The African Womanist Vision in Vera's Works

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Summary

This article analyses the brand/s of feminism depicted in Vera's selected works as articulated in *Nehanda* (1993), *Without a Name* (1994) and *The Stone Virgins* (2002), in an attempt to determine her feministic vision. Vera's writings foreground female discourse in that the subject of her fiction is gender specific. In *Sign and Taboo* (Muponde & Taruvinga 2003), the editor suggests that Vera works outside any identifiable literary tradition, and seems to challenge reading models of any attempt to classify her as a specific kind of writer. This article, however, will attempt to place Vera's selected works within the conceptual framework of African womanism, an Afrocentric feminist ideology within the feminist paradigm.

Vera seems to adopt the main tenets of African womanism as her selected works show women not only as victims of the patriarchal and colonial order, but also as an essential complementary part within an African family or communal unit. Her works centre not only on gender, but also reflect on nationalism, identity and are steeped in historicity.

Much of the criticism of Vera's works by female critics has come mainly from Western literary critics whose perspectives are somewhat different from those of an African womanist. Taking the latter stance in this paper is done with the hope that the reader, as well as the writer of this article, will have a clearer understanding and conception of African womanism as a particular brand of black feminism.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel ontleed die tipe(s) feminisme wat in Vera se geselekteerde werke uitgebeeld word, soos verwoord in *Nehanda* (1993), *Without a Name* (1994) en *The Stone Virgins* (2002), in 'n poging om haar feministiese visie te bepaal. Vera se werke beklemtoon vroulike diskoers in die sin dat die onderwerp van haar fiksie genderspesifiek is. In *Sign and Taboo* (Muponde & Taruvinga 2003) suggereer die redakteur dat Vera buite enige identifiseerbare literêre tradisie werk, oënskynlik om pogings uit te daag om haar aan die hand van leesmodelle as 'n spesifieke soort skrywer te klassifiseer. Hierdie artikel poog egter om Vera se gekose werke binne die konseptuele raamwerk van Afrika-feminisme – 'n Afrosentriese feministiese ideologie binne die feministiese paradigma – te plaas.

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Dit blyk dat Vera die belangrikste leerstellings van Afrika-feminisme aanneem, aangesien vroue in haar gekose werke nie slegs as slagoffers van die patriargale en koloniale orde nie, maar ook as 'n noodsaaklike aanvullende deel binne 'n Afrika-gesin of gemeenskapseenheid uitgebeeld word. Haar werke sentreer nie slegs om gender nie, maar besin ook oor nasionalisme en identiteit, en is gewortel in historisiteit.

Kritiek teen Vera se werke deur vrouekritici kom meestal uit 'n Westerse literêre oord, waarvan die perspektiewe ietwat van dié van 'n Afrika-feminis verskil. Voorgenoemde standpunt word in hierdie artikel ingeneem in die hoop dat die leser, asook die skrywer van hierdie gedeelte, 'n duideliker begrip van Afrika-feminisme as 'n besondere tipe swart feminisme sal bekom.

1 Introduction

In *Recreating Ourselves*: *African Women and Critical Transformation* (1991), Ogundipe-Leslie believes that the two main responsibilities of the African female writer are first, to tell about being a woman and secondly, to describe reality from an African woman's view and perspective. Given the background of oppression and silencing that women have suffered both in the real and the literary world, Vera takes up Ogundipe's challenge as her works seem inspired to "break the silence" that women have been subjected to in the African context. Her writings straddle the colonial and post-independent era in Zimbabwe's history, depicting the plight of the Zimbabwean woman in both these eras as she struggles against oppression both locally and globally. In addition to capturing national history, Vera, in her novels, sets out to explore the black woman's experiences by focusing on themes of gender, politics and identity within a colonial paradigm.

One cannot doubt Vera's feministic vision as her writings prove that she is a deeply committed female writer. The literary awards she has received for her works acknowledge her as a prominent and accomplished writer, both locally and internationally. What this writer wants to determine, however, is the brand/s of feminism that Vera propagates given the feministic theoretical framework and discourse that are in existence. Therefore, in order to locate her position, it is pertinent to highlight some of the brands of black feminism that exist.

Black feminism is about the unique form of oppression that black women suffer. It is an ideology concerned with problems of identity in which race and sexuality are interlocking systems of oppression as Vera highlights in *Without a Name.* Black feminists' beliefs can best be summed up by Lauretis, who correctly states that "[t]he female subject is a site of differences, differences that are not only racial, economic or cultural but all of these together, and often at odds with one another ... these differences cannot then be collapsed into a fixed identity, a sameness of all women as Woman, or a representation of Feminism as a coherent available image" (McWilliams 1995: 103).

The fact, however, that even in black women themselves there is a "site of differences" raises the question as to whether black feminism in general adequately addresses the plight of the African woman in particular. Lazarus (1990) thinks not. He speaks of African women as being "differently political" to their other black female counterparts because of the twin scourge of colonialism and sexism as experienced in the context of traditional African culture. Many female African writers and critics within contemporary literary tradition share Lazarus's view and have, therefore, felt the need to create their own niche and come up with their own brand of feminism. They believe in African women having a hoe of their own, after Virginia Roof's "A Room of One's Own" (1929). Although African women are not homogeneous either, they are aiming to develop an indigenous brand of feminism, an African feminism that is divorced from the fixed gaze of "western eyes". This is because female authorship is a process of authorising women to describe reality and themselves and is clearly connected to the important questions of voice, agency, identity and perspective. It is only the African woman who can convincingly explore her historical and cultural reality. African women scholars are, therefore, determined to breathe into feminist theory and practice the specificity of their culture and location in the global economy.

In her book *The Dynamics of African Feminism* (2002), Arndt uses the metaphor of the chameleon to explain the need for an African brand of feminism. Just as the chameleon changes colour to fit in with all the different environments it encounters, so too should feminism be named according to specificity and location. One may ask, what's in a name, but the power to name represents an assertion of freedom. Feminism should, therefore, be as accommodating, adaptable and tolerant as the chameleon!

Consequently, a number of African feminist schools of thought were born, some of which went further to reject the term "feminist" as having Western connotations, suggesting white women dominance and characteristics. These African women scholars have opted instead for the term "womanism", aligning themselves to an alternative concept first introduced by Walker. In her "Introduction" to *In Search of Our Mother's Garden* (1983), Walker describes womanism as being to feminism "as purple is to lavender". Walker believes that womanism is more suited to the black woman's position in society. Her definition of womanist is one who is "committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male or female" (p. xi). According to Walker, womanists are concerned not only with overcoming sexual domination but also discrimination based on people's racial and socioeconomic reality. Womanist writers should be no less concerned than men to articulate and denounce the poverty, corruption and destructive practices that have impeded development of the black race, particularly in Africa.

