to help one another in making our homes happy and harmonious little heavens in this Ladies-Get-Together. I feel we need to share with one another the very best ways and means to make us better wives to our

> husbands, and very good mothers of our children, for we are the key to happy and stable homes (*ibid:* 95).

Makhalisa's position is in stark contrast to Miles' that treats the conformist female subject as a 'product of male consciousness' (1988: 14). Where radical feminists would shun conventional constructions such as marriage and motherhood, Makhalisa celebrates the family, marriage and motherhood. This position dominates Zimbabwean literature in which motherhood is identified with married life. The mother figure, especially, is portrayed as larger than life as seen in Vera's Under the Tongue where Grandmother becomes the pillar of strength for Zhizha. Furthermore, the resilience of the mother figure dominates a number of literary works by women, for example Mariam Ba's So Long A Letter (1980) and Emecheta's Second Class Citizen (1974) where mothers single-handedly sustain their families.

While some Western critics and African feminists differ over what constitutes motherhood, the former group seemingly misreads Saint Paul's letters to the Corinthians regarding the male - female roles. Makhalisa seems to have a resolved position where the 'man is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of the man' (1 Corinthians 11: 7). This position neither denigrates nor blindly consigns the woman to the whims and supremacy of the male. Instead, it is a celebration of the perfection of the female subject where her charm, beauty and purity are a reflection

of a perfect creation.

In Zimbabwe, especially among the Ndebele and Shona, a woman occupies a special place in the home. Bourdillon (1976: 50) reveals that apart from being a wife, a woman had 'the status of provider to her family'. Although, she is referred to as a minor this in no way demeans her status. Instead, she is central to a home and this echoes Makhalisa's utopian picture of women striving to keep the family unit intact and be 'better wives to our husbands' (*ibid:* 95). This researcher views Makhalisa as championing the cause of the female within certain conventions such as marriage where both the female and the male engage in a complementary relationship for better or for worse. She positions the female as a proactive agent whose well-meaning gestures are, however, sidetracked by the male. This kind of portrait of the family is an attempt at establishing an androgynous text, which does not write off one gender by centralising the other.

Woolf, likewise, argues that women's writing is a product of the 'historical circumstances where the material conditions have a profound effect on the psychological aspect of writing' (in Eagleton, 1986: 37). The resulting condition is supported by Veit-Wild (1993: 158) who treats Makhalisa's experience of the break-up of her parents' marriage as manifesting itself in her works; especially in the way she portrays the family.

This is an experiential delineation that highlights themes such as

'family life' and 'the female condition in marriage' (Gaidzanwa, 1985: 35). The researcher would posit that Makhalisa's pre-occupation with the female condition is a form of protest against a society that constrains the female. Her text, arguably, remains at protest level where the dominant force (the male) is unmasked but left unpunished. This, however, is typical of the liberal female writer for whom family is the core of gender co-existence. Makhalisa's conservative stance of attempting to strike a balance regarding gender relations, qualifies for Woolf's observation that a 'perfect work of art should be unmarked by any intrusion of anger and bitterness' (Eagleton, 1986: 27). In the same vein, Makhalisa's protest is not befogged by anger or bitterness but does more than ring the alarm bells. Although the underdog is aware of her assigned position, there is very little that she does or can do towards redressing the situation.

2. 3 Celebrating the lives of the ordinary.

In Makhalisa's latest collection of stories, Eva's Song (1996), the tone and focus intensify, although the broader subject is still the Zimbabwean woman in the street. Dominated by the female character, these stories address the hidden world, the one patriarchal institutions have nearly silenced into oblivion.

This anthology focuses on contemporary problems faced by women concerning their health, work, marriage, or their position of being

daughters in the home. Such portrayal of the female is clearly enunciated in Nervous Conditions where Babamukuru is an absolute patriarch in the Sigauke household. It could also be argued that Maiguru is an educated professional who should not allow her husband to sideline her but, from a traditional perspective, the family set-up demands that she occupies a central position as is the case with Marita in Bones (1988) by Hove. Marita endures scorn and deprivation but surmounts all the hurdles against her.

In 'Together', more contemporary issues are explored. The story relates the experiences of Macici who is a victim of anorexia nervosa and whose preoccupation is 'keeping the body slim' (TUOS: 2). This young girl feels her mother does not understand the nature and extent of pressures she is subjected to. Not only is she under social pressure, but her peers exert pressure on her as well. As a result, Macici's self-concept has been carved out by external forces that have created the false image of being loved, and admired because of being 'slim and pretty' (*ibid:* 8).

Makhalisa's work becomes polemical when generational differences are centralized in that Macici's mother regards anorexia nervosa as a 'new disease' (*ibid:* 7). The contradicting values and views are manifested in the daughter's complaint that her mother would never understand. In their day, a fat girl was seen as a beauty queen. Slim girls were despised and mocked' (*ibid:* 4). The female experience is, furthermore, widened and presented in panoramic style in that it

encompasses the lifespan of a female. In 'Eva's Song', for instance, Makhalisa's thesis is a sisterhood that exposes the trying experiences on the street. The song of suffering echoes throughout womanhood and is 'heard everywhere ... from women in the market, in the street, in the factory, in the office, and in the field. But it was loudest from the women hawkers ... they did seem to drag heavy crosses uphill' (ES: 19).

Miles echoes this view in The Women's History of The World in which she regards the plight of the female as a product of a historical conspiracy that has been sponsored by patriarchy. The female experience is the 'greatest race of underdogs where women live like bats or devils, labour like beasts and die like worms' (*ibid:* 13). As such, 'Eva's Song' thrives on consciousness raising where women engage in a sisterhood meant to alleviate the suffering of other women. Jessie and Bongiwe are such a sisterhood that eventually extends to the general woman on the street. Not satisfied with their own success as individuals, they open up an outlet for hawkers to sell their wares. I regard this gesture as the essence of African feminism where the successful female is not content with her own upward mobility since her quest is for a collective advancement of the female sisterhood. Steady (1985: 35) concurs with this view that true feminism is not only an abnegation of male domination but a 'determination to be resourceful and self-reliant'. In a way, Jessie and Bongiwe engage in the struggle for an independent existence

outside male tutelage, a struggle that will equip the woman with skills to confront the odds of class and sexism.

The stories in this anthology often expose the way in which a girl-child attempts to register a presence against the gendered subjectivities already patterned for her in the family circle. For instance, Dezana's unwomanly choice of career as a mechanic earns her labels such as 'abnormal daughter... someone has bewitched her' (*ibid:* 13). While other girls willingly place themselves under the male gaze to be admired, Dezana dares challenge the centres of power and control. Because she refuses to avail herself to early marriage by which her parents will 'expand their cattle kraal' (*ibid:* 15), she is blamed for having wasted the money spent on her education.

Makhalisa, therefore, affirms the upward development of the female by making use of opportunities that avail themselves. In Dezana's case, there is, however, an ironic twist because her career as a mechanic bears fruit in spite of the father's opposition. When Dube falls critically ill, for example, he is ferried to hospital by the very car that has been fixed by his *abnormal* daughter - Dezana.

2. 4 The choice of genre.

Makhalisa has chosen the short story form for both Eva's Song and The Underdog, but unlike the novella or novel, this genre uses different points

of emphasis, with little if any development of its many characters. What is apparent in these short stories is that the author ends up cataloguing the female experiences at an informational level. For instance, in 'Short Sighted' the author evolves a pathetic image of Gogo whose woes have lasted for a lifetime. While this story images two characters of old age, it does not suffice to leave the description at 'she sits and listens to Khulu talk, talk, talk. She agrees with everything he says. And no matter how tired she is, she laughs with him' (TUOS: 60). Such imaging borders on a simplistic depiction of the African woman in that these short stories end up typifying characters such as Naka Nana, Mai Kudzai and Netsai who suffer untold oppression under patriarchal control. This surfaces when the female is depicted as the one at the mercy of the male who blindly rules his household. In this instance, the author parades the disintegration of the patriarchal order through Khulu who lacks foresight, as he cannot plan for the future. When drought sets in, he instructs his wife to 'wash the chemicals off the maize seeds so that they eat and let tomorrow take care of itself' (*ibid:* 62). The author is thus critical of the foolishness and lack of foresight of the patriarchal order as seen in this case where the family will not have seeds to plant when the rain comes.

Commenting on the short story form, George Williams (1954: 278) acknowledges the prevalence of short stories that thrive 'on plot, the action and the narrative element'. In such stories plot is emphasised

whereas character development is secondary if at all attempted. A close reading of Makhalisa's 'Baby Snatcher' reveals a Chekhovian approach to character exposition since the author portrays the disturbed psychological condition of its protagonist, Ntombi. Furthermore, the 'social culture' *(ibid: 79)* that has produced this inner tension is exposed although not interrogated.

Despite the shortcomings highlighted above, the main strength of these stories lies in their realism and objectivity - a pertinent example being 'Together' where Macici reels under social and peer pressure as she starves herself in order to get slim. When Makhalisa makes reference to Dube who describes his daughter as having 'nothing ladylike about her' (ES: 13) or when Bongiwe and Jessie confirm that most women are 'sole breadwinners of their families' *(ibid:* 21), her narrative attacks patriarchal constructions.

Two stories that stand out distinctly in Eva's Song are 'Lumpy Bed' and 'Big Nuisance'. These stories lend a voice to the long-suffering woman who is urged to seek alternatives instead of remaining in a relationship that saps life out of her. In the former story, for instance, the author displays the plight of the married woman through telling episodes. Initially, there is the leading character, NakaNana, whose husband has deserted his own family for a prostitute. When he comes to his senses and decides to return home, he is already a wreck due to disease after five years of

revelling. However, NakaNana is advised to take him back since 'men will always stray from home and come back in the end' (*ibid:* 93).

The author thus exposes practices that condone wayward behaviour in males and reduce the female, even in marriage, to chattel. By toying with the individuality of the female, the male ensconces himself in an *all - powerful* position where his law is unchallenged. Makhalisa's critique intensifies in this story as her presentation attempts to probe beyond the surface. This intensity is evident in Pepsi, NakaNana's sister-in-law, who engages in a consciousness-raising act when she champions the female cause:

> ... if you lie on a bed and its very lumpy, or one leg is broken, or coil in the mattress is sticking out, and is prickly, you make a decision either to continue sleeping in discomfort or to spend the night on the floor! The decision has to be yours, my dear (ES: 87).

This passage initiates a shift in position in Makhalisa's tone regarding marriage: she neither endorses divorce nor celebrates non-married life but brings to the fore pertinent issues plaguing the female. While in The Underdog she could be labelled as a sermonizing writer, in Eva's Song there is a change of tone since the married woman is presented as having various options to escape from a suffocating marriage. Furthermore, Makhalisa does not mince her words in exposing domestic violence, as the description of Mai Kudzai who died after being beaten by her husband, for instance,

reveals.

'Big Nuisance' is a story that affirms Makhalisa's realism as well as attacks the image of the stereotype, which attempts to domesticate the female even at work. The image of the obedient, docile and subservient woman is juxtaposed against the 'man-woman' (ES: 97) who is a masculinised female. At times, however, the so-called 'men-women' are not masculinised at all, but are self- assertive and clear-sighted females who refuse to be intimidated by the male. In addition, the leading character in 'Big Nuisance' is Mrs Mhlanga, who as one of the assistant managers at a certain company, stands up against male bullies by refusing 'to serve tea in meetings and to take minutes all the time' (*ibid*: 97) simply because she is a woman.

