

Suns of the *Mbira*: A Critical Exploration of the  
Multiple Figurations of Femininity in Selected  
Fiction by Tsitsi Dangarembga and Yvonne Vera

by

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## Declaration

I, Tendai Marima, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy in the department of English and Comparative Literature at Goldsmiths, University of London, is wholly my own work unless otherwise acknowledged and referenced. This document has not been submitted for qualification at any other academic institution.

Signed

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30 March 2011

## Abstract

My thesis is that multiple figurations of femininity challenging traditional Zimbabwean values are articulated in the representations of womanhood, motherhood and sexuality in the writing of Tsitsi Dangarembga (1959-) and Yvonne Vera (1964-2005). Critically, I draw centrally upon Rosi Braidotti (1994) and Donna Haraway's (1992; 2004) work on figurations as feminist metaphors theorizing how women challenge and transform socially constructed roles that confine females to subservient social positions. In addition, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's (1987) theorization of multiplicity is deployed as a useful conceptualization of the erasure of the binary separating the collective and individual, asserting instead, that subjectivities are pluralistic, connected identities in constant creation.

Applying the critics' ideas with due caution to the African context, through a method of 'carnivalizing,' mixing and negotiating theory, my thesis also makes use of selected forms of African feminist theory, to give the necessary cultural context to Zimbabwean femininity. I critically engage with scholarly work that theorizes African women's historiography and negotiations of power and knowledge. Combining these diverse feminist and post-structuralist voices together with views expressed in the writing, I aim to produce a nuanced reading of the plurality of femininity so that a pattern of simultaneously complimentary and contradictory relations with feminist paradigms of African womanhood begins to emerge as key to interpreting the selected fiction.

My thesis develops in three chapters, beginning with an examination of how rebellious women negotiate the domestic, private world culturally assigned to females. I explore how Vera's unconventional figurations of motherhood undo the cultural and political mores placed on women by essentialist patriarchal and racial ideologies. Further analyzing dissenting femininities, I investigate subversive textual constructions of same-sex relationships in Vera and Dangarembga's fiction. My readings suggest that some of the ideological contradictions between theory and text provide fertile conditions in which to rethink radical femininities as figurations within African feminism. I propose new, progressive strategies for reading womanhood, and exploring the polyphonic and complex nature of colonial and post-independence Zimbabwean femininity, as expressed in the novels.

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Introduction: Thinking Through Theory – Framing  
Cyborgs, Figurations  
and Feminisms

## Thinking Through Theory – Framing Cyborgs, Figurations and Feminisms

This thesis explores the multiple<sup>1</sup> figurations of femininity portrayed in the selected fiction of contemporary Zimbabwean women writers, Tsitsi Dangarembga (1959-)<sup>2</sup> and Yvonne Vera (1964-2005).<sup>3</sup> My central concerns are the novelistic representations of femininity, motherhood and sexuality. Drawing on the theories of various African<sup>4</sup> feminist and European scholars, I propose to argue that the defining characteristics of female identity<sup>5</sup> are not fixed in biological, historical or cultural ideologies as some essentialist traditional and colonialist perspectives encountered in the texts, might suggest.

The convergence of diverse theoretical perspectives from Africa, Europe and the Caribbean, relating to gender, race, sexuality and identity, within this literary project, provides a framework for reading the woman-subject

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<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's (1987) notion of 'multiplicity' is further discussed below.

<sup>2</sup> Tsitsi Dangarembga. *Nervous Conditions*, Harare: College Press, 1988. *The Book of Not*, London: Ayebia Clarke, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Yvonne Vera. *Nehanda* (1992), *Without a Name* (1994) *Under the Tongue* (1996), *Butterfly Burning* (1998) all published by Baobab Books: Harare.

<sup>4</sup> In this thesis African is used to refer to people of African descent unless where specific reference is made otherwise.

<sup>5</sup> I use the terms identity and subjectivity synonymously although I am aware there is a distinction between the two terms as Casper Hoedemakers (2007) makes clear when he states, 'identity functions to position the self within the context of social interaction, subjectivity can productively be seen as the vehicle that makes this positioning possible, as well as providing a mode of reflecting upon this identity. Subjectivity is what provides the condition for selfhood, both making it possible and limiting its potential directions.' p. 12 in *Performance Pinned Down: A Lacanian Analysis of Subjectivity at Work* ERIM, Erasmus University Rotterdam, 2008 <http://publishing.eur.nl/ir/repub/asset/10871/EP2008121ORG9058921567Hoedemaekers.pdf> [date accessed: 25 November 2009].

as a figure of dissent in the colonial and post-independent Zimbabwean worlds of the texts. Anorexia/bulimia,<sup>6</sup> abortion, prostitution and infanticide are some of the acts by the women characters in response to their challenging socio-economic and political conditions. Perhaps this paraphrased comment from Clare Denis's (2010) film<sup>7</sup> of Franz Fanon's (1986) position on the reasons for dissent by colonized people crystallizes what my thesis is trying to say about the portrayal of women as rebel figures in these novels. One of Denis's characters states that, 'When we revolt, it's not for a particular culture. We revolt simply because, for many reasons, we can no longer breathe.'<sup>8</sup> While the original Fanon reference in *Peau Noire Masques Blancs (Black Skin White Masks)* may have been referring to the suffocation that forces colonized people to publicly rebel against the state, the figuring of private acts of rebellion and dissent in Vera and Dangarembga's writing engenders Fanon towards the imagining of an anti-colonial feminism because the novels highlight the severity of cultural patriarchy and colonialism. For example, in *Butterfly Burning* (1998) women are systematically prevented from decent employment and suffocated by controlling, cheating male lovers and this leads to the orphaned protagonist choosing between life and death, in resistance to the multiple political, economic and personal oppressions she feels. Phephelaphi 'can no longer breathe' in impoverished 'Makokoba [that] is

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<sup>6</sup> Nyasha suffers from both anorexia and bulimia and this partly, leads to her nervous breakdown.