From Walker's concept of womanism have been developed versions of African womanism by a number of African female scholars and writers like, for example, the one propounded by the Nigerian literary critic, Chikwenye Okonje Ogunyemi. This critic gives a peculiarly African dimension to Walker's womanism and excludes whites and Afro-Americans from her conceptualisation of African womanism. Unlike Walker, she believes that motherhood is of central importance to an African woman's life, so motherhood should be an important aspect when theorising an ideology of African women. Ogunyemi stresses that the need to define African womanism is "necessitated by African women's inclusive mother-centred ideology, with its focus on caring familial, communal, national and international" (Ogunyemi 1996: 114).

This paradigm prioritises the triple plight of race, class and gender for all women of African descent. Unlike African feminism, which focuses mainly on gender empowerment, African womanism is concerned with the elevation of the African race, and community is the centre of consciousness for the African womanist. This ideology suggests mutual cohesion for the benefit of the African family. It encompasses the sociological, the political and every area of life. Anti-male sentiments are not encouraged by this theory which argues that "[f]eminism, and by extension black feminism, carries its own baggage that does not work within a black historical and cultural context" (Hudson-Weems 2004: 23). Many black feminists refuse to acknowledge this doctrine, saying that its emphasis on the struggle for racial parity overshadows the struggle for female emancipation within the black family. Nonetheless, this philosophy successfully continues the race-based legacy of African womanhood as propagated by womanist orators and activists, such as Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman. Its strength lies in its promotion of positive interdependence of African men and women for survival in a racially hostile environment in which the entire black race suffers oppression, the kind of interdependence that Vera highlights in *Stone Virgins*.

Given this theoretical background, this writer now proceeds in an attempt to analyse Vera's works in order to determine her feministic vision. A number of questions come to mind at this point. Do Vera's vision and style reflect the unique female experiences of her own time and culture? Does she align herself to a particular black feministic framework or do her selected works incorporate more than one of them? Can Vera's writings be classified as belonging to the conceptual framework of African womanism and where she seems to fall "short" of belonging, what may be the reasons? This writer hopes to provide answers to these questions by the conclusion of this article.

2 Nehanda, the Female Cultural Nationalist

The introduction suggests that African womanism is a philosophy that has "wholeness" and "healing" for all Black people as one of its primary aims, that is, it calls for a holistic approach to African life. The philosophy seeks to simultaneously revise and retain African traditions. A study of Vera's *Nehanda* reveals that in her envisioning of Zimbabwe's colonial history and depiction of the clash of cultures, she seems to endorse some of the vital characteristics of African womanism in her handling of the legend of Nehanda.

One of the fundamental tenets of postcolonial theory is the reclamation of the previously disparaged and disrespected cultures. This project is called the cultural nationalist phase and is referred to by Kirsten Holst-Petersen as the "service of dignifying the past and restoring African self-confidence" (1987: 253). Chiwome says that Zimbabwean writers have used the Nehanda legend to "remind themselves of their destination against the back-drop of political domination" (Muponde & Taruvinga 2003: 180) and Vera's handling of Nehanda is no exception. Chiwome compares Vera's Nehanda to Mutsvairo's and concludes that Vera's Nehanda is definitely a cultural nationalist, a point this writer readily agrees with. Vera uses the will and drive that Nehanda reveals to make a political statement to the effect that women were significant in the shaping of the history of Zimbabwe. This is reflected not only in Nehanda, but also through the other women in the novel, such as Vatete, who are not only significant in molding the main character, but also in their active contributions to resistance and nationalism.

In *Mothers of the Revolution* (1990), Stratton highlights that "without women, the war could not have been won" (p. xii), suggesting that women's role and participation in the struggle was crucial. In an interview with Bryce, Vera seems to endorse this view when she states:

> With Nehanda, I wanted to bring that woman who led the first war against the British to the fore-front. I was conscious of the feminist elements there … a woman had led the first rebellion not only physically, but spiritually, which, in fact, was the basis of our entire armed struggle that followed the Second Chimurenga. It's based on the spiritual belief arising from her words, "My bones will rise again."
>
> (Muponde & Taruvinga 2003: 222)

Nehanda's legend became a solid basis for female combatants to struggle for inclusion in the armed struggle for national liberation.

Any analysis of the understanding and reinvention of the African woman requires an interpretation of Ngugi's views of decolonisation, as well as Orlando Patterson's conception of social death. In *Decolonising the Mind* (1987), Ngugi condemns the whole process of colonisation in general and specifically the instruments of colonial hegemony, such as the school and its

colonial education. Ngugi suggests that colonisation results in fragmentation and disorientation on a personal and communal scale and results in cultural imperialism, a situation that ultimately leads to alienation, as evidenced by the ambi-faced women in the urban cities as depicted in Vera's *Without a Name* (1994).

Similarly, in *Slavery and Social Death* (1982), Patterson presents the enslavement process as one which leads to the loss of honour, respect and property on the part of blacks. He sees all forms of political and social domination, of the kind that we witness in Moses' relationship with the whites in *Nehanda,* as forms of enslavement since they assume subservience and subjugation of the recipients who then become "the living who are dead" (Vera 1993: 45). In the case of the African, the arrival of Christianity and Western thought as superior paradigms to the existing African world view resulted in a form of social death. Moses seems aware of this fact, as, inspired by Nehanda, he leaves his "privileged" position as houseboy to Mr Brown to return to his people. This concept of social death, as expounded by Patterson, when applied to the African woman, refers not only to the conflict between African and Western ideas, but also to the continued refusal by some African women to acknowledge the existence of useful ideas from their traditional and birth culture. In the postcolonial era, this meant that there was a need for the reawakening of an African world view, in a manner which Vera attempts in her literature on Nehanda.

Like Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*, Vera's *Nehanda* deals with the question of the restoration of Africa's past. The novel can be seen as a bold example of the inextricable bond that exists between the African womanist's struggle for equality and the African's battle against colonialism. Although the text itself does not readily indicate this, what Vera seems to be suggesting is that gender issues that exist in the Zimbabwean society cannot be resolved without first battling against colonialism and all that it entails.