2. 5 Conclusion

From this exposition, both The Underdog and Other Stories and Eva's Song have portrayed various stations of the female character. By presenting a cross section of the women folk, ranging from hawkers, female students, abused women, and company executives, Makhalisa succeeds in highlighting the multiplicity of the female experience. This is a position she vouches for without discarding progressive traditions or blindly imbibing modernity. These stories, therefore, locate her work on a progressive footing, as they show a shift from preoccupation with sermonising and moralising philosophies. What finally emerges is a writing that utilises the position of the Other, by placing her at the

centre of the fray and portraying her as she rises to contend with psychological, cultural and ideological formations.

Endnotes

1. Forced marriages – see Gaidzanwa and Batezat who deal in depth with the plight of the rural woman and indicate how, especially girls of school-going age are often forced out of school in order to boost the coffers of their fathers.
2. Socialisation of the girl-child is a historical fact where the girl-child is restricted to dosmestic chores while the boy is free to venture out into the world. Makhalisa's short stories and Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions (1988) show how the girl-child suffers within the home simply because of her gender. See also Batezat and Mwalo (1989) who discuss the plight of the girl-child in the chapter 'Family and Society' where the sexual division of labour within the household is unveiled.
3. The importance of fertility and child bearing are pertinent themes in African literature as seen in Ama Ata Aidoo's Dilemma of a Ghost (1987) and Buchi Emecheta's The Joys of Motherhood (1994).

CHAPTER THREE

Decentred characters in Vera's novels.

3. 1 Introduction

Yvonne Vera is an enterprising black Zimbabwean woman writer who grew up in Bulawayo where she spent her early years with her grandmother and mother. It is pertinent to mention the close relationship Yvonne had with the above women as it has later influenced her literature. Vera's literary career began in 1992 with the publication of Why Don't You Carve Other Animals. This collection of short stories was followed by a historical novel, entitled Nehanda (1993) that is a celebration of the Zimbabwean past and current struggles under colonial rule.

With more than three novels in the nineties, Vera has risen in literary stature to stand as an icon of black female Zimbabwean writing in English. Martin and Brickhill describe her as 'one of Africa's most successful writers' ('BBC Focus on Africa.' Oct - Dec 99: 52). In an interview with Vera, they point out that she examines the contemporary female character's 'concerns with power, ambition, freedom [and] touches on infanticide, incest and abuse' (1999: 12). This chapter is a close analysis of how Vera portrays the contemporary female as she pushes the boundaries of male culture, her quest for a voice; and the risks she takes as she searches for an elusive freedom. To cap it all, this chapter further discusses Vera's

strong vision of motherhood[1] – themes that are presented in a daring metaphor.

Badejo (1998: 106) defines motherhood as merging with womanhood to 'suggest black women who are strong in character and whose fortitude therefore underpins African communal survival'. In defining such motherhood, Vekris (1998: 16), suggests that Vera's versatility with language resembles that of Marechera[2] for it 'stretches and bends the language' in the process of 'pushing the boundaries and speaking the unspeakable'. Vera dares address the question of incest and abuse of women using telling imagery of 'mushrooms' and the 'mist' in Without a Name, the 'butterfly' in Butterfly Burning and the tongue motif in Under the Tongue. This chapter will focus on Vera's three novels Without a Name (1994), Under The Tongue (1996) and Butterfly Burning (1998).

3. 2 Pushing the boundaries of male culture

In an interview the researcher conducted with the author in January 2000, Vera revealed that on issues related to women, their struggles and triumphs, she would prefer to be referred to as an African Feminist. By this, she meant a strand of feminism founded on traditional African values where both the woman and the man are complementary in sustaining human life. While this researcher subscribes to the view that the female experience may be both universally and culturally defined, it may also be

true that different cultures emphasise different conventions as well as traditions regarding gender relations. From this premise, it may also follow that there is feminism with an African flair – one that is culture specific resulting in different gender relations from one culture to another. These strands are discernible in most Zimbabwean, African and African American female writing. Cases in point being the three authors under discussion, Mariam Ba in So Long a Letter (1980); Buchi Emecheta in Second Class Citizen (1974) and The Joys of Motherhood, (1994); and Mildred Taylor in Roll of Thunder Hear my Cry (1989).

Vera's writing, especially, focuses on the female and describes her experiences amidst the socio-cultural constructs arrayed against her. In Without A Name, Mazvita is portrayed as an emotionally bruised and violated woman whose quest for meaning in life lands her in a dilemma. Having been raped by a stranger[3], she leaves for the city only to find herself once more exposed to male exploitation. This time the agent of exploitation is Joel, who, on discovering that Mazvita is pregnant, forces her to leave. The author presents a Mazvita whose privacy and integrity have been violated and in unveiling this protagonist's forlorn state, Vera describes the internal and external turmoil her protagonist endures:

> Her skin peeled off, parting from her body. She had suffered so much that her skin threatened to fall pitilessly to the ground. It hung from below her neck, from her arms, from her whole silent body.... The skin fell from her back, she was left stripped, exposed, bare wide across her back (WAN: 4).

The picture painted here is of a bruised, tortured woman whose life strains under internal and external forces. Her wasting body shows trials that have been borne in silence, especially the rape that she endured. Furthermore, when she wants to escape from this hostile environment, Nyenyedzi, her intended husband, stands in her way by parading the land as the panacea to Mazvita's plight. In his view the city is corrupt, so he maintains: 'I cannot leave the land and go to a strange unwelcoming place' (WAN: 24). He thus reveals that he cannot leave the land, and be a man. He is even afraid of returning, 'not knowing the land and the land not knowing him' (*ibid*). Moreover, he fears absences and prefers the histories of his people. These histories assure Nyenyedzi of his rootedness in the land, a continuity of life and a firm link with his ancestors. Thus, to go to the city will be like uprooting oneself from the soil, the very essence of life.

Mazvita's assertive stance on the other hand, clearly projects her resoluteness as she maintains, 'I will move on' (*ibid*). This insistence emphasises the lure the city has for Mazvita. Considering the odds against her, she believes that the city offers her more and she thus leaves for the city.

Vera deliberately juxtaposes the land and the city, leaving Mazvita to choose the best way out of her dilemma. Since the importance of land to Zimbabweans cannot be underestimated, land is a recurrent theme in Zimbabwean literature. Bourdillon (1976: 70) reveals that 'the land forms a

close enduring bond between the living and the dead through their control of the fertility of the land they once cultivated, the spirits are believed to continue to care for their descendants'. Katiyo's A Son of the Soil (1976) as well reveals the impact of the colonial conquest and the resultant liberation struggle, which was fought over the issue of land. Therefore, Mazvita's resolve to seek freedom in the city is a challenge to the established order and a severance of a lifeline. The land, however, has not satisfied her needs, and after the rape ordeal, she becomes reclusive and hides in silence. The stranger 'had claimed her, told her that she could not hide the things of her body, that she must bring a calabash of water within her arms, and he could drink' (WAN: 28). The above incident is used to castigate male domination and violation of the Other. In Foulcaldian terms this stranger and her victim engage in a power game where the male colonises the 'weaker', without her consent (Weedon, 1997: 24). Furthermore, Mazvita's silence following her encounter with the stranger gives birth to an incessant hatred for the moment she was raped, as she remembers 'the morning, to the land, to the dew-covered grass that she had felt graze tenderly against her naked elbow in that horrible moment' (WAN: 30).

3. 3 The search for elusive freedom

Mazvita's resolution to leave Mubayira for the city hardly exceeds a

freedom seeking gesture as ghosts from the past – memories of her fractured life – dog her all the way. However, in Harare her escape turns into a nightmare. Having left Mubayira for respite in the city, Mazvita soon discovers that the war is everywhere and that the city has its own traps.

Her ordeal in the city[4] is microcosmic of the larger plight faced by single women there. Kahari (1986: 18) reveals that the city has a corrupting influence, especially on the likes of Mazvita who throw themselves into the hands of wolves such as Joel. It should be noted that this influence of the city is a traditional theme not only in Zimbabwean literature but also in African literature as a whole. The lure of the city thus, cannot be underestimated. Despite its being a symbol of modernity, the city is invariably portrayed as a destructive agent – one that exposes the unwary outsider to an alien culture – destroys family values, the moral fibre and soul of a people, and ushers in a dislocation of one from one's culture. Examples of this theme, for instance, abound in Scrapiron by Marechera and Eva's Song by Makhalisa as well. Barnes and Win (1992: 27) support this observation by painting a nightmarish picture of the dilemma of the single woman in the city:

> Another way that a woman could survive in turn was to become a man's *mapoto* wife. This involved doing his domestic work and providing sexual services, in the same way that a wife would. A *mapoto* relationship did not involve the payment of *lobola* ... the relationship was temporary and the woman could leave the man whenever she wanted to. Single women had to rely on being involved in a relationship with men who were living

> in town without their married wives. Most of the girls who came and did *mapoto* had nowhere to live.

The name 'Mazvita' means 'thank you' and is used ironically because Mazvita has nothing to be thankful for as a result of the rape. Vera's imaging of this character shows an individual who has been reduced to the level of insignificance but strives to surmount the cultural hurdles arrayed against her. Unlike the average down and out, Mazvita resolves to rise to the challenges posed by her situation:

> 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 (WAN: 34).

Vera's protagonist is thus emotionally wounded and her mission threatened by a number of factors. On the one hand, her search for freedom lacks foresight as this is driven by a will to conquer her reality while ambition blinds her to any reflection of the possible consequences of her action. On the other, Mazvita is a victim of the masculine 'conspiracy' against the female as she is stalked from all angles, which makes her escape a futile and bruising experience. Furthermore, patriarchal institutions such as the family unit have betrayed and destroyed her. Added to this, is the rootlessness brought about by modernity that alienates her from both the land and the city. Eventually, she realises that there is no escape from the secondary status occupied

by the female in patriarchal societies. To her, 'birth had not been a beginning but a new kind of departure, an entrapment, rare and multiplying' (WAN: 42).

As Vera's protagonist is unsettled - yet not defeated - hers becomes a search for self, a search for elusive freedom. Her determination is to subvert the forces that spoil her soul, thus 'in her absence she will register a presence' (WAN: 45). It is in this absence that she plans to survive by bringing about a revolution in her life. Her relationship with Joel turns into a nightmare since, as Joel's live in wife, their relationship has strange foundations because in their encounter 'there was no discussion, no agreement, no proposal. They just met and stayed together' (WAN: 50). By consenting to this relationship, Mazvita fails to claim her freedom and escape from the haunting pictures of her past, the hills and the land. Therefore, the flight to the city becomes an entrapment because having fled from Nyenyedzi and the land she finds that even in the city she is not free. In fact, she is dependant on Joel who, himself, is portrayed as part of the city's offerings and is a testimony of those whom the city has armed with teeth to bite or be bitten.

Vera's imaging further diagnoses the location[5] of the female in the social milieu. The female is an appendage to the male and this skewed relationship is evident through the ambivalence that marks Mazvita's life as it displays a decentredness that simultaneously repels and cuddles the

enemy. For instance, Mazvita voluntarily engages in this relationship and 'exploits' Joel to gratify her immediate needs; hence 'Joel was necessary to her dream' (WAN: 57). Her quest for an independent existence where she can 'opt out of the relationship when she desired it' (WAN: 63) is not realised because her body soon betrays her as a child is growing inside her.

Vera leads the reader into a social and moral dilemma as far as life is concerned. Regarding the right to life, the question to be posed is whose freedom or rights should be respected? Is it the mother's or the baby's? Mazvita's response is that the baby has 'pulled her back from her design to be free' (WAN: 64). From here, her life becomes an agony when she gives birth to a baby for whom she has no feeling:

> She had no name for the baby. A name could not be given to a child just like that; a name is for calling a child into the world, for acceptance, for grace. A name binds a mother to her child. A name is for waiting, for release, an embrace precious and permanent, and a promise to growing life. She had no promises to offer this child... the child grew in silence *with no name*. Mazvita could not name the silence (*ibid*: 75).