<sup>7</sup> *35 Shots of Rum*, (French: *35 Rhums*) Soudaine Compagnie, Pandora Filmproduktion, France, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> This is a paraphrasing of Fanon's sentiments in the closing chapter (Chapter 8) of *Peau Noire Masques Blancs* (1994), See movie review by Cynthia Fuchs. '35 Shots of Rum (35 Rhums)' *PopMatters*, 7 January, 2010. <http://www.popmatters.com/pm/review/118587-35-shots-of-rum-35-rhums/> [date accessed: 17 March 2010].

unkind to women' (106), and so she aborts her baby and later takes her own life.

For portraying women's nonconformity in such shocking ways, Vera is often described as a 'taboo writer.'<sup>9</sup> Depicted as abortionists, baby killers and abandoners, Vera's women characters show an acute awareness of the social trappings of motherhood and a distrust of intimate relationships. These images of women overturn commonly-held cultural views on mothers as subservient and loving nurturers; while at the political level, Vera's exploration of the complex relationships between men and women, women and the colonial state, reveal how acts of taboo function as a strong critique of power. In *Without a Name* (1994) and *Butterfly Burning*, Vera's characters defy the limitations imposed on women's bodies through the policing of colonial territories and the racial demarcation of boundaries.

Using the critical tools of multiplicity, figurations, cyborgs and anthropological evidence of African same-sex practices, I intend to develop a reading strategy adequately suited to understanding the various representations of the body in times of colonialism and war. I hope to offer crucial insight into the material circumstances of colonization, war and poverty, shaping women's precarious choices, such as whether to strangle one's baby (*Without a Name*), to abandon one's child or to abort a

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<sup>9</sup> See essays by V. B Lunga, (2002), R. Primorac, (2002) L. Attree, (2002), T.O. Ranger, (2002) and M. Samuelson, (2002) all in *Sign and Taboo: Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera*, Robert Muponde & Mandi Taruvinga. (Eds.), Harare: Weaver Press, 2002.

foetus and commit suicide (*Butterfly Burning*). Although these are unconventional life and death decisions, I argue that abortion, abandonment and suicide are acts of agency, an expression of extreme resistance against the intersecting oppressions of gender, class and race.<sup>10</sup>

This thesis envisions a twofold development that includes firstly, a critique of the dominant social constructions of femininity and secondly the proposition of an alternative model of reading African womanhood. To fruitfully examine the ways in which the texts 'give voice' to African subaltern identities, my thesis offers an integrated approach to both text and theory, citing connections and disconnections when fictional and critical texts enter into conversation with each other and with the diverse body of theory framing this project.

Drawing on the work of Caribbean literary critic and writer, Joan Anim-Addo (2007), in *Touching the Body*<sup>11</sup> I find an argument strongly in favor of a pluralistic theoretical approach to interpret the multiple meanings embedded in Black women's writing. In this text on Caribbean literary criticism, Anim-Addo uses the term carnivalizing theory to stress that, 'Carnivalized discourse juxtaposes critical perspectives which combined together seek to release a range of meanings about the creolized text.'<sup>12</sup>

Defining the term carnival, she writes:

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<sup>10</sup> Kimberlie Crenshaw qtd in Patricia Hill Collins. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment: Perspectives on Gender* 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990.

<sup>11</sup> Joan Anim-Addo. *Touching the Body: History, Language & African Caribbean Women's Writing*, London: Mango Publishing, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p. 7.

African-heritage peoples in the Caribbean... have developed a tradition characterized by *initiation, imitation and transformation of European practice* in a process of assertion of difference, articulation of social criticism.<sup>13</sup>

Carnival as a cultural expression connecting the Caribbean to Africa and Europe, functions as a metaphor in Anim-Addo's criticism as reflective of the historical connectedness of these three places. Her ideas are influenced by Antonio Benitez-Rojo's (1992; 1996) work on carnivalizing theory which is a critical exploration of the genealogical, geographic, literary and cultural connection of the Caribbean islands to the former colonial metropolises of Europe. Anim-Addo argues that this carnivalized relationship is reflected in the Caribbean novel:

African-Caribbean women writers, in negotiating the written text, enter also a syncretised space. I am proposing that the Creole text which results is a complex product demanding of critical reading sensitised to the social historical and cultural mix out of which it was forged.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, I would argue that Zimbabwean<sup>15</sup> modernity, marked by 17<sup>th</sup> Century Portuguese trade and colonization<sup>16</sup> as well as British settlement as the historic circumstances out of which a written culture emerged, places Western Europe in permanent relation to Southern Africa. Languages, identities, philosophies and cultural practices are constantly appropriated and fused in theory and knowledge-making processes that may be described as carnivalized. This hybridized state of theory and

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 229 (emphasis added).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> In this thesis the term Rhodesia is hardly used partly because Rhodesia no longer exists and also because as Caroline Rooney (2007) explains, the act of colonization by the settler Self is automatically and simultaneously an act of resistance and re-possession by the native Other. Rooney notes that, 'the appropriation of land that constituted Rhodesia [was] instantaneously the act that constituted Zimbabwe for Zimbabweans' in *Decolonising Gender: Literature and a Poetics of the Real*, London: Routledge, 2007. p. 126.

<sup>16</sup> See T.H. Elkiss *The Quest for an African Eldorado: Sofala, Southern Zambezia, and the Portuguese, 1500-1865*. Waltham, Massachusetts: Crossroads Press, 1981. p. 16.

culture lends authority to my attempt to draw on theories and parallel social practices from around the world to find other ways<sup>17</sup> of examining the conditions of colonized<sup>18</sup> Zimbabwean women.