Vera retells history from the perspective of a female historical figure, a distinct shift in the concept of Zimbabwean history as highlighted by, for example, Vambe's *An Ill-fated People* (1972) which depicts the male medium, Kaguvi, as the most influential in shaping the course of the Shona rebellion in 1896. In Vera's novel, however, Kaguvi is mentioned, but prominence is given to the role Nehanda played. She is a character that is positive and complex at the same time. Like Beatrice in *Anthills*, Nehanda serves as source of passion and inspiration to the people around her as she helps to adapt her culture for the future. She is primarily a symbolic figure who provides spiritual leadership and inspires her people to revolt, a mythical mother figure who presides over the vast land – somewhat similar to Achebe's Nneka, Mother-is-supreme. In the creation of Nehanda, Vera addresses the issues of nationhood so critical to Africa's decolonised people. Even today, Nehanda remains an important part of Zimbabwe's national identity and, as such, literature about her should reflect this

significant aspect. Not only should she be depicted as a symbol of female empowerment, but also as one of black empowerment as she has contributed to the birth and development of the Zimbabwean nation. Such an image is in accordance with the parameters of the African womanism, which call for women to work alongside their male counterparts for the development of the nation as a whole.

Vera's Nehanda places at the top of her list of priorities the needs of the greater African family for the ultimate survival of the Zimbabwean society in the face of the onslaught of colonialism. The larger community, not just women, is at the centre of Nehanda's consciousness. There is almost a Christ-like aspect to her birth and this is not surprising considering the almost "saviour" type role that she plays to her people who recognise her as being special and important. When the white men begin to threaten the black people of Zimbabwe, she is transformed into a spiritual leader, the heart of resistance and her eyes "filled with prophecies" (Vera 1993: 80). A woman spirit medium has been chosen to express the fact that "[t]he departed had come to deliver a gift to the living, to shape the birth of voices, to grant the safe passage of the unborn (p. 3). The villagers do not doubt Nehanda's spiritual powers, even though she is a woman: "The crowd recognizes and salutes the spirit medium that has been sent to them for the sake of their own relief" (p. 61). They respect her "command of the ground, her territorial claim" (p. 61). She is important to her people, a symbol of cultural nationalism and collective identity, providing them with wisdom and inspiration. Nehanda's influence is such that it inspires Moses to leave Mr Browning's residence and reject employment, resulting in Mr Smith beginning to contemplate the possibility of her having "some real sway over these people" (p. 75). Even Nehanda's death, although inevitable, is significant to the future of her people.

Nehanda's significance lies in a spiritual paradigm because, as Vera states in her interview with Bryce, she is "really at the center of our spiritual belief as a whole nation" (Muponde & Taruvinga 2003: 222). Nehanda's special mission in life is that of the spiritual mother figure who gives rise to the birth of the Zimbabwean nation. Her revolutionary spirit continued to guide Zimbabweans even after independence. Teurai Ropa Nhongo had this to say: "Comrade Nehanda taught Zimbabweans that men and women are truly equal and inseparable partners in the struggle for national liberation, as well as in the post war period of reconstruction and development" (*Zimbabwe News* 1978: 65). Critics like Martin Shaw (Muponde & Taruvinga 2003) see Nehanda as inspired to develop herself as a spirit medium through which spirits speak instead of paying attention to being a wife and a mother like her female counterparts. They propagate the glorification of wifehood and motherhood as the purpose of a woman's being, the sphere of all women's actions. Although Nehanda has no children of her own, the role that she plays as a spiritual leader sustains her entire community, so how can her

womanhood be undermined? In the novel Nehanda's mother defends the fact that her daughter does not live up to societal expectations by saying:

> Let us respect her silence. Let my daughter be perhaps that which wishes to be a part of her will not allow her to marry, she is a woman, is she not? She is industrious is she not? She has ancestors and a lineage and totems that she respects, does she not? Is it not enough? What is our power against the wishes of the departed?
>
> (Vera 1993: 47)

Vera's depiction of the other female characters in the novel also arouses debate on the concepts of wifehood and motherhood, as she depicts them as child bearers, carriers of water and cookers of food. Some black feminists would argue that this depiction shows these women as being at the centre of the life of their community but not in power. This view is expounded by Ali Mazrui in his essay, "The Black Woman and the Problem of Gender: An African Perspective" (Kokole 1998). He suggests that although women continue to be the senior partner in life-creation, it is the men who control the life of the family and community. Mazrui believes that "[i]n rural African life, women are at the center of the economy, the water supply, the energy supply without even being powerful. This is the legend of the African woman as custodian of fire, custodian of earth and custodian of water, woman at the center but not empowered" (Kokole 1998: 242).

Black feminists who share Mazrui's views have consequently argued the need for women to move away from the home sphere, with its ideals of wifehood and motherhood, in order to achieve empowerment. Other black feminists, who are somewhat influenced by the concepts of African womanism, believe otherwise. In an essay, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship" (1988), Mohanty explains how Third World women are typically considered in terms of how they are affected by certain social institutions and systems, not in terms of their own agencies and certainly not with regard to the specific historical contexts in which they live. This she identifies as being a result of the insubstantial universality placed in these women's experiences. The result of this is that Third World or traditional African women are represented as "ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition bound, domestic and family oriented" (Mohanty 1988: 61). Mohanty reiterates the importance of feminists examining the particularities of the structures that exist, rather than applying their own biased conclusion, for instance, "the mere existence of sexual division of labour is often regarded as proof of women's oppression" (p. 68). Nevertheless, Mohanty states, explanation for "these divisions can only be determined in socio-historic contexts" (p. 68).

Steady (1978) also emphasises the complementarity aspect of the male-female relationship in Africa. She suggests that

> [f]or women, the male is not the "other" but part of the human same. Each gender constitutes the critical half that makes the human whole. Neither sex is totally complete in itself to constitute a unit by itself. Each has, and needs, a complement, despite the possession of unique features of its own. Sexual differences and similarities, as well as sex roles, enhance sexual autonomy and cooperation between men and women, rather than promote polarization and fragmentation.
>
> (Steady 1978: 8)

Vera no doubt seems influenced by this African womanist philosophy as in *Nehanda* she depicts a harmonious village life with the men and women playing their respective roles in order to contribute to the smooth running of the village life, despite the fact that both have rituals that exclude the other. The novel illustrates the two sexes working together in a concerted effort to build their homes. Despite being cookers of food and carriers of wood, the impression the reader gets is not one of exploitation, or of women as victims, but of a compatible coexistence with males and females allocated specific tasks and roles.