Here Vera engages in a double-pronged critique which borders on the ethical as to who will cast the first stone? Mazvita rejects this baby - the product of a violation, a severed relationship with Nyenyedzi, and finally a rejection by Joel. When she puzzles over the paternal roots of the child and shuffles names about, Mazvita arrives at a void where she alone remains attached (as a mother) to the baby.

It is her body that has nurtured the child but it is this child who has thwarted her dreams for a new life in the city. Having been rejected by the city, Mazvita's unsettled spirit hovers over and re-lives the past ordeal with the 'armed man' (*ibid*: 85). She reflects on how he had stolen her body from her as 'he tore at her dress, pulled her legs away from her. He removed her legs from her body, and she lay still, not recognizing her legs as her own' (*ibid*). This metaphorical dismembering has destroyed her soul and violated her basic right to privacy.

Later on, when Mazvita strangles her own baby she may be deemed guilty of murder but consideration must be given to her own fractured life. French (1977: 211) describes such a life as a 'bombed out terrain full of craters and overturned rocks', a life which society and patriarchal institutions have strangled and choked at its infancy.

Eventually, she resolves to return to Mubaira. This decision re-establishes the bond not only with the land but with her own self as she seeks psychological balance dislocated by her departure for the city. This return promises a new beginning, perhaps one where she will restart the formula like the flower that, resting in a bare tortured tree, survives and resists the wind and shaking pods. She returns to the village, a wiser individual, beaten but not destroyed, though *without a name* she is ready for a reconfiguration among the hills. When she returns thus, it is to a deserted landscape where the record of her past lies in ruins. Her village,

as well as her own life, have been devastated but like all strong characters; Mazvita is ready to start afresh.

Like a shoot, Mazvita has a new realisation, which is a product of a scorched life, one of labouring under the weight of both motherhood and abandonment. Her ordeals can be seen as an allegory of a country (colonial Rhodesia), which has been plundered and abandoned. What remains is a 'wasteland' - one which Vera still hopes can be reclaimed - a land where milk and honey can still flow. This is the promise of a new beginning, even for the likes of Mazvita.

3. 4 Breaking the silence

Vera's Under The Tongue (1996) broadens the problem of *silences*[6] that the female character unconsciously nurtures because of her peripheral location in patriarchal societies. Zhizha, for instance, is portrayed as a searching soul whose formative years are turbulent but she is constantly searching for herself, first in the life of Grandmother and then in her mother's. As she learns the ropes of life, her father 'pulls the roots in her growing' (UTT: 5), thus making her a victim of incest. Vera describes Zhizha's plight as one where the father 'turns the tomorrow of his child into death, hurrying her in the middle of the night' (UTT: 31).

Apart from the above incident, her life is already mirrored in those of Runyararo (her mother) and Grandmother, whom she watches as they

slowly but surely waste away. This desolate state is apparent when 'Grandmother sings a song about the sorrows of the world, the grief of yesterday which follows her' (UTT: 9). When Zhizha reflects on Grandmother's song she realises that the sorrows many women endure are mostly buried beneath the earth - pushed to the recesses of memory. Her plight in the journey of life has two starkly marked polarities - birth and death. It is from birth that the girl-child traditionally meets a gendered reception. Consequently, Zhizha reads her own life in those of Grandmother and her mother but resolves to chart a new course where she 'must speak the beauties and the sorrows of the heart' (UTT: 10). As a woman, however, society dictates that she 'must not forget she must bury her sorrow and her dream' (*ibid*).

The fact that Zhizha finds her life mirrored in those of Grandmother and her mother emphasises the position of the Other for the womenfolk who 'belong together in an ancient caress of the earth' (UTT: 11). This commonality seemingly classifies women under a monolithic entity as the daughters of the biblical Eve whose solidarity and bond establishes a vicious circle of pain and buried feelings, which Zhizha wants to surmount. The dilemmas faced by women take centre stage when Vera exposes betrayed dreams which are epitomised in Grandmother's life - like a dry, brown leaf she has fallen and in her old age 'she has forgotten where she was going, where she is' (*ibid*: 150) as a result, only emptiness fills her.

Zhizha traces the silences in her grandmother, but the anger in her mother has its roots in Muroyiwa who has taught the mother that 'a woman is not a man. I am silent. Just silence to speak my silence against the husband who is not a man but a lizard with a rotting stomach' (*ibid*: 31).

This relationship reveals that between birth and death a woman endures abuses - verbal and physical - and like many women, Zhizha is expected to 'swallow these before she can learn to speak her sorrow and be heard' (*ibid*: 32). Vera's critique, therefore, is centred on cultural tendencies, which seek to silence women, simultaneously reducing them to received subjectivities and social roles. This is typified in patriarchal societies where, as Grandmother reveals, the male teaches the female to hide her pain, her feelings, to even go without a name because a woman 'forgets her name of birth when she meets suffering' (*ibid*: 39). Later in life, the unspoken hopes and pains lie buried *under the tongue* but these are the very experiences that the woman should write into text. Engaging in the act of voicing and even writing will be therapeutic, but if women remain silent, their cause is lost. Grandmother, old as she is, has not been silenced by her sorrows or pain and thus wants to speak out:

> I have not spoken, she cries. I ask only for a humble silence in which I can be heard. You have said that a woman cannot speak. I have asked is it well if I speak the heaviness on my shoulders? I have asked if any woman's voice can be heard, small as it is, is it not your voice too, does my voice not belong to you as I do? Can a woman not speak the word that oppresses her heart, grows heavy on her tongue, heavy, pulling her to the ground? (*ibid*: 44)

In this novel, Vera reveals that some societies treat women as children, but even though this is the case, children have tongues that they can use to find their way in life. However, the treatment of women as children is an issue that cannot be generalized as Leopold Senghor (1959: 55) reveals that in traditional African societies, the woman has always been regarded as 'the source of life-force and guardian of the house, the depository of the clan's past and the guarantor of its future'.

Vera's observation towards the female is, however, linked to the fracture of the traditional African family unit because family members have scattered in different directions. The resulting picture is a distortion of the traditional ideal; hence mothers have increasingly been treated as children and chattel. In this novel, Vera picks up the above issue at a level where society has already been distorted by moral breakdown and where a father (Muroyiwa) drinks the 'forbidden water' (UTT: 4) by sleeping with his own daughter (Zhizha), thus defiling his family name and his daughter's in particular.

When the images of Grandmother, her mother and Zhizha merge, the shared female experiences are seen to paint a full picture as three generations are seemingly in unison over the plight of women. Through Zhizha, Vera castigates retrogressive practices such as incest, and dares break the silence on abuse in some families. For a while, Zhizha's nightmare remains buried in the recesses of the mind and she even fears

telling her own grandmother: 'No. It is death when such things are told' (*ibid*: 108). This feeling of confinement and immobilisation devastates Zhizha, crushing her emotionally, leaving her broken and violated. Vera unveils such negative practices because they do not acknowledge privacy and respect of the Other. In the case of Muroyiwa, he 'swallows his head and his own legs' (*ibid*: 23) as he rapes his own daughter and this has to be addressed. One effective way is through the written word where the woman writer breaks the silence by inscribing her experiences into text. Furthermore, if women do not rise and challenge these dehumanising practices, their prolonged silence will result in words rotting under the tongue.

Under the Tongue, consequently, is a novel that presents the reader with an African woman whose consciousness of the past and present is a liberating experience. It is through Zhizha that Vera is able to unmask patriarchal ideologies that seek to monopolise language, perception and values. In the case of this protagonist, these silences are probed, an act which makes Vera one of the few female Zimbabwean writers in English who have dared to challenge such malpractices. As such, her novel is a narrative of self, the female self, pouring out from a realisation of self that seeks definition, not from outside but from the position of a woman defining herself. In a way, Vera images a woman who is in the process of becoming – a conscious move from being treated as an object to being

a subject – one who dares challenge patriarchal forces threatening her life.

In this novel the male is positioned as the outsider while the dominant players are female - Grandmother, the mother and Zhizha. The male is an intruder, a despoiler whose moves upset the very commune among these women. Vera's portrayal of the female protagonist is thus in line with Adrianne Rich's position of the need to centralise the female experience in feminist poetics. In Rich's view the woman has to 'write directly and overtly out of a woman's body and experience, to take a woman's existence seriously as theme and source of art' (in Minogue, 1990: 199).

The expression of lived experiences in literary texts shows a vast number of gendered positions; for instance, masculine realism is in contradiction with female realism. There could, however, be an area of convergence as regards external reality but when it comes to how the girl child is socialised, her experiences are a full text in themselves. As such, Zhizha is on a plane of discovery, a diagnosis of self, cultural silences and gaps, moving from a position of naivety to one in which she realises that if she remains silent she will perpetuate the current power relations and be an extension of the defeated line of females. In her attempt to define herself she goes through a phase of self-discovery and self-awareness and then strategises towards speaking out.

Vera's fiction is multi-dimensional, that is, in its exploration of female life it goes beyond the surface by probing the abuse of women and the distortion of history as seen in Butterfly Burning. Furthermore, through symbolism such as the 'mushroom', the 'butterfly' and the 'tongue' the author centres her text on issues that sum up the situation of the woman. For example, through the mushroom the delicate nature of the woman is highlighted, whereas the butterfly epitomises the ephemeral life that some women lead under patriarchy. Ultimately, such writing mirrors female subjectivities in transition where she has to negotiate cultural and so-called personal issues.

In the case of the African female[7] there are many battles to fight - traditionally a woman's position is secure and carried with it respect but this had been severed by the arrival of the colonial era where the traditional set-up had been threatened. As a result, the basic family structure was lost while moral breakdown set in. This negative slide can, however, be countered if society redefines the ways in which women are perceived and treated. In an interview with Vekris, Vera argued that the 'traditional respect for woman in her symbolic and spiritual dimension must now be supplemented by respect for woman as a person, deserving of all the dignity and freedom which every human being should enjoy by right of birth' (1998: 17).

To conclude, Vera's achievement in this novel lies in awakening

womenfolk to stand up and be counted. By doing so, they engage in a revolution that confronts those practices that suppress and keep them down as second-class citizens.

3. 5 The domination of the female by the male.

Vera's latest novel is Butterfly Burning which is set in the late forties, and whose central sphere is Makokoba - an African township in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. Township life is riddled with insecurity resulting in Phephelaphi, the protagonist, being orphaned under mysterious circumstances. In fact, the woman she believes to be her mother is killed in a shooting incident. These are the years when blacks 'walk the streets without encroaching on the pavements from which they are banned' (*ibid:* 4).

In the hustle and bustle of the city some blacks find solace in Kwela music. Others lead free-for-all lifestyles marked by moral breakdown as is the case with Zandile (Phephelaphi's blood mother) who:

> Makes no distinction between white men and black men when it comes to pleasure and exchange ... at dusk she can curl her legs around the body of a white man and at dawn, she wakes in the arms of black men whom she truly loves (*ibid:* 33).

Here is a woman who has resolved to assert herself by using all opportunities that come her way as she explores the potential of her body. Culturally, Zandile would be viewed as a moral disgrace and a bad role model to both her daughter and those around her. Like the city

women described in Without A Name, Zandile finds herself in a jungle where the survival of the fittest is the rule. To survive in the city, she has to conjure 'freedom from chaos and build altars to wounded dreams' (BB: 62). In the city she learns to survive as the head of a household. She also shelters her lover, Boyidi, under her roof whatever the cost (*ibid*: 34).

Amidst the city slums, Phephelaphi falls in love with Fumbatha, 'a man many years older than herself' (blurb). Their affair soon leads to the two living together in the crowded Makokoba house where:

> ...the walls were thin. Fumbatha and Phephelaphi were aware of the thin distance between their breathing and the next room, their thoughts and the next, their suppressed voices and the room not theirs, their inhalation, their motion, their surrender. They knew too that their sighs and harmonies had witnesses as old as stars (*ibid*: 39).