Further to this, carnivalizing theory by juxtaposing high French theory with indigenous Shona knowledge to read Vera's *Nehanda* for example, makes an effort toward deconstructing the dominance and privilege that White Western discourse has often been afforded as the singular authoritative theoretical voice. The dismantling of privilege a key motivating factor in Anim-Addo's carnivalizing. In taking a synthesized critical approach, I seek to not only critique and repudiate the notion of African as Other, but in borrowing theory from many places, I intend to show what fresh understandings can be gained of Zimbabwean femininity.

'Multiplicity' is an idea developed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987) that elaborates on Edmund Husserl<sup>19</sup> and Henri Bergson's<sup>20</sup> philosophical interpretations of Riemann's mathematical concept. Proposed by Deleuze and Guattari, multiplicity is a movement away from thinking of 'the One and the Multiple' (1986: 14) as diametrical opposites.

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<sup>17</sup> While postcolonial theory provides a useful framework through which to understand the expressions of femininity and the experience of colonialism in the work of Dangarembga and Vera, as other critics have done (see Literature Review section of Introduction), my thesis attempts to break from this tradition and find other untested, creolised methods of reading the texts.

<sup>18</sup> The concept of the colonial state and colonialism in this thesis are used to refer to the imperial domination of Zimbabwe by the British, with a primary interest in the relations between individual/collective and the colonial state while the relation between individual- colonial state - British Empire is a background concern. When examining how the women characters interact with the state, I consider the impact of government institutions on traditional culture and political subjectivity of the women in the texts.

<sup>19</sup> *Philosophy of Arithmetic*. trans. Dallas Willard, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, [1891] 2003.

<sup>20</sup> *Time and Free Will, an essay on the immediate data of consciousness (Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* 1889), Dover: Dover Publications, 2001.

As a concept, multiplicity seeks to undo this classic dichotomy by suggesting that everything is multiple, even the ‘One is a multiple.’ (14)

Deleuze writes:

Multiplicity remains completely indifferent to the traditional problems of the multiple and the one, and above all to the problem of a subject who would think through this multiplicity, give it conditions, account for its origins, and so on. There is neither one nor multiple, which would at all events entail having recourse to a consciousness that would be regulated by the one and developed by the other.<sup>21</sup>

In other words, the distinction between the one and the multiple is redundant, as is the binary of individual and collective. Such an ideological assertion is an attempt to re-imagine the individual and collective as always and already connected and heterogeneous entities. In my reading of Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* (1988), I attempt to show how the divide between the individual and collective is made obsolete through Dangarembga’s reinvention of the individual *bildungsroman* into a collective *bildung* narrative. *Nervous Conditions* is the stories of four women woven into one multi-layered *bildung* which, as discussed in the following Chapters in this thesis, uses the collective structure of the Shona family as its novelistic framework. This communal story-telling style is one example illustrating how even at the level of textual structure, ‘the multiple’ might be thought of as ‘the one’ as Deleuze and Guattari suggest.

My use of the concept of multiplicity is only up to a point because I am primarily concerned with how bodies and identities are socially constructed by historical circumstance, race and sex and Deleuze and

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<sup>21</sup> Gilles Deleuze. *Foucault*, trans, Sean Hand, London: Athlone, [1986] 1988. p. 14.

Guattari's ideas on multiplicity are not very developed in that regard. Instead, Braidotti and Haraway's theoretical concepts of the figuration and the cyborg are substantially thought out, particularly in the domain of how bodies and identities are socially technologically constructed by history and culture, not predetermined by science and political hegemony. With these specific concerns in mind, my understanding of figurations concerned with feminism and subjectivity, is that figuring is a theorizing of images depicting women transgressing and transforming socially constructed roles that confine them to subservient social positions. As a theoretical tool, figurations explore how the 're-imagining of women'<sup>22</sup> is made possible through writing. Critiquing humanism from a feminist standpoint in the essay 'Ecce Homo, Ain't (Ar'n't) I a Woman, and Inappropriate/d Others',<sup>23</sup> Donna Haraway (1992) argues that historical discourses are 'in crisis' (86) because of the imperialist legacy upon which the modern human and humanity is conceived. She urges a re-writing and rethinking of these concepts through the feminist figuration which:

is about resetting the stage for possible pasts and futures. Figuration is the mode of theory when the more "normal" rhetorics of system-analysis seem only to repeat and sustain our entrapment in the stories of the established disorders.<sup>24</sup>

Intent on undoing humanism's traditional assignation of women to a second or third-class status as human beings, Haraway's treatise on feminist figurations is presented as a strategy to write new histories in which all women, regardless of class or race, are considered historicized figures with political and cultural agency. In this study, I appropriate

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<sup>22</sup> Rosi Braidotti. *Nomadic subjects: Embodiment and sexual difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, p.5.

<sup>23</sup> 'Ecce Homo, Ain't (Ar'n't) I a Woman, and Inappropriate/d Other': The Human in a Post Humanist Landscape' in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, Judith Butler & Joan W. Scott, (Eds.) London & New York: Routledge, 1992. pp. 86-100.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* p. 86.

Haraway's metaphor to read Dangarembga and Vera's acts of writing as a way of constructing new historical figures of Zimbabwean femininity that challenge the silencing and dehumanizing of African women by patriarchs and imperialists.