This is not to say that the women in *Nehanda* are depicted as stereotypical passive wives and mothers! Vera shows the women in a positive light. They are depicted as strong and active. The women who at Nehanda's birth wove a circle of strength around her mother are described as hard-working and productive. One of them is a trader "who knew where the best markets were and how people lived in far-flung places" (Vera 1993: 5). A widow, she owns "a circle of huts and land to plant her crops" and has "no qualms about sitting on the stool like a man" (p. 5). Then there is also Vatete, the woman "highly respected" for bringing life into the world. She is often invited by "the elders to arbitrate in matters of the village, especially those concerning women" (p. 9). The fact that she is among the "shapers of wisdom who determined the future of the village" (p. 9) suggests that women were also included in the decision-making and politics of village life. These women are fighters too, taking an active part in the revolt against the white man. Implicit in *Nehanda* is the fact that the women in this traditional African society are accorded a great deal of respect and contribute to the life of the village, contrary to what Mr Browning believes when he says: "This society has no respect for women, whom they treat like children. A woman has nothing to say in the life of the natives, nothing at all" (p. 75). Unfortunately, this Western belief has permeated much of black feminist ideology! Vera further expounds this revolutionary role in her later novel, *Stone Virgins,* as I will explore further on in this paper.

Vera's handling of male-female relationships within the communal and traditional society is somewhat of a contrast to Dangarembga's depiction of the same in *Nervous Conditions*. Tambu experiences traditional culture as being oppressive, as something that makes her feel "ill at ease and profoundly limited, where everything came back to the question of femaleness,

femaleness as opposed and inferior to maleness" (Dangarembga 1988: 115). This is not the sense that one gets of the traditional culture revealed in *Nehanda.* With Tambu's development in consciousness, however, she becomes sceptical of the colonial system and values "which made a mockery of the people I belonged to and placed doubt on my legitimate existence" (p. 163). Tambu's scepticism of swallowing Western ideology and beliefs wholly at the expense of a disregard or elimination of traditional African cultural beliefs and norms alludes to the hegemonic capabilities of Westernisation and Western philosophies. What Tambu suggests by the end of Dangarembga's novel is what Vera seems to highlight throughout *Nehanda,* namely that African women in general, and African women writers in particular, need, like Tambu, to move away from the "nervous conditions" that Fanon (1963) describes in order to develop authentic self-awareness and self-identity. We need to understand our roles as women within our own socio-political and historical context. Let us not consume Western feminist ideology wholesale, but let us analyse it, select what is relevant to our situation then discard that which is not appropriate to us. The weight of womanhood has to be balanced against the weight of blackness.

With this in mind, this writer fully agrees with Vambe (in Muponde & Taruvinga 2003: 28) when he suggests that "Vera's Nehanda interrogates nationalistic constructions of black female identity as a victim of historical forces. Vera re-appropriates the cultural symbols of a validating male dominated tradition of spirit possession in order to weave into them women-centered meanings of independence and install these at the heart of the new nation's consciousness of selfhood" (Vambe in Muponde & Taruvinga 2003: 28). Vambe, however, goes on to accuse Vera's construction of pre-colonial society as being "infiltrated with contradictory terms, values and modes of thinking" (p. 28) within the ideology of cultural nationalism. Looking at Vera's work from an African womanist perspective, there is no contradiction. The black women are not "trapped" in nationalistic discourse. What Vera seems to suggest is that women have first to identify themselves within a nationalistic framework and fight for the good of the nation, that is, develop a national consciousness before they can proceed to women-centred concerns of autonomy, female identity and selfhood. There is no "implicit challenge" to nationalist ideology as the concepts which are of major concern to African womanists are very similar to those of cultural national-ism; both propagate the development of the African family/nation as a whole, both have a holistic vision. Vambe's criticism, therefore, of Vera's failing to move away from the male-dominated ideology of cultural nationalism is unfortunate. In this writer's view, Vera's stance – while analysing it wearing African womanist blinkers – is indeed one that makes this text an example of positive literature.

3 A Fusion of Feministic Ideologies in *Without a Name*

In *Nehanda*, where women are portrayed as proactive agents of their destinies and those of their community, the conflict is suggested as a result of the colonial encounter, whereas in *Without a Name* there appears to be a distinct shift in Vera's feminist consciousness as the women in the novel are depicted as victims and men as the authors of the ills that women suffer as they struggle to break free. In this text, Vera seems to move beyond the concerns of colonialism to examine violence against women within an African community. The novel appears to be largely influenced by the main tenets of African feminism. In my view, however, what distinctly comes out of this work is feminism in crisis, where, in addition to a mainly African feminist approach, which includes some elements of radical feminism, Vera seems to also highlight some fundamental aspects of African womanism. This "fusion" of feministic ideologies is achieved, on Vera's part, through the use of two narrators in the text. In addition to the main female protagonist who tells her story from within, there is also the voice of the third-person narrator, whose vision suggests a broader nationalist, feminist and historical perspective – that of Vera herself.

Vera uses the act of writing in the novel to give voice to women who have been violated and abused but are unable to speak out since "to write is to banish silence" (Vera 1994: 93), alluding to the power of the spoken word in gaining emancipation. Women's insistence on finding voice has undoubtedly been part of the agenda of female empowerment in the face of what has been seen as the constraints and limitations of traditional African life in its expectations of what a woman can and cannot do. *Without a Name* is set during the period of the Second Chimurenga in the years leading to independence in the 1980s. Although the novel focuses on gender, Vera explores Mazvita's quest for freedom in the larger context of history. Her idea of freedom occurs in a world marred by the trauma of war and distorted by the confusions of a transitional modernity that she encounters in the city. In sharp contrast to *Nehanda,* the war causes Mazvita to be cut off from the collectivity of the rural life, so that she ends up desperately wandering from country to city and back, suppressing one painful secret and unable to communicate another; the silent bundle that she carries on her back, her own nameless child whom she has killed and is going to bury ritualistically at the site of her own violation.

The most significant event in the novel is the physical and psychological rape of Mazvita by a Rhodesian soldier, similar to the rape that Zhizha suffers in *Under the Tongue* (Vera 1996). Like in the case of Zhizha, the rape is traumatising and results in the land symbolising her violation. She becomes psychologically fragmented and tries to suppress the memories of rape through silence. The rape having occurred on the land, Mazvita cannot identify with it and transfers the hatred of rapist to the land, blaming the

land for what has happened; it betrayed Mazvita by hiding a man in its midst and trapping her between itself and the soldier so that "[m]ostly she hated the land that pressed beneath her as the man moved impatiently above her" (Vera 1994: 36). Mazvita's response to her rape by the soldier is a silence which she continues to dwell in as she represses memory, and Vera emphasises that "she had to find a voice with which to speak without trying to hide from herself" (p. 86). This novel, then, places the act of rape into public discourse showing how any act of violence invades women's lives in unexpected ways, bringing irrevocable changes. The text suggests the need for women to break the conspiracy of violence and stop accepting crimes against their dignity, psyches and bodies, or regarding them as punishment for their femaleness. Rape signifies not only physical violence but also psychological torture for, as Zhuwarara (2002: 293) states, "[t]he act of rape itself is a violent and arbitrary penetration into the woman's body, proclaiming the dominance of the male and the powerlessness of the female who, in this case, has no say in the matter (p. 293). What immediately becomes apparent is that voice is crucial to Vera's conception of female autonomy and emancipation, and it is this absence of speech and its psychological consequences in individuals that is the focus of *Without a Name*. The protagonist, because of the traumatisation caused by the violent act of rape perpetrated against her, is robbed of the power to speak. From an African womanist perspective, however, the rape of Mazvita can be interpreted as a metaphor signifying colonialism's violation of the African people and their traditions as this discussion will illustrate.