Fumbatha and Phephelaphi have to consummate their relationship in these rooms that lack privacy. Furthermore, these are the townships where Shebeen Queens run battles with the police as is the case with Deliwe who hates the police, especially black policemen whom she concludes, are not 'only capable of eating their own vomit but slicing the stomachs of their own mothers' (*ibid*: 50). These streets resemble battlefields where the long arm of the law compels black policemen to 'brutalize people of their own race and push women into police vans and have dogs salivating for black blood' (*ibid*). The issue of conquest arises here where the black policeman has become an 'Uncle Tom' prepared to victimise his own in order to gratify the Master.

The milieu of the Makokoba streets creeps into Phephelaphi's life and the brief respite she has had as Fumbatha's lover is soon upset by a new need to become a nurse at the hospital. Vera thus criticises patriarchy, as an institution that curtails the space the female is to inhabit. As far as Fumbatha is concerned, Phephelaphi has no need to seek independence or study and improve herself. His conclusion is, 'we are happy together. I work. I take care of you. It is not necessary for you to find something else' (*ibid*: 59). He furthermore insists on her unwavering loyalty – a demand that finds echoes in Nervous Conditions where Babamukuru seeks to dominate all under his authority. Fumbatha's wish to control, conquer and possess is an urge that imposes the powerful over the weak. In this case, he occupies a position of power because he is employed and in his view, this entitles him to a position of control and power. More so, he is the man and traditional society locates the male in a position of command and control while the female is the Other, having to wait upon the male. The fact that Phephelaphi seeks independence beyond the confines of male control poses a challenge to the male where his ego cannot easily succumb.

Phephelaphi is a victim of this quest as she realises that Fumbatha 'could never be the beginning or end of all her yearning' (BB: 64). Her quest to be somebody is in contradiction to the male gaze of a sweet woman as described by Deliwe's male patrons who take Phephelaphi to

be a lily in the valley - one that thrives on the male gaze. But Phephelaphi is convinced that rather than wait on accolades from males, a woman must love herself, and this self-awareness is a realisation of self-worth, thus lending value to and loving the self.

Vera places Phephelaphi in a moral dilemma when her protagonist is about to register to be trained as a nurse, only to discover that she is pregnant. Phephelaphi's hopes to embark on this career are dashed, since pregnancy will mean an opportunity missed. In pre-independence Rhodesia black females had limited chances to enrol for these professions, and as such, pregnancy was regarded as a curse in fields such as teacher training and nursing.

In Phephelaphi's view, this pregnancy has come between her and her advancement in life, a situation which echoes that of Mazvita whose quest for freedom leaves her morally devastated and results in her strangling her own baby. Another manifestation of this devastation is the feeling of emptiness that oppresses her to eventually leave her clinging to one passion: 'freedom'. But, what kind of freedom is she searching for? What is freedom anyway? Will it still be freedom having severed life from an innocent infant? Is this not selfishness and the act itself abhorrent and bordering on insanity and beastliness? Phephelaphi's dashed hopes make her regard this pregnancy as a betrayal by her body:

> She wanted to be something with an outline, and even though she was not sure what she meant, she wanted some respect, some

> dignity, some balance and power of her own [and] Fumbatha would never understand so she said nothing to him (BB: 91).

So when, like Mazvita, she terminates life, she has gone past the threshold of immorality while society, like the land, will stand still, merely watching as Phephelaphi wrestles with her problem. The female question is brought to the fore here, although it is viewed from a global perspective focusing on an ordeal such as missing school due to pregnancy. The novel, however, centralises this as a human condition that must not be trivialised. Vera's use of irony shocks the reader, for she carves a woman whose birth pangs destroy life instead of bringing forth life.

The author's ambivalence, however, surfaces when Phephelaphi's act is described as the 'weight of her own suffering, the weight of courage' (*ibid*: 101). It may be construed that she has been driven to this act by negative social constructs – patriarchal institutions that victimise the weak who, in this case, are the blacks in colonial Rhodesia. As a black and a woman, Phephelaphi suffers under the yoke of both colonisation[8] and discrimination, as her race relegates her to the fringes of power. Basu (1997) views colonisation as a force that 'controls the body and feelings' among other things. It also thrives on power and control as revealed by Fanon (1990) a classic example being Phephelaphi whose personal life is constrained by both the colonial power and her husband at the same time. Furthermore, as a woman, her own culture is dominated by patriarchy, and this has fostered in her a set of values that does not

recognise the rights of women. In her culture a woman is treated as a minor who cannot make decisions independent of her husband. Benstock (1987: 2) reveals that the double colonisation of the female subject is due to the 'influential structures of gender and sexual difference' (*ibid*). The powerful coloniser or male has 'controlled history, politics and culture-dispensing power from a patriarchal point' (*ibid*) and often uses this power to relegate women to the margins of culture.

The colonial system thus discriminates against black women, barring them from training if they are pregnant or married. Such treatment is in contradiction with nature and presents a shallow argument, as intelligence does not depend on whether one has given birth or not. In a way, Vera apparently criticises the colonial establishment that sought to destroy instead of cultivate life.

When Fumbatha returns from work and discovers that Phephelaphi has had an abortion, he accuses her of 'killing our child' (BB: 121). He rejects her and labels her as dangerous. This devastates her and in a trance-like state:

> she was no longer living and Fumbatha was not there at all in front of her but his voice was following her, accusing her and taking Boyidi's hands and placing them all over her body (*ibid*: 123).

Vera uses this comparison to deal with an ethical issue where Zandile is seen to give birth to a baby but cannot keep it, as she wants to remain free. In her case, she had no man to call her own, whereas

Phephelaphi is attached to Fumbatha, thus, traditionally she has someone to look up to for support. For Zandile, her baby would have been a burden to one who has just arrived in the city and is still searching for firm ground on which to stand. As a result, she decided to dump the child but Getrude, her friend, took it over and raised this child – Phephelaphi. Fate then revisits Phephelaphi as life has gone full circle - now confronted with her own dilemma, her mother's curse revisits her and she terminates her pregnancy. One may therefore perhaps view Phephelaphi as a woman driven by selfishness, especially when she goes to the extent of terminating life in order to pursue a personal agenda - training as a nurse!

In Butterfly Burning, the city is a jungle, a place where the fittest, both physically and morally, survive. Through Getrude and Zandile, Vera portrays two women whose moral fibre varies as both are confronted by urban pressures but shows that the former surmounts the odds against her while the later succumbs. This novel ends on a tragic note as Phephelaphi is again betrayed by her body. She blames herself for falling pregnant once more despite Fumbatha's having stopped loving her. Vera paints a pathetic scene where Phephelaphi resignedly muses:

> So I have to forget about training as a nurse altogether and what else am I to become but nothing. My being, my woman self, tearing away. My sorrowful self. No matter my need, no matter which. Now he has broken my stem with this child he has given me. I am nothing. I am here (*ibid*: 126).

This lament echoes Zhizha's although the latter resolves to speak out

and register her presence. Phephelaphi resignedly takes the escapist route and commits suicide by burning herself. This end to the narrative, although baffling, serves as a didactic note showing the life-denying nature of patriarchal institutions.

The city's stranglehold on Phephelaphi started at birth, and her fateful existence has had no respite even in her association with Fumbatha. Her transitory life has seen no moment of settledness and this underlines both the brutality and the stifling hold of the city over its victims. Her ephemeral life soon gets choked out of her and transpires into oblivion. Her life has vanished from the surface of the earth – one which has provided no foothold for her. As if to escape from a world that has been hostile to her, Phephelaphi sets herself alight and flames, which float butterfly-like, as they lick her body, consume her body. This act of self-immolation is significant as it portrays a character who goes through trials, which, however, purge and purify her. Furthermore, the fire itself is symbolic of power, and it is a consuming potency that brings about a change of state. The import of Vera's symbolism lies in the butterfly which itself is a beautiful but fleeting insect known for its beauty and transient life. In a way the burning butterfly could be symbolic of the natural beauty of the woman, which, however, is despoiled by the interference of the man. The focus of this exit from life is a challenge of the destructive forces that have denied this protagonist a fulfilling existence. Repelled by life,

Phephelaphi seemingly embraces each part of her self in flames.

3. 6 Conclusion

These three novels are landmark developments in Zimbabwean literature as they successfully bring to the fore the plight of the female character. While Mazvita and Phephelaphi go through turbulent phases in their lives, Zhizha battles with social taboos, which Vera unmasks and strongly challenges. By showing the variability of the female character, her experiences and the ways in which she seeks to rise above those forces that thwart her efforts, Vera's writing can be described as the voice of a true African feminist as it calls for a redefinition of the woman's situation in changing circumstances.

Endnotes

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[1]. Motherhood – For more views on this subject see Judith Evans' text, Feminist Theory Today (1995); and Deidre Badejo's article, entitled 'African Feminism: Mythical and SocialPower of Women of African Descent' in *Research in African Literatures,* 29 (2) 1998: 125-132.

[2]. Marechera's writings – described by Buuck as the 'scripting of the self' in *Research in African Lliterature*, 28 (2) 1997: 35-42.

[3]. The armies that operated during the Zimbabwean liberation war were a mixed bag: the Rhodesian Army, the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (Zipra), the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (Zanla), as well as a host of other forces which included mercenary fighters within the country.

[4]. The city's corrupting influence is a recurrent theme in Zimbabwean literature. See Kahari's The Search for Zimbabwean Identity (1980); Kahari's Aspects of the Shona Novel (1986) where 'the city is the death bed of the Shona people's morals and decency'

(108); Cutrufelli's Women of Africa: Roots of Oppression (1983), and Little 's The Sociology of Urban Women's Image in African Literature (1980).

[5] . Peripheral location – Keith Green and Jill Lebihan in Critical Theory and Practice (1996) deal at length with sexual identity and how the female is marginalized in patriarchal societies while Judith Evans (1995) views gender as 'a social construct' where relations between the sexes are the relationships of power.

[6]. Silences – see Pauline A Uwakweh's article cited earlier. Furthermore, silences may suggest contentment, protest or even disgruntlement, amongst other things.

[7] African female – see Badejo's essay (1998) on African Feminism.

[8] Colonisation – an extended coverage of the impact of colonization in Africa and on the colonized individual is in Frantz Fanon's The Wretched of the Earth (1990) where the colonialist is identified as the chief culprit in the deprivation of the African socio, cultural and economic landscape.

CHAPTER FOUR

The politics of gender in Nervous Conditions

4. 1 Introduction

The main text analysed in this section will be Nervous Conditions (1988), a seminal novel that has been acclaimed as Tsitsi Dangarembga's masterpiece; one of the 'first published novels in English by a black Zimbabwean woman'[1] (Veit-Wild, 1993: 333). It is against this avant-garde position that Dangarembga's novel has been read largely as a bildungsroman where the protagonist's development is spread across the text.

This chapter will therefore explore the imaging of the female characters in the novel; the challenges they face in their quest to discover the 'self' in a male dominated landscape. It will further examine entrapment as a theme affecting a cross section of people in this novel. Next will be an analysis of motherhood and how this is delineated in Dangarembga's work. This chapter concludes by highlighting the key issues the author raises in this novel.

4. 2 Locating the self in a male dominated culture.

Tambu is the female narrator of this novel who in her early female experiences rejects her mother's destiny of rural labourer and wife. She grows up in a society where traditional values are being renegotiated and

Dangarembga places her protagonist at the focal point where various choices towards a realisation of self are open to her. As a girl-child, Tambu is not given an equal chance to receive an education, as is the case with her brother, Nhamo, whose departure for the mission school means that Tambu has more chores to do in the homestead. To compound her condition as a woman, her needs in the family are 'not considered a priority or even legitimate' (NC: 12). Sugnet (in Nnaemekka, 1997: 34) describes Tambu's social and educational life as a 'slow unfolding of the many defences against marginality'. This location outside power is evident in that her education comes as an afterthought, not a priority. The resulting marginality breeds a feeling of 'injustice' and 'dislike' for her brother, the parents and 'in fact everybody' (NC: 12).