For Rosi Braidotti (1994), the figuration is a metaphor central to her theorization of the female nomad. According to Braidotti:

Feminist figurations refer to the many heterogeneous images feminist use to define the becoming-subject of women, a view of feminist subjectivity as a multiplicity and process as well as the kind of texts feminists produce.<sup>25</sup>

An evolution from Deleuze and Guattari's work on becoming and the nomad,<sup>26</sup> Braidotti formulates the figuration, 'to think through and move across established categories and levels of experience: blurring boundaries without burning bridges.' (1994: 4) Braidotti perceives women as nomadic subjects moving freely or resisting social boundaries and hierarchies that proscribe notions of inferior positioning on the basis of gender. She makes the point that a figuration is useful to, 'explore and legitimate political agency, while taking as historical evidence the decline of metaphysically fixed, steady identities.'<sup>27</sup> The theorization of resistance to fixed identity through woman-centred acts lends itself to my

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<sup>25</sup> 'Toward a new nomadism: feminist Deleuzian tracks: or metaphysics and metabolism' in *Deleuze and Guattari: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers* Gary Genosko (Ed.), London: Routledge, 2001. pp. 1414-1439.

<sup>26</sup> The nomadic way of life is characterized by movement across space which defies the rigid geo-political boundaries of the State. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari explain, 'The nomad has a territory; he follows customary paths; he goes from one point to another; he is not ignorant of points (water points, dwelling points, assembly points, etc.)' (1987: p. 380) By migrating according to one's needs rather than the dictates of the State – such as zoning restrictions, passports, visas etc - the nomad is able to exist outside of the State structure and is able to cross national and local borders in spite of regulations.

<sup>27</sup> Rosi Braidotti. *Nomadic subjects: Embodiment and sexual difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994. p. 5.

research as a critical lens to explore how the diverse subjectivities of fictional women function as symbolic figurations of Zimbabwean women's opposition to the hegemonic processes of gendered identity construction that mark women as docile and subservient.

Both Haraway and Braidotti's treatises on figurations express a strong intent to find new ways of critically exploring subjectivity that break from the historically determined discursive positions that continue to produce the same, fixed perspective. In their respective works, these feminist thinkers theorize figurations as a way of understanding the interpolations between power, knowledge, identity, technology, bodies and science, and in my literary project, I borrow significantly from their work on figurations to explore how alternative histories and subjectivities are constructed through the processes of writing and representation of women's experiences in my analysis of the texts.

In addition, to help examine the positioning of women in the modern colonial state, the concept of the cyborg is particularly useful. Developed as a feminist concept by Haraway, the cyborg is a metaphor to show how the boundary between humans and technology is often blurred. In the *Cyborg Manifesto* (1991) Haraway argues that the concept of being human is constantly changing in line with developments in technology, as aids like prosthetic limbs and contact lenses become essential parts of the human body and its functioning. Haraway's cyborg, a part-human and part-machine creature, thus seeks to erase socially constructed binaries

that divide machine from human. Extended to gender, the cyborg breaks away from heteronormative codes defining sexuality and gender and although Haraway declares that the cyborg is post-gender and 'has no truck with bisexuality,'<sup>28</sup> I argue that the blurring, crossing and deconstruction of sex/gender boundaries by trans and bi-sexual identities is symbolic of what the cyborg aims to do which is to be a non-categorised figure. In my reading of subversive same-sex and bi-sexuality in Vera and Dangarembga's novels, I adapt Haraway's notion of the cyborg, with limitation, as it is a useful way of understanding how transgressive sexualities are constructed in the texts. Using Haraway and Braidotti in very specific ways, I try to argue that the metaphors of the cyborg and figuration provide different, new ways of reading African femininity and also alternative, albeit experimental ways of developing feminist thought in Africa.

In order to further strengthen and legitimize my reading of the texts as portraying alternative figurations of Zimbabwean womanhood, I draw on my 'insider knowledge'<sup>29</sup> as a Zimbabwean woman of Shona ethnicity with intimate knowledge of the historical settings of the texts and the cultural symbols deployed, particularly in Vera's writing. Sandra Harding<sup>30</sup> in her insightful explanation of standpoint theory argues there is

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<sup>28</sup> Donna Haraway. *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century*, New York: Routledge, 1991. p. 150.

<sup>29</sup> An insider perspective that emerged in the 1970s as critical term used in articulating standpoint theory which is a critical feminist position on the production of knowledge and power that privileges lived experience as discursive knowledge. The work of Patricia Hill Collins (1994, 1989) on insider standpoint lends itself significantly in constructing my theoretical framework and shall be expanded upon below.

<sup>30</sup> Sandra Harding. 'Introduction' in *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader Intellectual & Political Controversies* S. Harding (Ed.), London: Routledge, 2004. p. 3.

no single standard of validity for different competing knowledge systems, but there are some social situations from which knowledge can be better transmitted than others. My 'insider position', thus, seeks to advance a sensitized reading of the cultural encoding in the texts that affirm traditional rites of womanhood as a marker of difference and plurality. It also allows for an analysis of processes within Shona and Ndebele culture that critics without this background, might misread or gloss over. I hope that my personal knowledge will give the reader a more intimate understanding of Zimbabwean culture and history as represented in the writing.

Further to this, at particular points in my thesis, I engage with specific variations of African feminist/womanist theory to discuss issues of motherhood and sexuality in the texts because they offer a theorization of the realities of African women with an acute awareness of the everyday in the public and private sphere. The selected feminist/womanist ideologies offer insight on similar themes explored in the texts such as how women negotiate tradition and modernity or react to prevailing cultural perceptions of the female body, this provides an opportunity to engage with some of the differences and similarities in feminist/womanist ideologies and the figurations of Zimbabwean women in fiction. Such discussion aims to reveal how simple or radical acts by women in opposition to patriarchal and colonial systems of dominance all constitute acts of African feminism.