Mazvita's strong feeling of being betrayed by the land can be seen to also be that of the third-person narrator – Vera herself – who, as mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, expresses a broader, nationalist and feminist view than that of her protagonist. In an interview, Vera explains that the rape and the land issue are merged because the war of independence was very much about the land. The way the land betrays Mazvita can be symbolic of the way Africa betrays traditional African life and culture by its acceptance of colonialism. This is expressed when Mazvita says that "the land had no fixed loyalties". The colonial invasion has detrimental consequences for the African sense of identity.

Although there is nothing romantic about Mubaira who is swollen with terror as the people struggle to reclaim their land, the land, even in its troubled state, embodies those things that connect the people to their selves, to each other and to their histories. True to African womanist ideology, Vera suggests that what the land offers, in opposition to the alienation of the city, is cohesion and wholeness. This is what, unfortunately, Mazvita does not realise. If the war of independence could be defined as a war about the land, then in rejecting the land, she would, in fact, be rejecting the struggle. She does not believe that she must, like Nyenyedzi, stay in the rural areas to defend the land that has betrayed her. She leaves Nyenyedzi and the land

(symbolically tied together) to seek freedom and autonomy in the city: "She felt a strong sense of her own power and authority" (Vera 1994: 14).

Vera uses a journey motive in a manner typical of most African feminist literature to illustrate Mazvita's quest for freedom. Mazvita's journey is emblematic of her psychological search. Going to the city signifies to her an assertion of this freedom. She goes there with so much hope. She is convinced that her own powers will "[c]hange the definitions of her own reality, adjust boundaries to her vision and banish limits to her progress" (p. 38). What Mazvita fails to realise at this point, however, is that individual freedom, in a situation where the nation as a whole is bound by the chains of colonial oppression, is illusory. Her own power is not enough because of the larger socio-political and historical forces at play – which are harsher than she anticipated. These characteristics of the colonial system are everywhere, both in the rural areas and in the cities because the African land has everywhere been violated. Individual freedom, however we conceive it, cannot be achieved unless and until Africans rid themselves of the oppressive and racist nature of colonial hegemony. Mazvita's "freedom" in the city is, therefore, illusive and it is this illusive nature of her freedom that causes one to interpret, in Vera's text, the feminism in crisis mentioned previously. Vera seems to be at once exploring the black feminist's need for freedom and self-assertion, in this instance represented by Mazvita, yet also alluding to the fact that the freedom of women in a colonial context can only be achieved with the freedom of the black race in general, a belief which is a strong component of African womanism. This seems to be the reason why Vera makes Mazvita return to the land, to the place where the rape occurred "to find a voice with which to speak without turning to hide from herself" (p. 58).

Within such limitations of autonomy, even the bold ceremonial act of "freedom", the killing of her child, becomes only an ambiguous climax that achieves "tremulous vision" (p. 98) yet provides no clear sense of release: "A cold stillness hugs her but deceptively her back also broke into sparkles of flames" (p. 72). This act of infanticide can be viewed from two dimensions of feminist criticism; that of radical feminism and that of African womanism. This writer will explore each closely. From a radical feminist viewpoint, because the baby prevents Mazvita from moving away from the pain of the past, it is a barrier between what she is and what she may become. "The baby had chosen her, risen above her own frailty to hinder her" (p. 87). This position is explained by Leonette who states that "[w]hereas murder is generally considered to be a crime of the individual against the society, it can be present as a symptom of society's crime against the female individual. Struggle for the control of their bodies determines the ultimate act of resistance and survival" (Muponde & Taruvinga 2003: 12). The crime against Mazvita is the rape which removed the control that she had over her body and her future. In killing her own child, Mazvita seeks to

escape from the limitations of sexuality and motherhood. It is a desperate act and one full of ambiguity.

A strong proponent of radical feminism, Firestone (1970) suggests that the specific oppression that women experience is directly related to their unique biology. Woman's reproductive function, she believes, is inherently central to her oppression, thus too is the biological family, and it is this reduction that African womanists, such as Ogundipe-Leslie contest as they do not, as elaborated in the discussion on *Nehanda,* consider motherhood or wifehood for that matter, oppressive and limiting. The radical feminist view provides sharp contrast to the conceptualisation of the importance of motherhood from an African womanist dimension. According to Firestone (1970: 9), "the sexual imbalance of power is biologically based". In this framework, the feminist revolution involves the elimination of the male privilege through the elimination of sexual distinction itself and the destruction of the biological family as the basic form of social organisation. Only then, radical feminism suggests, will woman be freed from her oppressive biology. Radical feminists would therefore argue that as a result of her unwanted pregnancy and the subsequent motherhood, Mazvita attempts to be freed from this "oppressive biology", and the infanticide is a violent act that shows a radical rejection of maternity as it works to circumscribe a woman's sexuality and identity. The child is sacrificed to the desire for freedom.

But with the child's death, does Mazvita feel any freer than on her arrival in the city? Is there any joy in this freedom of the kind that the women in *Stone Virgins* experience on Independence Day? This is the ambiguity that lies in the text, and which also provides the basis for argument from an African womanist perspective. From this view, the act of infanticide is problematic in that the philosophy itself advocates women valuing the family unit, which includes the children. As mentioned earlier, motherhood is an important aspect of the African woman's life, because, as Mazrui (quoted in Kokole 1998) states, she is a "life-creator". This act of infanticide is, therefore, unforgivable as it goes against the internal values of an African, as justice cannot be meted out on an infant's life. Vera alludes to the importance of maintaining African values because in killing her own child, Mazvita "breaks her own back, that which made her upright" (p. 35). She loses her integrity, her identity, without finding freedom. This is why she is "without a name" because her act of infanticide goes against the grain of what it means to be an African woman.