Furthermore, this bitterness stems from what Nfah-Abbenyi (1997: 31) regards as the 'different levels of being the Other'. Thus, before Tambu gets a scholarship to Sacred Heart, she wrestles with many socio-cultural forces that stand in her way. Given the above background, it is not surprising that soon after Nhamo's death she maintains:

> I was not sorry when my brother died. Nor am I apologising for my callousness, ... my lack of feeling. For it is not that at all. I feel many things these days, much more than I was able to feel in the days when I was young and my brother died (NC: 1).

Dangarembga uses a child narrator, Tambu, to transport the reader on an odyssey that lays bare the trials that confront the girl-child in Shona patriarchy. As such, Tambu's account is likely to be reliable owing to her

tender age, yet her account may suffer from a child's point of view, thus rendering it lacking experientially. However, what is clear in Tambu's account is that she is not merely an observer but also an active participant in nearly all key incidents. For example, she observes injustice at work as Nhamo is given preference to go to school since this 'would lift the branch of the family out of the squalor' (*ibid:* 4). This is typical of Zimbabwean gender bias where the male child is prioritised over the female. High educational aspirations are discounted and if any education is given to the girl-child, this is simply to make her literate; otherwise the rebuff is a chauvinistic outburst such as when the narrator's father insists that his daughter will not go back to school. He thus dismisses the whole issue with, 'can you cook books and feed them to your husband' (*ibid*: 15)?

What is apparent here is that the doors to education are closed to the girl-child, save in accidental cases, such as Nhamo's death that opens up educational opportunities for Tambu. Even with Nhamo's death, she only goes to school because there is no male child who could be sent in her place. Despite such marginalisation, she seeks to validate her existence by subverting her father's ideology of accepting a domesticated life under male tutelage. Later, she raises her own crop for sale in order to get money for school fees, and this in itself is a self-asserting gesture in which Tambu shows rare resilience.

More importantly, this is a rejection of colonisation and the subordinate position cherished by her father. Wilkinson (1992: 191) posits that Tambu's strength emanates from her 'solid character because she was grounded in her culture and she had been taught at the feet of her grandmother about her ancestors and her cultural history'. Wilkinson's observation is pertinent in understanding Tambu's character since without a firm cultural backdrop, she would have found it difficult, if not impossible to pave her way forward. Unlike her cousin, Nyasha, who is afflicted by a double consciousness, Tambu is connected to the memories of her past. This strength is evident if Tambu is contrasted first with Nhamo who is portrayed as detesting communal life, and secondly, with Nyasha whose assimilation of the western culture, culminates in a self-destructive life as she lashes out not only at her own body, or Babamukuru who embodies Shona patriarchy, but also the colonial legacy itself.

Before Nhamo's death, Tambu has been finding it difficult to accept herself as a full individual resulting in her being apologetic about her gender. Evidence to this effect is in her feeling embarrassed, denial and hurt about issues such as menstruation, thus she finds it 'comfortable to occupy the corner that some natural process had carved out for her' (NC: 39-40). At this stage she is faced by contending forces which pull her towards either accepting her lot, or exploiting the accidental opportunities for education which will make her a subject in her own right.

That she is now able to forge ahead against all odds is a sign of growth that further testifies to her having undergone a profound reinvention.

4. 3 The entrapment motif in Nervous Conditions

Dangarembga's novel juxtaposes the female against the male. On the one hand are Nyasha, Maiguru, Lucia, and Mainini who are a commune that affords Tambu possible role models to emulate. On the other, are Babamukuru, Nhamo and Jeremiah who epitomise patriarchal values. In the first chapter of the novel the author refers to 'my escape and Lucia's', her 'mother's and Maiguru's entrapment' and 'Nyasha's rebellion' (NC: 1). This section of the chapter will discuss the entrapment motif and how it affects different individuals in this novel.

Traditional Shona culture would not view Maiguru or Mainini as entrapped or as downtrodden African women. Instead, they may be stereotypes of those women entrapped under the weight of womanhood while the male occupies the dominant position. In both Ndebele and Shona traditional culture, a woman's social standing 'depends on her ability to work hard and bear children. Her influence in the family and society became stronger as she grew older and had thus achieved complete adulthood' (Batezat and Mwalo, 1989: 4). Independent existence outside male control was, however, rare since authority and power rested with the father, the husband and even the boy-child who

was groomed for control in later life. This subordinate status was neither an entrapment nor did it denigrate the female despite her living 'under the authority of a man' (*ibid: 5*). Instead, a married woman was respected in traditional African societies.

The image of the extended family in Nervous Conditions has however lost the beauty of an ordered life found under the traditional set-up. First, the male figures in the novel are themselves victims of an oppressive colonial system and can thus no longer act as custodians of the idyllic African past. Second, Babamukuru is portrayed as the product of colonial education that has alienated him from his roots. Furthermore, as the overseer of a household he fails to live up to the standards expected of a role model or mentor. That his own identity is in a crisis is seen in his puritanical, legalistic conventions and demands on others. This unflinching control is evident in the way he appropriates his wife's salary and dispenses it as he wills. He further demands unquestioned compliance to his whims by all waiting upon him, as seen in the way in which he commandeers Jeremiah towards a western type of marriage.

The wedding alone magnifies Babamukuru's rootlessness[2] and entrapment as it shows his alienation from the Shona traditional type of marriage. In Nervous Conditions entrapment does not only affect the women, but men such as Nhamo, Babamukuru, and Jeremiah who experience their own nervousness and entrapment. For instance, Nhamo

is a victim of elusive forces that sever his being and alienate him from his roots. His obsession with books is an elitist gimmick that estranges him from his culture. He is thus entrapped by colonialism that strangles life out of him. Thomas (1997: 54) describes the dilemma of people living in perpetual 'alienation from their ancestors and this kills them psychically and spiritually'. Nhamo, for instance, no longer feels any kinship with his roots and thus, spiritually, the ancestors let go of any protection due to him.

Nyasha goes through a fateful odyssey marked by alienation and a negation of her Shona self. This culminates in her constantly shifting identity as she cannot adapt either to western lifestyles or relearn Shona culture which has been pushed to the recesses of her psyche. Thus, she is caught in a void where her past stands doubtful while her future is equally foggy. On the other hand is Tambu who escapes entrapment due to a consciousness of possibilities beyond the immediate challenges. Cloete (2000: 41) locates Tambu's strength in her ability to find a 'middle way between the kind of blind adherence to traditional – and often insensitive – male authority shown by her mother, and the blatantly rebellious rejection of patriarchy shown by Nyasha'. This observation is qualified in a number of instances such as when Tambu refuses to be part of the circus of a wedding Babamukuru forces Jeremiah and his wife into.

Dangarembga locates the male subject at an ambivalent position

where he is a 'historical artefact' (NC: 160). It is true that we are all constructed by history and from the same history we make our choice and ideologies. In the case of Babamukuru and Jeremiah both have been uprooted from a traditional culture and have lost the traditional father-figure image of one exercising control through guidance and exemplary acts. As such, Babamukuru, especially, parades as 'God' (*ibid*: 70), but unlike God he lashes out in an insulting way and imposes his own vision as 'a rigid, imposing perfectionist, steely enough in character to function in the puritanical way that he expected, rather instead; that the rest of the world should function in' (*ibid:* 87).

This caricature is a statement against the myopic nature of patriarchy, especially when it is indulged in power. Like the colonial text, Babamukuru blindly imposes his own reality on others, no matter how squinted his vision. This blindness to the other's position is destructive and shuts out life, more so in a family setting. Furthermore, he is the centre of power and a symbol of cultural imperialism in this family. His world is a plain where all 'Other' have to fit in. This is apparent as he speaks to Tambu about the wedding: 'I am the head of this house. Anyone who defies my authority is an evil thing in this house, bent on destroying what I have made' (NC: 167). Here Dangarembga presents a caricature of a man – an illegitimate authority that cannot be a representative of a traditional Shona family. This, portrayal hence makes Nervous Conditions a

polemical novel that seeks alternatives to a distorted patriarchal stranglehold of the 'Other'. Closely linked to Babamukuru's situation are the entrapment of the African family at large and the Sigauke family in particular as they epitomize the extremities of this dilemma. From a post colonial perspective the legacy of colonisation has been identities in crises without firm cultural roots. Therefore, entrapment dominates this novel and affects the various characters at different levels.

4. 4 A negation of motherhood

Dangarembga describes Maiguru as 'an embodiment of courtesy' (*ibid*) and her name suggests 'Earth Mother', a position celebrated by Miles (1988: 19) as 'the race itself, the primary sex' while the male is a 'biological afterthought'. Traditional societies in Africa respected the women's role of motherhood and its centrality in society. Thus, 'women have always been regarded as important for their roles as wives, and mothers for the reproduction of the husband's lineage. She is the owner of life, the earth goddess and some cultures associated her with the fertility of the land' (Steady, 1985: 29).

The female figure mirrored above is one who knows her strengths but, unlike this idyllic image, Maiguru has no access to power in the Sigauke household. Instead, she is caught in a transitional plane, where Veit-Wild (1993: 333) sums up her condition as a 'choice between self and

security but she has not chosen the self'. Her dilemma is, nevertheless, intensified because an effort to pursue an individualistic agenda is against traditional African culture since the individual is subject to the collective and as such, Maiguru's *self* should thrive within the collective. Batezat and Mwalo (1989: 57), concur with this interpretation while further revealing that 'the relations between men and women within the household provide the key to understanding women's subordinate role in society'.

While Maiguru may not pass for a traditional woman, she parades as a female character torn between two contending forces. Brought up in a traditional home, she has been fortunate to get an education, not only in Zimbabwe but in South Africa and England as well. Chennells views Maiguru as 'self effacing in order to preserve his [Babamukuru's] sense of identity and value' (in Ngara, 1996: 30). Another view could be that Maiguru's education should not necessarily have alienated her from her people, nor should it have estranged her from her family and the beauty of a communal existence in the family circle. As the leading matriarch of the Sigauke clan, she stands for the Earth Mother, one whose matriarchal role warrants respect. It is this image that patriarchy exploits leaving the victim further trapped by double colonisation. In Maiguru's case, westernisation cannot provide answers to her entrapment hence Sugnet's observation (in Nnaemekka, 1997: 57) that despite her education and western ways 'she fails to break free from the sexism around her because

western feminism cannot liberate her'.

Dangarembga does not obliterate Maiguru from the centre of this discourse and this helps to bring about a recurrent juxtaposition of Maiguru and other characters such as Tambu and Lucia among others. Veit-Wild contends that Maiguru is a reinforcer and pacifier of the patriarchal ego who demeans herself and other women by her androgynous stance. This view is debatable as it fails to understand her as a person as well as her role in the novel. In this study Maiguru is seen differently mostly owing to her assertive remark: 'so today I am telling you I am not happy. I am not happy anymore in this house' (NC: 172). At this stage she is not necessarily lashing out at patriarchy but may be operating at a personal level, thereby revealing the rare awakening of an African woman in a world of changing roles. This self-assertion arises from Tambu's punishment by Babamukuru as a result of refusing to take part in her parents' wedding – an incident which Maiguru feels her husband is taking advantage of her by lavishing her money on 'ridiculous weddings' (*ibid: 172*). This is one of the many incidents when women characters speak out against oppression. Dangarembga thus interrogates silences and taboos within the family; a view supported by some western critics such as Miles (1988) whose thesis treats the family unit as the source of female exploitation.