Clenora Hudson-Weems (2004) articulates a brand of womanism called Africana womanism that places culture as central to the concerns of African women and as fundamental in their social transformation and empowerment. Hudson-Weems writes that:

An ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is foregrounded in African culture, and therefore, it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, need and desires of African women. It critically addresses the dynamics of the conflict between mainstream feminist, the black feminist, the African feminist and the Africana womanist.<sup>31</sup>

Hudson-Weems follows in the tradition of womanists, Alice Walker (1982) and Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (1984) who, in the absence of a suitable feminist articulation of Black women's experiences, proposed their versions of feminism called womanism and African womanism, respectively.

Ogunyemi in theorizing African womanism is of the view that the colonial encounter was responsible for a paradigmatic shift in African gender relations. Arguing in favour of a womanist perspective on Black male female relations grounded in culture, Ogunyemi states that:

Womanism is a philosophy that celebrates roots, the ideals of Black life. It concerns itself with the world power structure that subjugates blacks. Its ideal is for Black unity, where every Black person has a modicum of power and so can be a "brother" or a "sister", or a "father" or a "mother" to the other.<sup>32</sup>

As a theory located within literary criticism, Ogunyemi sees African women's writing as key to retrieving a philosophical, historic and cultural subjectivity of Black people where people are united across lines of gender in a common struggle. African culture-centred approaches to

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<sup>31</sup> *Africana Womanist Literary Theory*, Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, 2004.

<sup>32</sup> 'Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English', in *Revising the Word and the World: Essays in Feminist Literary Criticism*, VeVe A. Clark, Ruth-Ellen B. Joeres & Madelon Sprengnether. (Eds.), Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993. p. 24.

feminism(s) such as this shed light, to an extent, on the feminist/womanist<sup>33</sup> actions in the novels. At times there is tension between text and womanist theory as some articulations of African feminist theory are grounded in African culture and endorse the hetero-normative bias that motherhood is a natural choice for all women at all times. For example, Mary M. Kolawole's (1997) definition of African womanhood is:

[it] focuses on positive collectivity as opposed to individuality. It also endorses the overt manifestation of womanhood and motherhood with no apology...marriage and family values and assertion of feminine outlook are important canons of African womanhood.<sup>34</sup>

In contrast some of the protagonists in Vera's novels do not reflect Kolawole's canonized womanhood; their anomalous acts of mothering such as abortion and infanticide re-figure the maternal body as a site of anti-colonial resistance. In the Chapter on motherhood, I further discuss the contradictions between theory and text, but for now I turn my attention to the work of critics who have written on Dangarembga and Vera who inform the corporeal and cultural strategy of reading Zimbabwean femininity that I develop in this thesis.

## Literature Review

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<sup>33</sup> In this thesis feminism is used interchangeably with womanism when referring to African feminism(s).

<sup>34</sup> *Womanism and African Consciousness*, Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, 1997. p.197.

Much of the published criticism on the selected authors has appeared as collections of essays, as chapters in larger works and journal articles. The development of this canon of criticism might be said to be piecemeal, although steady in output. On Vera, *Sign and Taboo*<sup>35</sup> and *Tales of the Nation*<sup>36</sup> are the only published collection of essays and critical perspectives that concentrate solely on Vera's novelistic opus while for Dangarembga, despite the many international and local perspectives on her 1988 novel; there is only *Negotiating the Postcolonial: Emerging Perspectives on Tsitsi Dangarembga* that consolidates the wide-ranging views on Dangarembga into one text. In the absence of substantial sourcebooks on these authors, these three anthologies serve as principal critical texts in my readings of the novels. As the evolution of criticism has been somewhat scattered and most of the writing is published post-1995 to 2005, I have taken a non-chronological approach in my literature review and instead critique the articles and essays in terms of the themes I am concerned with in the writing.

I am however aware of some of the nagging critical questions concerning the literary production on both Dangarembga and Vera that neither a chronological or theme-centered review of works can offer. For example, why is it that fourteen years after *Nervous Conditions* the first published anthology of essays is produced? Why, after five award-winning novels

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<sup>35</sup> *Sign and Taboo: Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera*, Robert Muponde & Mandi Taruvinga (Eds.), Harare: Weaver Press, 2002.

<sup>36</sup> Lene Bull-Christiansen. *Research Report No. 132 Tales of the Nation: Feminist Nationalism or Patriotic History? Defining National History and Identity in Zimbabwe*, Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute, 2004.

and a short story collection, have there been only two critical texts on Vera's work published? Why is there this time lag? The answers to these questions may possibly be linked to the political and intellectual movements emerging in and about Zimbabwe, but at this present moment I treat them as lingering questions that highlight why this literary study is necessary and important because it seeks to fill a 'critical gap' in the knowledge on Vera and Dangarembga. My thesis hopes to offer a systematic reading and sustained discussion of Dangarembga and Vera's respective representations of Zimbabwean womanhood that will make a substantial contribution to the field of Zimbabwean literary criticism and in a wider sense, African feminist literary thought.

### **Critical Approaches to *Nervous Conditions***

*Nervous Conditions* was completed in 1984 and first published in 1988, by Women's Press, a feminist press based in London. For four years Dangarembga was rejected by local Zimbabwean publishers whose attitudes to her writing were that she was 'too much of a feminist.'<sup>37</sup> This is also the response of a Zimbabwean reviewer, who although sympathizing with Tambu's situation, Chigango E. Musandireve warns of the feminist undertones of the novel. The subtitle of his review in *Moto Magazine* read 'Woe unto bossy man!'<sup>38</sup> Musandireve's reading of the

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<sup>37</sup> Speaking at a reading of *The Book of Not* November, 2006, SOAS, London: University of London.