Vera here undoubtedly suggests that in adopting or bending towards Western values and ideas such as those propounded by radical feminism, the African woman may, in the process, sacrifice some essential elements that constitute her identity. There is a need, therefore, for us to be selective, in order to retain our own worth as African women, based on our cultural past. This point is further emphasised by the fact that Mazvita realises that in

killing her child, she has killed an important part of her being. She realises the futility of her act and therefore cannot easily bury her in the city. She straps her dead child on her back and returns to Mubaira, to the place where the rape was committed. This is significant because the new beginnings that she yearns for must be based on the pain of the past, just as the new grass she notices on her way back to Mubaira grows out of the grass burnt by the soldiers. As Lavelle poignantly stresses, "[i]t is only when she returns to the land from where she comes that she can redefine herself, become whole again and reclaim her name. Mazvita's sense of self was shattered after the rape, since then, until she returned home she was without a name" (Lavelle in Muponde & Taruvinga 2003: 110). Lavelle points out what African womanists believe: that freedom becomes indefinable, unattainable when new, shallow dreams are sought to replace ancient claims promised by the land that defines and unites Africans. It is only when she returns to the land from where she comes, where the rape occurred, that Mazvita can redefine herself, become whole again, and claim her name.

Although the novel seems to end in resignation, unlike the hope signalling the end of *Nehanda*, what one can daringly deduce, standing in the shoes of an African womanist, is that the failure of Mazvita's personal quest for freedom, at the height of the liberation war, is indicative of the illusory nature of individual freedom in a country where the nation itself is confined by the shackles of colonialism. There is no questioning the fact that there is a need to reshape African society so that the rules and norms are changed in order to redefine the position and role of women so that they find voice and are free. This redefinition and repositioning, however, must be positive and evolve within women not only a feminist consciousness but a nationalist one too. Only then can women push the boundaries that limit their potentialities, as Vera reveals in *Stone Virgins*, the novel to be discussed next.

4 *Stone Virgins* – Crossing the Boundaries

Stone Virgins, Vera's last novel, is particularly interesting to explore from an African womanist perspective because it signifies an obvious development and maturity in Vera's "womanist consciousness" which began with the writing of *Nehanda.* In this novel, Vera offers concrete, practical paths for women's liberation as compared to *Without a Name*. In addition to finding voice emphasised as important in *Under the Tongue*, it depicts women as enjoying freedom, in the actual sense of the word, after the attainment of a national independence that they have helped to bring about.

In this novel, Vera propagates the same cultural nationalism that she highlights in *Nehanda,* a fact that will be illustrated in the discussion of the "guerilla girls" Vera depicts; Nehanda's and the other women's roles in the

First Chimurenga are carried over to the Second Chimurenga by these girls. Significant, too, is Vera's depiction of the male characters in the novel in which she displays a maturity and compassion of the kind that was lacking in her portrayal of the incestuous father, Muroyiwa, in *Under the Tongue.* It would be easy to demonise Thenjiwe's killer, Sibaso, but Vera does not. Instead, she plunges into his scarred psyche and finds an ordinary man who went to the war idealistic and hopeful but returned a victim, feeling alienated and numb. Vera's liberal portrayal of the male protagonists in *Stone Virgins* manifests the reformist character of African womanist criticism.

As Ranger has argued (in Muponde & Taruvinga 2002: 204), a total history of Zimbabwe cannot be achieved without the history of women.

It follows then, that literature about the war should also reveal the important role that the women played in the liberation struggle. In a scenario where there is little feminist criticism in the dominantly male discourse of war, Vera takes up the challenge which she began with *Nehanda,* and in *Stone Virgins* she deals with details of war in order to facilitate the voices of women. Implicit in her creative reconstruction of the war is the central role women have played in shaping Zimbabwe's history. She delves into the experiences of women during Zimbabwe's two-decade-long liberation struggle and the ethnic violence in the 1980s, narrating the hardships, the pain, the courage of women, both those who took part in the war and those who were left behind. The women in the novel are presented not only as victims of colonialism but also as guerilla fighters fighting against the oppression of the black race, another important characteristic of the black heroine as mentioned in the introduction.

Historically, women's participation in the struggle against European domination mainly went unnoticed, despite their actual leadership in, and initiation of, the wars of resistance, a noteworthy example of such rebellion being the women's war of 1929, which involved the protests of Igbo women against British colonisers. Yet there is a disparity between the roles women occupied historically and those they are ascribed in fictional works where their contributions to struggles or rebellions are under-represented or largely ignored. This may be because of the fact that in traditional African society, fighting and defending land was considered a male business. Women were not expected to be soldiers. Mazrui in his essay "The Black Woman and the Problem of Gender: An African Perspective", emphasises this point when he says that "Africa has very rarely expected women to kill for their people" (Mazrui in Kokole 1998: 222).

Zimbabwean women, like many women elsewhere, have shown that a woman can lead, do battle, and if necessary, kill for her people. The Second Chimurenga, the war of liberation in Zimbabwe, gave young women new opportunities to negate the traditional roles and break traditional barriers in their fight for Zimbabwe as Vera reveals in *Stone Virgins*. Women's involvement in the guerilla movement meant that they became active agents

in the revolution, fighting alongside their male counterparts on all three fronts of the struggle – diplomatic, military and political. They were the men's equal partners in the transformation of the nation. According to Lyons (2005: 73), the training that men and women received was the same, work was allocated among groups regardless of gender, there was no division of labour, and women carried their own weapons. Lyons clearly highlights these experiences of the guerilla girls in her text. Demonstrating great patriotism, these women fighters, like the rest of the guerillas, recognised that their central platform was the fight against racial discrimination. National liberation of the black people of the then Rhodesia was their primary goal, as this liberation would lay the groundwork for the emancipation of women.

Not only were they fighters; the women were leaders too, a good example being that of Teurai Ropa Nhongo (Mujuru). A *Herald* edition (March 6 1981) reported on Teurai Ropa, highlighting her role as that of the heroic symbol of the African warrior. Another example is that of Margaret Dongo who, after independence, went on to become the first independent Member of Parliament (for Harare South) in Zimbabwe. These are the kind of women, the "guerilla girls" who Vera depicts in *Stone Virgins* – women who relegated their own agency as women to a position below that of their agency as nation-builders, and, with independence, moved on to explore their own potentialities. They are "the most substantial evidence of survival there is, of courage, of struggle", the struggle to fix "a broken continent" (Vera 2002: 52). Those who stayed behind, however, did not remain passive either. As mentioned in the discussion on *Nehanda,* they became "the mothers of the revolution", who fed, clothed and protected the guerilla fighters; an extension, perhaps, one may argue of their role as nurturers, but definitely their role was militarily significant. Without these "mothers", the guerillas would not have had the necessary support in the rural areas.