Capitalising on the Saussurian construct of 'logocentrism',

Dangarembga probes the centering of power on the male head as the sole point of reference in the family. Thus, a close reading of Nervous Conditions will reveal that all 'structures' are being dismantled, leaving an elusive, formless subjectivity that cannot be delineated into a conventional or finished product. Therefore, when Babamukuru attempts to prescribe and delineate the roles of those he presides over, his mission is to bring about a patriarchal order that operates on the logos - his own rules and vision of a rational ordering of life in the home. This logocentric perspective awakens an awareness of who the female is in relation to the dominant power of the male in the home.

It is however within the family that Maiguru breaks her silence and finds a voice. Silencing itself is 'a patriarchal weapon of control and is used by the dominant male structure on the subordinate or muted female structure' (Uwakweh, 1995: 73). In a way Maiguru goes through a self-defining moment and proves herself capable of independent action. As such, she cannot just be written off as one permanently self-sacrificing.

4. 5 Refuting the 'angel in the house' myth

Viewed from one position, Nyasha's reaction[3] is tragic because it shows a psychologically tormented individual who rejects patriarchy. Nyasha eventually loses control over herself rampages and shreds her history books. La Trobe (1992: 41) regards this rebellion as a 'rejection of

colonisation both within and outside the home'. Another view is registered by Nfah-Abbenyi (1997: 69) who describes the same incident as Nyasha's reaction to oppression 'after realising that the history she has been taught is one-sided and that it subjugates the colonised – hence the rage as she tears up her history books'. Therefore, her struggle to rise above the challenges that beset her reaches crisis proportions because she rejects not only her Shona roots as well as the partial construction she has undergone overseas.

Nyasha's condition of anorexia nervosa is indicative of a state of confusion, a nervous breakdown that is fired by patriarchy and fuelled by her own reaction. She fails to reflect as she withdraws and stops eating (NC: 118). As such, hers is a manifestation of a social problem that is compounded by patriarchy and social pressure. Nfah-Abbenyi (1997: 64) observes that Nyasha partly drives herself into destruction as she 'pushes herself to the edge and uses her body as a site of struggle' by starving herself. A related case is found in Eva's Song where Macici breaks into hysteria and starts 'banging plates' (ES: 4). This kind of behaviour is a product of a subjectivity that succumbs to external pressure and leads to self-destruction. In the process it is subject to two options - either to overcome the dietary abnormalities and start eating, as is the case with Macici, or suffer like Nyasha whom Dangarembga depicts as a pathetic figure:

> She sat on her bed and looked at me out of her sunken eyes, her bony knees.... I do not want to do it, Tambu, really I do not, but it's coming, I feel it's coming. They've done it to me... it's not their fault. They did it to them too. You know they did ... to both of them, but especially to him (NC: 201).

Dangarembga's concern is evident at this stage: to articulate the psychological and physical battles women have to fight in their lives. Thus, Nyasha's sanity, or otherwise, serves to expose Babamukuru's omnipotent charade. Tutored to dispense authority as a male, his society has elevated him to an all-powerful position that is not subject to challenge. In the process he is oblivious of alternatives to life. Although not totally blind to these, he chooses to dismiss all other options by imposing his own solutions on the dilemmas of the Other.

Babamukuru's logocentric approach to life may be seen as the direct cause of Nyasha's nervous breakdown as the following incident, for instance, testifies. When Nyasha returns home late from a party, Babamukuru treats this as insubordination and in an outburst, labels Nyasha a 'whore' (*ibid:* 114). This prompts Nyasha to lash out and challenge Babamukuru's centralising of power but he counters this act of rebellion with unflinching authority: 'if Nyasha was going to behave like a man, then by his [Babamukuru's] mother who was at rest in her grave, he would fight her like one' (*ibid:* 115). He resultantly slaps her across the face, whereupon she strikes back. By hitting back, Nyasha has stood up to confront the centre of power, an act against tradition.

The above incident undeniably depicts the Sigauke family as a fractured entity built on a 'false' and shaky foundation. It is, nevertheless, ironic that Babamukuru should be amazed at Nyasha's behaviour for he is the one who has uprooted her from her tradition and taken her overseas. This uprooting has alienated Nyasha from having the respect traditionally due to a parent. However the question may be posed: who is there to be revered when Babamukuru parades as a caricature and prowler broken loose, threatening to devastate all around him? It may further be argued that Nyasha justifiably labels herself 'hybrid' – a term that emphasises rootlessness and a lack of a stable identity.

From one position, Nyasha's reaction may be celebrated as a liberating experience, while her challenge to Babamukuru's authority elevates her to the position of a heroine. From another, she may be viewed as a hysteric who is 'volatile and strong-willed' (*ibid*: 116). These features pose a threat to any patriarchal institution that thrives on the 'angel in the house' myth (Woolf, in Eagleton, 1986: 12). Dangarembga is not blind to filial obligations such as children obeying their parents, but when the so-called parents brutalise their own offspring, as is the case with Babamukuru and Nyasha, the child finds it difficult to remain silent. Nyasha's victimisation is compounded by her gender as revealed in 'all conflicts came back to this question of femaleness. Femaleness as opposed to and inferior to maleness' (NC: 116).

4. 6 Conclusion

By endowing the female character with growth and the acquisition of an increasing feeling of worth, Dangarembga's novel attains rare heights in African authorship. This in itself is a celebration of a feminist consciousness that seeks to subvert patriarchal forces that in many societies overwhelm the female. Furthermore, this study has revealed that Dangarembga believes in education as a means to achieve the emancipation of women. However, this education should not be a blind regurgitation of a colonial world-view (as is the case with Babamukuru) or the rootlessness displayed by the self-destructive Nyasha, but a quest for a balance: a reinvention of the self through education without repudiating the past.

Endnotes

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[1] . The seminal nature of Nervous Conditions (1988) has been highlighted by different critics such as Biman Basu's 'Trapped and Tropping: Allegories of the Transnational Intellectual in Tsitsi Dangarembga; s Nervous Conditions' in *Ariel,* 28(3) 1997; 78-85; and Veit-Wild's Teachers, Preachers Non-Believers (1993).

[2] . Hybridity is a post-colonial term that sums up the decentredness and rootlessness of the colonized subject. The image of this subject is dominant in Marechera's fiction as revealed by Buuck in his article, 'African Doppelganger: Hybridity and Identity in the works of Dambudzo Marechera', in *Research in African Literature*, 28 (2) 1997: 125-132.

[3] Nyasha's condition gets in-depth coverage in Sue Thomas's article entitled, 'Killing the Hysteric in the Colonized House: Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions and Veit-Wild's article Creating a New Society: Women's Writing in Zimbabwe' in *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 22(1) 1997: 136-142, and Sally MacWilliams in her article 'Tsitsi

Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions at the Crossroads of Feminism and Post Colonialism' in *World Literature Written in English*, 31(1) 1998: 103-112.

CHAPTER FIVE

Intertextuality among Vera, Makhalisa and Dangarembga's Writings.

5. 1 Introduction

This chapter will highlight the extent to which the three authors converge or differ in their imaging, especially as they write at different times. Some authors contend that any work of perfect art should not be marked by any intrusion of anger or bitterness but this should not be viewed as a way of condoning a passive cataloguing of female experiences. Instead, this is a call for a discourse that highlights the challenges met by the female in life and how she copes with these. From this perspective, this chapter will closely evaluate how the three selected authors locate their literature as they portray those experiences peculiar to women.

5. 2 Woman-centred writing

Gaidzanwa (1985: 11) posits that the female experience is unenviable in that 'women who have no husbands and children are usually those who have refused to marry, been unsuccessful in maintaining marriages, widows, single or jilted women'. Vera's Butterfly Burning teems with such women who apparently exist independent of the male. When Zandile, for example, 'tunes her intuition to necessity and offers instant consolation' (BB: 31) she displays an independent existence as an individual who is at

liberty and has various options before her. Zandile's match is found in Deliwe - a woman who could 'make a man crawl as though he had never walked on his own two legs, she liked to see a man fall on his knees' (*ibid:* 54). Vera portrays Deliwe as assertive and impatient with an air of abandon about her. This is evident when she jeers at the women 'selling vegetables' in the street. For her, they are the 'laziest people she had seen in Africa' (*ibid:* 53). In her view, these women are idling away time, instead of being out to solicit for money as prostitutes.

Gaidzanwa further probes the plight of the 'independent woman' who opts for an existence outside male control. These women are 'condemned if they exploit their beauty and attractive bodies without necessarily becoming wives and mothers' (*ibid:* 12). A woman cannot exploit the potential of her body outside marriage since this will be regarded as prostitution. In Butterfly Burning, however, the prostitute can not be treated as just another outcast, but an individual with a potential to weather male domination. By daring to affirm the independent strength of the female character beyond conventional institutions such as marriage, Vera's novel seemingly opens up other avenues for the woman outside marriage.

In this novel, therefore, Vera liberates her text from being a mere catalogue of female stereotypes as seen through her portrayal of Phephelaphi whose singular journey through life is often stony. For

example, her dream to train as a nurse is initially dashed because her body 'betrays' her as she falls pregnant when she is about to enrol. This protagonist is entrapped in a cultural web, which suffocates her: 'she wanted an opportunity to be a different woman ... she wanted to be something with an outline ... she wanted some respect, some dignity, some balance of power ' (*ibid*: 91). Alone, Phephelaphi reflects beyond the deconstructionist notion of an ever-elusive identity of meaning as she searches for the 'self'[1] - her self - her very configuration of life. This is the outside, which has form, is tangible and will lend weight to her quest for existence and recognition.

Makhalisa's protagonists, on the other hand, take related but less convincing options out of their dilemmas. While her work explores the pressures and stresses that confront female characters, it portrays them as multi-faceted beings: as victims, as combatants or even as re-enforcers of the patriarchal set-up in the battle of the sexes. This renders Makhalisa's literary work elusive to classify, for in it there are mixed voices ranging from conformists who hardly ever reveal bitterness or anger, to the likes of Dezana who openly opt for alternatives in life.

Where, for instance, Vera carves a bitter female going to extremes such as self-immolation, Makhalisa's text tends to be more of a socio-cultural critique than a psychological battle at both the conscious and subconscious levels. The latter is the case in Under The Tongue where

Zhizha battles with memories and pains she encounters while growing up. A brief review of the novel reveals that it unapologetically explores harsh secrets, as a result of betrayal within families. As has been mentioned earlier, her father sexually abuses Zhizha, resulting in a severe psychological trauma for her. In response, Vera blatantly unveils these dastard acts, which Makhalisa passively refers to, as is the case of Netsai whose fatalism lands her in jail.

While it could be argued that the short story form does not develop character as the novel would, it could still be maintained that this genre enables the author to present a spectrum of female experience. Makhalisa does this in survey form where a multiple array of female experiences are portrayed in short story form. As a result, the researcher rejects Gaidzanwa's (1985: 80) views that Makhalisa's short stories, 'The Underdog', 'To Keep Him', 'Different Values', 'Baby-Snatcher', and 'The Rat-race Syndrome' are 'about women who whine about how hard they have been done by in the world'. Instead, each story contributes to a Zimbabwean female narrative that seeks to encompass the mixed voices in the land. By making the female the centre of these seemingly different narratives, Makhalisa sets the tone of this compilation. When taken as collective discourse, these stories gain in stature and tend to depict real-life undulations of the human experience.

As a leading character Tambu is a constant observer whose

proximity to the point of action authenticates most of the action in the novel and this makes her upbringing a 'school' in itself. Her formal education is rocky since preference is given to her brother, Nhamo, but she untiringly strives to assert her independence by seeking alternatives that will not shut off the channel that sponsors her education. This, in fact, makes her a calculating and realistic individual, unlike Nyasha whose idealism becomes her undoing.