<sup>38</sup> Cited in 'Tradition, Modernity, and The Family: Reading The Chimurenga struggle into and out of *Nervous Conditions*' by Susan Andrade. pp. 25–57, qtd. p. 28 in *Emerging Perspectives on T. Dangarembga: Negotiating The Postcolonial* Anne E. Willey & Janet Treiber (Eds.) Trenton New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2002.

novel as a warning to men, resonates with the readings of local publishers who viewed the novel as an 'anti-male, feminist book'<sup>39</sup> that rebelled against tradition.

Rejected by three publishers in Zimbabwe,<sup>40</sup> Dangarembga sent her manuscript to the now inoperative Women's Press at the recommendation of a friend. She was rejected at home partly because her work was not considered educational, as Dangarembga reveals in an interview:

Part of my problem getting published in my own country was certainly commercial. Fiction, no matter by whom, hasn't a wide market in Zimbabwe; textbooks do.<sup>41</sup>

The singular focus of the book market is one of the reasons why the internationally renowned Dambudzo Marechera was rejected by Longman Press.<sup>42</sup> It was said that his work was not suitable for teaching in schools because of his use of expletives and sexually charged metaphors in criticising both the colonial and post-independence state. The decision to approve materials for publication lay in the hands of the Rhodesia Literature Bureau which until the late 1980s existed as a tool of the state thus making it impossible for writers like Dangarembga and the exiled Marerecha to get published.

The Rhodesia Literature Bureau was founded in 1959 with the main aim of sponsoring manuscripts by Black Zimbabweans. The Literature Bureau

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Introduction of *Emerging Perspectives on T. Dangarembga: Negotiating The Postcolonial* Willey & Treiber (Eds.) Trenton New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2002.

<sup>41</sup> 'The Power of the Word: Culture, Censorship and Voice', *Women's World* (website) [wworld.org/publications/powerword1/6gender.htm](http://wworld.org/publications/powerword1/6gender.htm) [date accessed: 26 September 2007].

<sup>42</sup> Flora Veit-Wild. *Dambudzo Marechera: A Source Book of His Life and Work*, New York: Hans Zell, 1992.

(renamed after independence) edited and approved work for publication through Longman, Mambo Press, College Press and Zimbabwe Publishing House. During its time, the bureau encouraged Africans to write in Shona and Ndebele and had a bias towards male writers and works free of political content.<sup>43</sup>

The Literature Bureau was inherited by the nationalist government and continued the colonial policies of gender discrimination and political censorship. Aware of the over-representation of men within the literary field, Dangarembga took it upon herself to make women's presence known as she says in an interview:

The writers in Zimbabwe were basically men at the time....And so I really didn't see that the situation would be remedied unless some woman sat down and wrote something, so that's what I did!<sup>44</sup>

In her time at the University of Zimbabwe she was a member of the Drama Club where she wrote and directed three plays,<sup>45</sup> all with a feminist theme. While Dangarembga had written these plays and *Nervous Conditions*, there were no novels by Black Zimbabwean women in English until 1988. It was only when Dangarembga achieved international success that her debut novel was finally published by College Press in Harare. Now, 22 years after its publication, this novel still dominates the Zimbabwean school curriculum.

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<sup>43</sup> Flora Veit-Wild. *Teachers, Preachers and Non-Believers: A Social History of Zimbabwean Literature*, Harare: Baobab Books, 1993.

<sup>44</sup> Jane Wilkinson. 'Tsitsi Dangarembga' *Talking with African Writers: Interviews with African Poets, Playwrights and Novelists*. London: James Currey, 1992. pp.189-198.

<sup>45</sup> *She No Longer Weeps* (pub. 1987), *The Lost of the Soil*, and *The Third One*.

With the support of the feminist Women's Press, Dangarembga's book achieved global success. There have been four editions of *Nervous Conditions* to date, its most recent being published in 2005, a year before the release of its sequel, *The Book of Not*. The American publisher, Seal Press notes that by 2002 it had sold 80, 000 copies in the United States.<sup>46</sup> With such sales figures it is considered the second most successful African book after *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe. The success of *Nervous Conditions* eclipsed the writings of other post-liberation Black Zimbabwean women writers: Nozipo Maraire (1990), Sekai Nzenza Shand (1988; 1992) and Yvonne Vera. In the school and university curriculum, internationally, *Nervous Conditions* has continued to dominate and as Treiber and Willey (2002) argue, this text has a global force within literary studies, alongside Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, that sells 100, 000 copies a year in the US alone. Achebe and Dangarembga's debut novels are among the top most widely taught African books.<sup>47</sup>

Critical feminist perspectives on *Nervous Conditions* have deployed a wide range of interdisciplinary methods of reading offering comprehensive, sometimes contentious, analyses of the fictional rural and urban experiences of colonial modernity and tradition. Exploring how women individually/collectively negotiate their identities within everyday colonial Zimbabwe, Lindsay Aegerter (1996) uses a womanist lens to suggest that *Nervous Conditions* articulates, 'a dialectic of autonomy and

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<sup>46</sup> 'Introduction' in *Negotiating the Postcolonial* Treiber & Wiley (Eds.), 2002.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

community.'<sup>48</sup> Aegerter views Tambu's identity as inextricably linked to the woman collective. Womanist theory (Walker (1982) Ogunyemi (1986)), as my research will show in greater detail, is the claim that the struggles of women of African descent are rooted to their traditions and heritage. Using Mae G Henderson's (1990) 'matrix of black female subjectivity'<sup>49</sup> coupled with Homhi Bhabha's (1986) theory of the 'dialectic' of master/slave narrative; Aegerter argues that the individual negotiates her identity through a communal outlook. Reading Nyasha and Tambu as 'dual protagonists' (1996: 235), Aegerter maps the girls' development within the cultural and colonial spaces of the novel that simultaneously include and exclude women their subjectivity.