In *Stone Virgins*, the women who took part in the liberation war return to the village of Kezi from the bush "with a superior claim of their own. They define their world differently" (p. 49). These women are able to redefine and reposition themselves in their society because they entered the war as "fighters, simply, who pulled down every barrier and entered the bush, yes, like men" (p. 49). This image is contrary to the image of girls having been kidnapped by the "terrorists" and forced into the war, as portrayed by the Rhodesian forces in their war propaganda. What these propagandists did not know was that most of these women willingly laid down their lives for the freedom of their race. In the novel, Vera depicts them as being brave, assertive and confident, women who "do not apologize for their courage" (p. 50). And they have no reason to because theirs is a freedom they have fought for, unlike the other women in the novel who, like Mazvita, "think that freedom can be held in the hand, cupped like water, sipped like destinies" (p. 50). These guerilla girls remind one of the likes of Penda and

the other active women in Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood,* who took their destiny into their own hands by getting actively involved in the Dakar strike. They were willing to sacrifice their lives in a way that not even the men, who do not step further than Thandabantu store, would attempt. This is why these men feel ashamed when faced with the guerilla girls such that they "lower their eyes frequently" (p. 53) because "to owe a woman a destiny is more than their minds can deal with" (p. 54). It makes them feel "too inferior in some ultimate detail of existence, some risk they have not taken" (p. 55).

These guerilla girls' experiences in the war are such that their faces are "marked with unknowable places … with unquestionable sorrow around their eyes" (p. 50). In a discourse of war, predominantly thought of as a discourse of men, these women have proved their capabilities and have heroically represented themselves. They have helped to bring about independence and now can no longer be "silenced" by the oppressions of colonialism and patriarchy. In line with African womanist ideology, as nationalists who have contributed to victory in the fight for national liberation, they are able now to concentrate on woman-centred concerns and fight against inequality based on gendered differences in the new nation. The freedom fighters' clear vision of a new Zimbabwe is one that would be independent, free, democratic and economically prosperous, allowing women to cross the boundaries, seek their own emancipation, articulate their potentialities and embrace new possibilities in the manner Nonceba does by the end of the novel.

This independence signals to the women of Kezi the end of the years of "death, the years of deafness and struggle" (p. 45) and they "feel an immense pride. They burn in it" (p. 45). Freedom, a freedom not of an illusive nature like Mazvita's freedom in *Without a Name,* but a freedom that is truly theirs has come at last to the Zimbabwean nation, and they are jubilant because "[f]or years they have only learnt to wave their voices, with no hope of release, and now they can dance in the clouds" (p. 45). They plan to call their children by such names as "Happiness", "Prosperity", "True Love", "More-blessing" and "Joy" because this is what they anticipate independence will bring them. It will banish all despair and restore the nation.

The fact that the freedom these women feel brings no sense of confinement illustrates that Vera's vision has progressed somewhat from the one she shows in *Without a Name*. She depicts, what African womanists believe, that self-fulfilment, self-identity and freedom comes only with the freedom of the nation, and highlights the fact that with Independence, "[t]hese women are the freest women on earth, with no pretence, just joy coursing through their veins" (p. 42). The transitional period of Independence in Zimbabwe, however, devastated the hopes and aspirations of many Zimbabweans. In the novel, Vera shows how the brutality and suffering of the war of liberation resumes and takes on a new face. She poignantly describes this

period and its atrocities. One particular atrocity that is interesting from a womanist perspective is Sibaso's horrific acts perpetrated on the two sisters, Thenjiwe and Nonceba – his brutal killing of one and horrific rape and mutilation of the other.

Vera's portrayal of this "villain", however, is very liberal as mentioned previously. She depicts the Sibaso of before the war as a tough student with nationalist ideals. Inspired by his reading of Feso, which to him represents an early idealistic cultural nationalism, he willingly goes into battle for the liberation of his country. His experiences on the battlefield, however, are such that they turn him into what Ranger describes as "a hunted and haunted guerilla, a man of death" (Ranger in Muponde & Taruvinga 2003: 206). These lasting psychological effects of the war on the comrades who fought it is highlighted in the manner Vera describes the relationship of one woman with an ex-combatant in which the woman is frightened by the tortured sleep of her partner who "sleeps, but his eyes are wide open" (p. 48). What she sees when she looks at him is not only the man but his experiences of war in the circling hills of Gulati. The pain and suffering of that ordeal is registered on his face. Vera seems to deliberately expose us to this relationship first in order to prepare the reader's mind before encountering Sibaso and his horrific acts. Already, she begins to set the scenario of Sibaso, an ex-combatant, a victim of the war; this same image is highlighted by Hove in *Red Hills of Home* and Kanengoni in *Echoing Silences*. Understanding this ensures that the reader does not readily condemn Sibaso's actions, although obviously we cannot condone them. The liberation war, although giving birth to Independence, created men and women who were physically, emotionally and psychologically scarred. It left not only death and destruction but also deep lacerations in the psyches of those directly involved in it. Both the dead and those who survived sacrificed their lives for the liberation of the country because those left alive have to live with the memory, the pain, the suffering and the trauma of the war. Some are lucky and are able to put the experiences behind them, but others, like Sibaso, continue to live in their terror long after the war has ended.

The consequences of the war on Sibaso are such that his mind, and part of his humanity perhaps, die in the war. As Vera delves into his mind, we see a man who has begun to lose his sense of self, his identity: "My name is Sibaso … it is an easy task to forget a name. Other names are assumed, temporarily, like grief, in a war you discard names like old resemblances …." (p. 73). His mind reveals a delirious torture and darkness within, the loneliness of a man whose fascination with spiders seems a necessary part of keeping himself sane. He is left in a situation of such turmoil that "[w]hen he stands, his head hits against something heavy – he discovers that history has a ceiling …. He cannot escape, he is an embodiment of time (pp. 74-75). Bearing in mind Fanon's discourse in "On Violence" (1963) in which he states that the violently destructive nature of colonialism breeds

counter-violence, this writer would agree with Ranger's conclusion that "Sibaso too is a victim of history, shaped by history for murderous violence" (Ranger in Muponde & Taruvinga 2003: 212). The consequences of this war, this past, haunts him in the present as he tries to hide in the hills of Gulati as "Independence is the compromise to which I could not belong" (Vera 2002: 69). He has no home to return to, no family. It is this past that comes to his mind even as he performs the brutal and horrendous acts of decapitating Thenjiwe, then raping and mutilating Nonceba. His idealist quest for liberation culminates for him, not in the joy of independence and freedom, but as "scars inflicted before dying, betrayals before a war, after a war, during a war" (p. 71).