Unlike Zhizha in Under The Tongue or Mazvita in Without A Name, Tambu realises growth in the duration of the novel. She grows both physically and spiritually. When the novel begins she is initially rather naïve and uncertain about herself but by the end, she has grown more inquisitive as seen in 'something in my mind began to assert itself, to question things and refused to be brainwashed' (NC: 204). Her early experiences are summed up when she goes to live with Babamukuru and Maiguru, a couple she looks up to for all her needs as she remarks: 'I was going to be developed in the way that Babamukuru saw fit' (NC: 59) and 'I was like a vacuum then, taking in everything, storing it all in its original state for future inspection' (*ibid:* 63).

At the end of the novel, this naivety has been overcome as Tambu displays maturity and clarity about her moves. Although initially nervous, she ultimately knows 'what could or couldn't be done' (*ibid:* 203) and this is a discovery of self that is liberational. Uwakweh (1995: 65) confirms this

awakening in Tambu as resulting from 'a conscious being capable of independent thought and action'. Unlike Nyasha[2] who is trapped by a psychological 'hell', Tambu has gone through various learning curves that have enlightened her path and resulted in attaining a clear vision by the close of the book. Her growth is advanced by her receptive mind, unlike Nyasha's that shuts out vision and hence reduces possible alternatives that could have led her out of the quagmire she is trapped in.

Compared to Tambu, Mazvita in Vera's Without A Name is destroyed by a singular passion - the yearning for freedom. As she leaves Mubaira for the city she shuts out the rest of the world to tendentiously embrace the city. Vera aptly depicts her as one who 'sent her head forward through the tunnel and met darkness tall and consuming' (WAN: 10). The city snarls, gaps its jaws and smothers her. With nowhere to turn to, she returns to the village a disillusioned, confused and devastated individual. Unlike Tambu, whose exposure to the experiences of others has had a didactic effect, Mazvita's alienation has been compounded by an obsession with the self. Her singular purpose of uprooting herself from the land to pursue freedom in the city is life-denying. At the end, Mazvita wanders as a lost spirit without identity, form or name. However, a different reading of Mazvita's dilemma would be to view her as a victim of a war situation since a stranger raped her. This violation haunts her and makes her feel betrayed by all around her, including the soil, land, grass,

and the very morning when this act took her place. In a way her decentredness can thus be traced to events that violate her privacy as in the rape ordeal itself.

5. 3 Living on the margins

The way in which Mazvita is portrayed makes her a victim of a colonising force, epitomised in the stranger who could have been a Rhodesian soldier or a freedom fighter. A colonising force overpowers by imposing its will on the weaker a condition that is dealt with in Vera's novel where the dominant force and those on the periphery are juxtaposed.

In 1977, for instance, the war was fought in and outside the country, as are the battles Mazvita is facing. She is battling within herself as she searches for ways out of her dilemma. There is also telling parallelism between what Mazvita undergoes and what Zimbabwe experienced during the colonial era where her country's wealth was plundered and she was left scarred for life. Vera suggests this ravish when she writes:

> He had claimed her, told her that she could not hide the things of her body, and that she must bring a calabash of water within her arms and he would drink. He had tired of drinking from the river. She must offer him water with cupped hands. She must kneel so that he could drink (WAN: 28).

Here Vera's text broadens in its implication because it traces the history of colonisation and shows how the colonising power plundered both the natural and human resources in the colonies. Unlike a welcome visitor who

is offered cool drinking water to quench his thirst, this outsider's presence is unwelcome and a violation of the morals and privacy of the individual.

If Vera's extra textual political inclinations are subtleties in this novel, Dangarembga's are a critique of the devastating forces of colonisation. For instance, the political climate in the Rhodesia of 1965 was marked by racism in the year when the minority government declared UDI[3] (Unilateral Declaration of Independence) a watershed development that is, nevertheless not centralised in the novel.

As if to trivialise the above incident, Dangarembga is particular about the 'history that could not be found in textbooks' (NC: 17) which Tambu learns from Mbuya. The author paints an idyllic picture of heroes, giants and achievements as she nostalgically recalls the past before all the beauty and plenteous wealth were abruptly ravaged by 'white wizards' (*ibid:* 18), who displaced the local people and then drove them to sandy soils. On the land issue, Batezat and Mwalo (1989: 2) reveal that the usurpation of land was 'legalized by the Land Apportionment Act of 1930 which was superseded by the Land Tenure Act of 1969 where the latter divided land between blacks and whites with the white settlers getting the same amount of land as Africans'[4].

It is against this background that Nervous Conditions depicts a dispossessed people caught up in transition where the lure of western education breeds a new elite class that is oblivious of its own dependency

on its sponsors such as missionaries and other philanthropists. Plasa (1998: 37) concurs that colonialism 'pathologises the subjectivities of those it embraces, including the colonisers'. In this novel, a number of individuals display unstable personalities, Babamukuru, for instance, is an example of decentredness. Examining his role in his immediate family substantiates this view: he adopts a western lifestyle and tastes while his family has been disoriented by a dominant but alien culture – which is the 'Englishness' that Tambu's mother identifies as the chief cause of the suffering bedevilling this family.

Dangarembga paints a tragic portrait of Nyasha as she is destroyed by the patriarchal culture of Babamukuru. When insisting on traditional respect during his confrontation with Nyasha, seemingly he is blind to the fact that his daughter is the product of two conflicting cultures that have entrapped her to the extent that she cannot break free from this cultural collision. She bemoans her dilemma and decries what the coloniser has done to her nation: 'they've taken us away. They've deprived you of you, him of him, ourselves of each other. They've trapped us. They've trapped us. But I won't be trapped. I'm not a good girl' (NC: 200-201).

Nyasha's fighting spirit becomes deflated as she sinks under the heavy legacy of colonisation. It is this colonial culture that crashes her, as she cannot reconcile the many forces contending for her allegiance. A

quest for identity is rooted in one's claim to land or family but in Nyasha's case it is unfortunate that her identity lacks the firm cultural backdrop that is found in Tambu who is able to recognise both the imperfections of the adopted white culture and of the kind of patriarchy typified in Babamukuru that destroys Nyasha's well-being.

That Tambu does not repudiate her culture per se confirms Dangarembga as a genuine African feminist whose work surmounts a 'casual' feminism that casts a blind eye on racial problems. As such, Dangarembga concurs with some black American feminist commentators who regard the challenges facing a woman writer as multiple, because 'she should think and write out of her own identity and not try to graft the ideas or methodology of white or male literary thought'[5] (Hull & Smith, 1982: 164).

The female experience is of prime importance in Nervous Conditions, a novel in which Dangarembga tells her 'own story' (NC: 204). As such, her work serves as an expose of social silences and taboos that impact on the female. Cloete (2000: 48) observes that Dangarembga manages to expose the above through a child narrator (Tambu) whose 'childhood innocence enables her to write a calm, unemotional tale of patriarchal and colonial domination'. This narrative position is an important element in this novel because to a large extent it enables some untainted observation of life from a child's viewpoint. By highlighting the

women's commune this way, the novelist brings to the fore what Vera in Under The Tongue refers to as 'all the pain in the world' (UTT: 11). In daring to expose the loopholes and potholes in family governance, both Vera and Dangarembga may be misconstrued as being too westernised or advocating the dissolution of the family unit. Instead, both authors stress the need to redefine roles and renegotiate power relations within the family unit.

Vera's Under The Tongue locates the dilemma of the female subject in various social constructs and conventions that silence her. In the phrase: '...you have said that a woman cannot speak' (UTT: 44), Vera attacks the silences that society imposes on the female subject as if she has to suffer in silence. Unlike Nyasha in Nervous Conditions, Zhizha's consciousness increases and shows no uncalled for bitterness as is revealed in the words: '...my woman's voice can be heard, small as it is, can a woman not speak the word that oppresses her heart, grows heavy on her tongue, heavy, pulling her to the ground?' (*ibid*: 44). Vera's protagonist is in a quest for a voice and self-definition which Uwakweh (1995: 65) views as 'cathartic'.

What seems to be emerging here is that the three authors are concerned with the situation of the female but vary in the intensity of their discourse. For instance, Makhalisa has been described as not a 'very political person' (Veit-Wild 1993:196), while Dangarembga views 'classical

culture as damaging and constraining' (Chennells, in Ngara, 1996: 66). By contrast, Vera displays a rare insight into the female experience by keeping her writing relatively unstained by uncalled for bitterness, an approach that should not be viewed as a flaw in her writing. Martin and Brickhill describe her style as a rare 'reconstruction' and further remark that 'she imagines more truly than historians can reconstruct' (BBC Focus on Africa, Oct.- Dec.99: 52).

5. 4 What's in a name?

Apart from the cultural discontinuities that bring about conflict in the characters under discussion, there are other common strands that culminate in an intertext among the three authors. For instance, the names of the characters unveil the social, and moral construction of the day. In several African communities names are not just a 'tag' to an individual but serve as social, religious, personal and wider political statements. For instance, among the Shona names such as 'Hazvinei' and 'Munyaradzi' and 'Miedzo' are not mere tags but carry an extended message. 'Hazvinei' may suggest an individual experiencing a hard time, especially in a marriage setting, or someone about to give up hope but decides to soldier on despite the challenges. 'Munyaradzi' is another name that indicates one who has searched for answers but failed, hence now looks up to another source for comfort and solutions.

In Makhalisa's Eva's Song, names such as 'Macici' (earrings) and 'Linda' (wait/persevere) are germane to the thematic concerns of the stories. In 'Together', for example, Macici is portrayed as an aloof girl whose quest for beauty results in her suffering from anorexia nervosa while those of Bongiwe, Minenhle and Linda are 'praise' names whose impact is positive.

The imaging of characters in these texts is highly symbolic and needs to be decoded to reveal its signification. The Underdog and Other Stories has names such as 'Netsai', 'Tsitsi', 'Chipo', and 'Melusi' which, if carefully analysed, will reveal a match between the characternym and the bearer's nature and personality. Macici, for instance, starves herself thin as she pursues her dream of a beautiful and daintily dressed Cinderella, who to her is the epitome of beauty. 'Netsai' means 'one who brings trouble or discomfort' and this protagonist's life goes through turbulent times as she is stalked by the men folk throughout.

Vera is more provocative than Makhalisa as regards the centrality of names in the narrative. In Without A Name, for example, she allegorises the sub-culture status of womenfolk who are relegated to the fringes of power by patriarchal constructions. Furthermore, in Under The Tongue she insists on giving a 'tag' at least to the female character. This act does not in any way belittle women but is a call to dare speak themselves into existence. The following statement: '...grandmother asks for my name again and I knew she wants my real name not the name of my mother'

(UTT: 14), raises Vera's text to that of the personal and not the collective experience of the female gender. She insists on the female's introspective gaze at self where being female is not denigrated but affirmed and celebrated.

Under The Tongue, therefore, places 'names' and identity at a focal point. 'Zhizha', the protagonist, dominates this negotiation of identities and occupies a plane of transition from the age of Grandmother, through that of Runyararo, to the present where she searches for her own identity. She is 'the soft fall of rain after the harvest, a peaceful rain which is not for growing things but for mercy' (UTT: 15) – hence the non-confrontational tone of this novel. Grandmother's insightful philosophy of the female experience assumes a didactic dimension as it nurtures Zhizha to 'say the heaviness of her life ... without madness' (*ibid:* 10). However, unlike Zhizha, Nyasha's alienation from her roots results in a mental breakdown that will 'kill them all if they aren't careful' (NC: 202). While 'Nyasha' means 'mercy' or 'grace', she ironically experiences the opposite of these. Having been uprooted from her African culture, she 'collapses under the extreme pressure of the conflicts she faces' (Veit-Wild, 1993: 334). In Butterfly Burning Vera is unequivocal about identities. In this novel she interrogates cultural erosion and the ways in which this has negatively impacted on human conduct: 'what happened to Gugulethu, to Ntombenhle, to Zanele, to Ntombiyethemba, Nkosinomusa,

Thandolwenkosi, Nkazana and Bathabile those humble girls?' (BB: 78).