This perspective is extremely important to my reading of *Nervous Conditions* as a collective *bildung*. Based on family kinship and the principle of interdependence, my reading borrows from Aegerter to show how the woman-centered network fuses cultural and capitalist modes of knowledge(s) in order to articulate their subjectivity. Arguing that Dangarembga's fiction presents the intersection of gender in the social settings of culture and colonial capitalism at the level of the collective experience, Julianna Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi (1997)<sup>50</sup> explores how this struggle by the collective helps to positively shape the development of the

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<sup>48</sup> 'A Dialectic of Autonomy and Community: Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Autumn, 1996), pp. 231-240.

<sup>49</sup> 'Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics and the Black Woman's Literary Tradition' in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Ed.) New York: Methuen, 1990. p.89.

<sup>50</sup> Julianna Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi. *Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity and Sexual Difference*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997.

individual. To this end, Nfah-Abbenyi contends that memory and custom play an important role in the construction of the protagonist's subjectivity. By Tambu 'remembering' her roots, while maintaining an awareness of the material benefits of formal education, the protagonist 'strikes a balance'<sup>51</sup> such that she is not 'necessarily inside or outside of these cultures, but simultaneously not quite an insider and not quite an outsider'<sup>52</sup> according to Nfah-Abbenyi. This perspective is enlightening because it focuses on the significance of the traditional roles of Shona women as storytellers and farmers as 'custodians of history.'<sup>53</sup> Further, it brings into sharp focus the culturally-centred acts of feminism(s) that I intend to highlight from my reading of the text.

Charles Sugnet (1997) develops an argument on the novel's depiction of feminism(s) and anti-colonial nationalism which further aids my reading of the feminist and historicized consciousness of the woman collective in this novel. As other critics have done, Sugnet uses Fanon as a conceptual lens, but I am specifically concerned with his view of how Dangarembga treats Nyasha and Maiguru as feminist characters. He makes the contentious observation, 'Nyasha the anorexic/bulimic, and Maiguru, the unhappy "Superwoman" demonstrate that Western feminism cannot provide a simple "liberation" for Tambudzai.'<sup>54</sup> This view is problematic because it assumes that the characters practice a form of radical Western

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* p. 24.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* p.28.

<sup>54</sup> 'Nervous Conditions: Dangarembga's Feminist Reinvention of Fanon' in *The Politics of (M)Othering: Womanhood, Identity and Political Resistance in African Literature*, Obioma Nnameka (Ed.), London and New York: Routledge, 1997. pp. 33-49.

feminism(s) on the basis of their experience in the West. Ironically Nyasha is bound up in a struggle to find her roots while Maiguru diplomatically negotiates her cultural roles of wife, in-law and educated woman. Sugnet misinterprets how these women articulate their identities in making a comparison to Western women, whereas my thesis looks at the actions of Nyasha and Maiguru from an African feminist and Zimbabwean perspective. I argue that while Nyasha's behaviour may be considered uncultural and presents a challenge to dominant African feminist ideas on the body shape and femininity, Maiguru's behaviour is in sync with how African women strategically articulate their feminism.

In addition to redressing the cultural imbalance of women, Dangarembga's novel also weaves gender dynamics into the discourse of the nation and Kwadwo Osei-Nyame Jnr's (1999), 'The 'Nation' between the 'Genders',<sup>55</sup> best explores this novelistic concern. Although the political revolution remains in the background of the text, some critics<sup>56</sup> have interpreted the protagonist's struggle as a gendered struggle for national liberation. Osei-Nyame Jnr makes this precise interpretation in his analysis of Mbuya's story-telling that alludes to an oral heritage that 'engages in a criticism of colonialism which is articulated specifically from a nationalist perspective.'<sup>57</sup>

This politicized analysis illustrates how Dangarembga deploys literary

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<sup>55</sup> 'The 'Nation' Between the 'Genders': Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*' *Current Writing*, 11(1) 1999.

<sup>56</sup> See S. Andrade, (2002), H. Zwicker, (2002), E. Boehmer, (2003).

<sup>57</sup> 1999 p. 57.

narrative strategies to construct a gendered response to the colonial condition under which the Zimbabwean nation-state is formed. Osei-Nyame Jnr affirms therefore that, Dangarembga articulates a ‘political consciousness’<sup>58</sup> within female domestic narratives and this compliments my view of how the novel expresses a subterranean revolutionary outlook that documents women’s experiences of liberation. Read as acts of feminism(s), this collective record of women’s political agency is a creative mode that legitimizes the endless, multiple ways in which women assert their identities.

*Emerging Perspectives*<sup>59</sup> edited by Anne Elizabeth Willey and Jeanette Treiber (2002) is an important collection of essays that sharply focuses on the plural ways in which female identities are constructed in *Nervous Conditions*. Most of the perspectives in this collection deploy the writings of Fanon as an analytical tool to develop readings which highlight the anticolonial theme of the novel and to highlight feminist concerns such as cultural, domestic, capitalistic, women-centered acts in the narrative in order to show the specific and concrete ways anticolonial female subjectivity is asserted. These approaches are extremely useful to my reading of Dangarembga’s novels (although not framed on Fanon’s discourse) because they affirm the presence of a feminist consciousness in the writing.

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Anne Elizabeth Willey & Janet Treiber (Eds.) *Emerging Perspectives on T. Dangarembga: Negotiating the Postcolonial*, Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, 2002.

The essay, ‘The Nervous Collusions of Nation and Gender’<sup>60</sup> by Heather Zwicker (2002) explores the link between Fanon’s notion of national identity in the *Wretched of the Earth* and the women’s struggles in *Nervous Conditions*. Zwicker offers a deepened view of Fanon’s position that colonialism is a form of violence to suggest that when gendered, this violence is played out on the female body. This informative essay emphasizes the important connection between patriarchy and colonialism as colluding forces of oppression that the women characters resist. This thesis extends the argument to demonstrate the significance of the multiple individual/collective ways in which women express feminism(s).