Vera's deliberate presentation of these brutal acts in such poetic language is explained so clearly by Hunter (in *Feminist Africa Issue* 2002) that it is necessary to quote her at length:

> The point of representation of a man such as Sibaso seems to be that, although severely damaged, he is still human and not a monster. The rhythmic repetitiveness of phrases, as Sibaso kills and rapes, conveys what the narrator elsewhere states, that soldiers like him enact their brutalities with purpose "in a ceremony of their own" (*Stone Virgins* p. 160). Eventually, incapable of achieving ecstasy through a blend of passion with tenderness and respect, they repeatedly seek to recapture the experience of transcendence through ritually, but profoundly, inflicting pain and death. Horror is therefore one appropriate response to the passages in which Sibaso kills and rapes, but pity for the perpetrator is another.
>
> (Hunter 2002: 19)

As the rest of the novel alternates between a woman's struggle to heal and her attacker's story, Vera presents Sibaso through his own voice so as to provide the testimony of a human being who has sacrificed himself for his ideals and has suffered extreme mental and bodily pain. The element of the tragic Vera presents here reminds one of Shakespeare's Othello, but rather than being a victim of love, Sibaso is a victim of war and instead of loving too well, he cannot love at all! As he states himself, "I am an instrument of war. I lose all sight of pity towards myself" (p. 8); but the reader is forced to reserve some pity for him. He is a victim of the powerful colonial legacy, as the war has left him with no connection to custom, memory or other human beings.

After the murder of Thenjiwe and her rape and mutilation, Nonceba is left mute. "A voice dying" (p. 82). Like Mazvita and Zhizha in Vera's other texts, the experience leaves her in silence, "without words" (p. 82). Nonceba, however, is determined to "restore her own mind, healing it in segments, in sound" (p. 82). She struggles to heal; a healing that is possible as symbolised by the marula tree which represents the capacity for memory. It is memory that is necessary for healing both the individual and the nation

so that regeneration can take place. This healing also comes through Cephas because with his help, Nonceba is able to "start again, to plant hope and banish despair, to be restored" (p. 82) with the changes that Independence brings to the city of Bulawayo. In Cephas, Vera reveals how man's willingness for change and cooperation with women opens the door to the fundamental transformation of gender relations. Like most African womanist literature, Vera depicts in Cephas a man not as woman's enemy but as her ally.

Cephas is a historian who works at the National Museum, a vocational choice that seems deliberate on Vera's part as he helps Nonceba, allowing her space and silence. He does what he knows best: restoration. Restoration not only of Nonceba, but of the nation as a whole signified by the fact that he has been commissioned to rebuild beehive huts at Lobengula's old kraal, suggesting that "[a] new nation needs to restore the past" (p. 165). The kind of past that Vera celebrated at the start of the novel – the comings and goings in the store, the children playing in the dry river bed – everything "communal" (p. 118). As Chiwome and Mguni (2003) suggest "[t]his vision of regeneration offers signposts to greater freedom and new possibilities of identity for men and women" (p. 69). Some measure of healing comes from a man who, unlike Sibaso, aims to reconstruct history instead of destroy it and believes that a "new nation needs to restore the past" (p. 153). Although his character is not developed, his mission echoes one of the book's central themes: that somehow, in the face of war and destruction, some things endure. The novel suggests that Zimbabwe may yet survive, like the stone virgins that have outlived the years of devastation and loss of the war. The Nonceba we see at the end of the novel is one who is "Happy. Free. A new path had been opened for her, she will meet other people at work, build new friendships, have colleagues, discover qualities of her own" (Vera 2002: 156). New spaces and possibilities have opened for her and she is able to explore her potential.

Vera's vision in this text, as revealed by this article, seems most definitely that of an African womanist, as highlighted by the analysis of her images, themes and characters. This discussion has alluded to her voice as a cultural nationalist, and has revealed her depiction of man not as the "other", the enemy, but as a victim too of the war (Sibaso) and a partner a woman can depend on in her search for independence and freedom (Cephas). In addition, it has indicated Vera's exploration of the new avenues and possibilities open to women in an independent nation, as seen through Nonceba. Last but not least, Vera ends her novel with a suggestion of hope and optimism. All these points are important characteristics of African womanist literature. In *Stone Virgins*, therefore, there is no doubt that Vera – knowingly or unknowingly – propagates the philosophy of this school of thought.

5 Conclusion – The Marriage between Feminism and Nationalism

As discussed in the introduction, the birth of feminist literary criticism was vital as a consequence of the male-dominated literary tradition. Western feminism, however, does not adequately represent the African situation because it dismisses the complexities and diversities of various women's lives in projecting a false homogeneity that is just as oppressive as the structures feminists are attempting to combat. The struggles and political priorities of African women should be considered within socio-historic, cultural and economic contexts. African society, even in its most Western-ised, modern forms, places the values of the group or family unit over those of the individual. The notion of an African feminist, therefore, almost seems a contradiction in terms. This inherent paradox generated by feminism was significant in leading to several African women writers creating their own terms, one of which is African womanism, the guiding philosophy of this article.

It is important, therefore, in this conclusion, to reiterate that African feminist ideology should be steeped in the particularities of African women and that African tradition need not be inherently restrictive. These are the reasons why this writer believes that African womanism is of paramount importance to today's African modern woman and why this article was written. African womanism is a philosophy which focuses on consensus, compromise and cooperation between the sexes for the good of the development of the African nation as a whole. Its vision is holistic. Vera's texts confirm, what African womanists believe, that African women should place the value of the group or family unit over those of the individual. Communalism is an essential part of our heritage, which is not an entirely bad thing as this provides us with a solid support system. Also, modernisation need not necessarily mean the loss of African identity on the part of the African woman. Our feminist aspirations need not be confrontational, nor cause conflict with our communally bred sense of self. Let us select what is good and progressive from Western feminist ideology in order to adjust our cultural roles, discarding that which would have an adverse effect on our operations within a family or communal unit. It is with this perspective in mind that this writer has explored Vera's consciousness in the same manner in which she steps into Sibaso's mind, in order to determine the feminist ideology or ideologies that have influenced her vision.

The discussion shows that the texts studied in this article incorporate some of the essential aspects of African womanism. It would not be presumptuous, then, for this writer to conclude that in these texts Vera's feminist vision is largely influenced by the conceptual framework of African womanism. Knowingly or through implication, she promotes the need for the African woman to have, at the centre of her consciousness, the

communal elevation of the family. In such a context, mutual cohesion is as important as gender empowerment. African womanism does not imply that women should stop fighting for parity. What it highlights is that the struggle for gender empowerment must take into consideration our own socio-historic context and try to achieve the type of society which Sanday (1996: 93) describes as one in which "[a]lthough the sexes may not perform the same duties, or have the same privileges, each is, nonetheless, indispensable to the activities of the other and the sexes have access to balanced power spheres" (Sanday 1996: 93).

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