Beyond using names as a recurrent motif in her work, Vera's story centres on Phephelaphi and Fumbatha as well as on the highly personified township of Makokoba[6] and the hustle and bustle of Sidojiwe E2 Street. The author unveils Fumbatha's life that is lived in a whirlwind amid 'debris and rubble' (BB: 18). This wasteland experience places him among the victims of a fractured history where the past is foggy and every experience and dream is 'a sorrowful wind blowing like a hurricane' (19).

Deprived of his roots, Fumbatha nurtures bitter memories of how his father and sixteen other men have been hanged. Against this historical backdrop Vera validates the occupation of the then Rhodesia at the end of the nineteenth century. 'Fumbatha' means 'holding tight in a fist' and Vera uses Fumbatha to symbolise the subjugation of the Africans in Rhodesia at the beginning of the twentieth century. The resulting bitterness of defeat is this 'invisible truth' (BB: 19) that Fumbatha broods over throughout his life.

In contrast to the inner turmoil experienced by Vera's protagonists, the social milieu in Makokoba is vibrant amid the 'cracks' and 'desperate wounds' (BB: 3). Phephelaphi (where is my refuge), finds herself on the run and chases an elusive aperture to break out of this nothingness where blacks live 'unnoticed and unnoticeable' and where they have to learn

to 'walk without making the shadow more pronounced than the body ... they lean on walls, on lies, on music' (*ibid*: 3-4).

Phephelaphi's quest for meaning in life is butted by Fumbatha whose 'fist' punches life out of her. Stalked by the dominant male in her marriage, she rejects colonisation in the home and opts for salvation and consummation of self by burning her own body. Her ultimate exit echoes Nyasha's rejection of domination by Babamukuru in Nervous Conditions. The latter's protest however is matrophobic in that she has witnessed her mother tolerating and reinforcing Babamukuru's whims. Unlike Phephelaphi's situation, though, Nyasha's is self-destructive as revealed by Nfa-Abbenyi (1997: 64) in that she 'uses her own body as a site of struggle' as she starves herself and in the process destroys herself. Both these names (Nyasha and Phephelaphi) are ironically used because each protagonist searches for but fails to gain solace amid the cultural and sexist forces that dominate their lives.

5. 5 Conclusion

This chapter has revealed that the three authors under discussion are concerned with the situation of the female. The resulting images are those of women striving to subvert an array of forces that seek to dominate and overwhelm the female. Amid these forces, the oppressed is given choices either to confirm her secondary status or to fight for her freedom as is the

case with Tambu, and Lucia in Nervous Conditions; Zhizha in Under the Tongue; Phephelaphi in Butterfly Burning; or even Dezana in Eva's Song who openly opts for alternatives in life. Therefore, through apt naming and strong protagonists, the three authors galvanise what might have been just another name into a world of text that should be read closely for both thematic and stylistic significance.

Endnotes

[1] . The self - see Linda Alcoff's article, 'The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory' in *Signs; Journal of Women in Culture and Society,* 13 (3) 1988: 425.

[2] . On Nyasha's entrapment, see Biman Basu's 'Trapped and Tropping: Allegories of the Transnational Intellectual in Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions' in *Ariel,* 28 (3) 1997: 117 where, Nyasha is portrayed as rebelling against the 'naturalising of the trap: once you get used to it, well, it just seems natural'.

[3] . The Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) in the Zimbabwean context refers to the time when Ian Smith (former Rhodesian Prime Minister) illegally declared Rhodesia's independence in 1965. Further commentary on this event is in Ruth Weiss' The Women of Zimbabwe (1986).

[4] . For more insight on the land question in Zimbabwe, see Gaidzanwa's Promised Land: Towards a Land Policy in Zimbabwe (1982) and Giovanni's The Political Economy of Rhodesia (1967).

[5] This observation is itself highly debatable as the African feminist may experience different challenges compared to those faced by an African American woman writer.

[6] Makokoba – this is the oldest township in Zimbabwe's second largest city, Bulawayo.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion

This dissertation has revealed the disparate nature of the female experience in that the selected works portray diverse though related positions regarding the imaging of the female character. To conclude, this chapter will review the above thesis, summarise the key propositions and then draw conclusions on the representation of the female protagonists in this study.

6. 1 Conclusion.

In her essay, 'Cultural Feminism Versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory', Alcoff (1988: 417) suggests that 'because [the] woman has been excluded from functional discourse' her position of the 'Other' is fertile ground for a 'discourse of resistance'. This research has shown that the three Zimbabwean novelists under discussion take divergent routes in their pursuit of the female experience. The researcher prefers to refer to female experiential encounters as a process of becoming rather than a plight or fixed position. Paradoxically, the 'female' as a category of gender cannot be dismissed for it exists whether one acknowledges it by creation or through socialisation.

The notion of 'female experience' may be viewed as a plane of diverse proportions and dimensions. As such, it can never be universalised as revealed by the didactic stance taken by Makhalisa in her short stories. Her mother-figure counsel is androgynous and aims at renegotiating interpersonal relations within marriage institutions. This, however, does not suggest that Makhalisa condones violence, abuse or any form of subjugation of the female in the home. Instead, her writing exposes unreservedly what Lauretis in Alice Doesn't (1984: 182) calls the 'complex of habits resulting from the semiotic interaction of the outer world and the inner world, the continuous engagement of a self or subject in social reality'.

Thus, a reader of Makhalisa's short stories encounters the female character in various life situations spanning the socio-political and the economic. Unlike Nyasha in Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions, Makhalisa's protagonists are non-confrontational as they chart alternative courses out of dilemmas. For instance, with widening horizons of their experience, Jessie and Bongiwe in 'Eva's Song' hit the main strain of Makhalisa's tune: women should stand up and uplift their women-folk in a 'close sisterhood' (ES: 19).

This sisterhood should not wait for logocentric patriarchal intervention but must organise and liberate the desolate 'leathery faces and dry scaly lips ... the dry and swollen feet [which] wail a song of

weariness' (*ibid:* 20). This observation refers to the female hawkers who literary live on the streets while those with a home to go to, wrap up their wares and head for home but are up before sunrise to again fend for their offspring.

The issue at the core of the works studied may not be whether women are biologically determined or a cultural construction, but that the female subject must be accepted as a human being first before any gender categorization is emphasised. This researcher's view is that any classification emanating from a gender division will seek to erase the humanness of the female subject. But, if the female and male engage each other on co-existential terms, cultural fragmentation may dwindle and in the process gender biases may be addressed.

Vera's Under The Tongue arguably affirms the femaleness of Grandmother, Runyararo and Zhizha without denigrating this to a negative. There is also an echo in Butterfly Burning where Phephelaphi, for instance, ironically suffers for her femaleness. Through a subtle use of irony, Vera exposes the wanton nature of the male who has categorised the female and told her that she should neither work nor plan for her future. Fumbatha's all-condemning remark is: '...we are happy together. I work. I take care of you. It is not necessary for you to find something else' (*ibid:* 59). In Without A Name, Vera uses the image of 'mushrooms' (WAN: 5) to show the delicate nature of the female and this is exemplified through

telling juxtaposition where the male gaze over the mushroom is destructive. Nyenyedzi, for instance, 'crushes it' (*ibid:* 6) and justifies his act by remarking: 'there are many under the log. I will find mushrooms for you, if you want some' (*ibid:* 7). This is exploitative and typical of the male view of life, implying that he can have his way by controlling the life of the female. The emerging image is that the positionality of the female finds echoes in these novels. As if always on a tether, the female is depicted as constantly being stalked by the male. Those who break free from this web of oppression often find themselves maimed for life as is the case with Nyasha, Mazvita and Macici, while Phephelaphi is destroyed by the very cultural construction that purports to provide for and protect her.

6. 2 Summary.

The three authors studied in this dissertation have shown that the female experience is fundamentally different from that of the male. If the male in patriarchal societies is the point of reference and the central symbol of essence, the female writer cannot help but write herself into existence. If she does not, the male will do so on her behalf and in the process, impose a male view of the world.

Vera's treatise in Under The Tongue lends hope to the direction that black Zimbabwean women writers have to take. First, 'a woman must love herself enough' (*ibid:* 68) and second, she should have:

> ...a sense of belonging before that kind of belonging which rested on another's wondrous claim, being herself because she was a flower blooming in her own green pool, to be able to pick the flower, which was herself, from the water before he reached out his own strong arm and did all that for her and made her feel empty and waited upon (*ibid:* 69).

By daring to explore the unconscious, Vera liberates many a woman's silences that have lain buried for generations. Instead of uttering a lament such as Eva's Song, the female has to 'learn to speak her sorrow and be heard' (UTT: 32). Vera thus challenges the female to dare find a voice and break the chains of retrogressive patriarchal institutions.

One fundamental insight into reading black Zimbabwean women's literature in English emanating from this dissertation is that these authors have not simply estranged themselves from retrogressive traditions or cultural practices. On the contrary, they have exposed these negatives and negotiated new courses. It is, therefore, significant that the semiotic positioning of their discourse be decoded from a wider perspective, one that is cognisant of a people rooted in tradition yet gradually being exposed to other influences and cultures.

There exist obvious stylistic differences in the writing of these three female writers. For instance, Makhalisa's literary style is successful within the conventional literary standard of the short story, while Vera's tends to be innovative as the following comparison of two passages from the two authors reveals. In the following text, Vera further uses abstract symbolism which on the surface remains elusive to the reader thus: 'I long to know

the word which banishes silence ... I see an anthill. Grandmother is inside the anthill. Under her tongue is a word. I wait under the tongue' (UTT: 53).

On the other hand, Makhalisa's narrative is more linear and less abstract. In the story, 'Not A Picnic Mom' in Eva's Song, Nomasonto's agitation and dilemma at single-handedly bringing up her children following desertion by her husband remains controlled and guarded:

> It's not fair! This is what I get for struggling to give them all I can so that they don't feel out of place with their friends'. She tried to tell herself that she should keep calm in order to quieten her crazy heartbeats but resentment got the better of her (ES: 49).

Compared to the more volatile Nyasha in Nervous Conditions or Phephelaphi in Butterfly Burning, Nomasonto's ultimate response to the estranged husband is to beg him to stay but to no avail. When going through a nervous breakdown, Nyasha nevertheless 'rampages and shreds her history book; breaks mirrors, her clay pots' (NC: 201) and bursts out shouting: 'They've trapped us. They've trapped us. But I won't be trapped. I'm not a good girl. I won't be trapped ... Look what they've done to us ... I'm not one of them but I'm not one of you (*ibid*: 201). This description is a violent rejection of domination yet it still does not result in psychological or spiritual freedom for the victim; instead she remains firmly trapped by forces both within and without.

The multiplicity of the female experience warrants special attention to any researcher interested in investigating women's literary works. This

observation is fundamental to the study of women's literature owing to the somewhat irreconcilable collective and personal encounters women face in life. Where the latter is informed by a view that the women's socio-cultural and political experiences vary and cannot be viewed as universal, the former posits that women as the female species share many experiences and point to the male as the culprit and despoiler. However, the situation of the female in the society is precarious, hence the need for intensified studies of literature by women in a constantly changing society.

Although reference to black male Zimbabwean writers has been made by Gaidzanwa, Veit-Wild, Zhuwarara, and Ngara amongst others, it will be interesting to carry out an in-depth comparative investigation of the male authors' narrative techniques and imaging of the woman in Zimbabwean literature written in English.

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