Interpreting the anti-colonial theme of the novel in a different way, Susan Andrade (2002) suggests that the absence of the ongoing liberation war as historical backdrop for this novel is a subversively anti-colonial position. Andrade argues that the refusal to engage with the nationalist struggle raises important questions on women’s roles in politics and nationalism that, she views as, ‘the telling of a domestic (and gendered) political tale which subsumes and metaphorizes nationalism in the interests of feminism.’ (25)

This critique on the power and women’s absence is further explored in Andrade’s examination of Tambu’s sexual development. Arguing that sexuality is significant in *bildung* novels of self discovery, Andrade claims that Tambu’s ‘libido is represented as diffuse and unformed’ (32).

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<sup>60</sup> 2002, pp. 3-24.

Probing further, the themes of sexual desire and longing in *Nervous Conditions*, Elleke Boehmer (2003) explores the girl's friendship in her paper 'Tropes of Yearning and Dissent.'<sup>61</sup> She offers an encoded reading of *Nervous Conditions* and Vera's *Butterfly Burning* around an 'experimental and poetic voicing'<sup>62</sup> of same-sex relations. Based on the notion of sameness, 'the mutual recognition of self-in-other,'<sup>63</sup> Boehmer advances her claim of subversive 'desire.'<sup>64</sup> Boehmer makes crucial links between sexual desire and the self-construction of female identity and in my analysis, I locate these elements in a cultural framework to show that same-sex sexuality is part of the rite to womanhood. In this way, sexual desire becomes fundamental in the figuring of an African female subjectivity constructed along non-heteronormative lines.

The complexities of African femininity are further illustrated in Treiber's essay whose focus is gender and cultural essentialism. She highlights, 'the way in which the text diffuses the geographies of home and "not home", tradition and modernity, essential purity versus contaminated fusions.'<sup>65</sup> Treiber rightly argues that Dangarembga's meshing of Western and Shona values 'disrupts cultural essentialism.'<sup>66</sup> This analysis lends support to my interpretation of acts like storytelling and ploughing in *Nervous Conditions* as acts of feminism. Women's labour and recalling of the past

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<sup>61</sup> Elleke Boehmer. 'Tropes of Yearning and Dissent: The Troping of Desire in Yvonne Vera and Tsitsi Dangarembga', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 2003 Vol. 38, Issue 1.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* p. 137.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* p. 144.

<sup>64</sup> A notion taken from bell hooks 'Liberation Scenes: Speak This Yearning' pp. 1-13 in *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*, London: Turnaround Press, 1991.

<sup>65</sup> Boehmer, 2003, p. 144.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* p. 90.

through tales run counter to patriarchal expectations of women to be child bearers and silent wives as the protagonist's father and uncle expect of their wives. The telling of stories of women like Mbuya alongside Tambu's fairy tales while ploughing in the fields is perhaps a 'contaminated fusion,' a carnivalizing of personal memory and stories from around the world to challenge the dominion that imperialist forces claim to have over history, land and access to education.

Further cementing women's ownership of narrating their personal experiences of living in a colonized country to one struggling for independence, the sequel to *Nervous Conditions*, *The Book of Not* (2006) focuses on Tambu's development from adolescence to adulthood. To date there is little published work on *The Book of Not* and my analysis of the text makes use of two essays, by Roseanne Kennedy (2008)<sup>67</sup> and Caroline Rooney (2007).<sup>68</sup> Kennedy focuses on trauma and bearing witness to war as gendered discourse in her reading of *The Book of Not*. Concerned with what the experience of war means for Zimbabwe's future and how it shapes the construction of Black subjectivity in this newly liberated nation, Kennedy frames her analysis on Fanon's anti-colonialism and writings on the Holocaust as the central paradigm of trauma and memory discourses. This detailed essay offers valuable insight into how postcolonial subjectivity is shaped by tragedy. As narratives of war victims are often suppressed by patriarchs with control over Zimbabwe's

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<sup>67</sup> Roseanne Kennedy. 'Mortgaged Futures: Trauma, Subjectivity and the Legacies of Colonialism in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *The Book of Not*' in *Studies in the Novel*, Vol. 40, Spring Summer 2008, pp. 86 – 107.

<sup>68</sup> *Decolonising Gender: Literature and a Poetics of the Real*, London: Routledge, 2007.

historiography, Kennedy's essay contributes to scholarship challenging the 'abuses of history,'<sup>69</sup> to borrow Terence Ranger's phrase. Also providing a provocative reading of humanity through Dangarembga's novel, Rooney's essay investigates the (im)possibility of performing the African humanistic principle of *unhu*, as it is named in the text, under the repressive conditions of colonialism and conflict. This is an instructive essay which shows the futility of practising *unhu* in the '[mission] world of competitive individualism' (132) where recognition of achievement is pre-determined by race. Rooney's take on *unhu* is a useful discussion point for me and although my interpretation of *unhu* differs slightly, my reading of *The Book of Not* is nonetheless informed by her work.

In this review, I have identified the critics whose work is most influential in my reading of the figurations of femininity in Dangarembga's writing. Aiding my examination of the dialectic between the individual and the collective, these essays offer interesting, wide-ranging discussions on the impact of how the conflict, violence and racism of the mission education system have the most damaging effect on women. By grounding my analyses of sexuality and femininity in Dangarembga's texts in cultural and global feminist perspectives, I hope to shed light on new ways of understanding the different identities expressed in the novels. By locating the taboo and the normal in an anti-colonial and African feminist frame, I

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<sup>69</sup> Terence O. Ranger. 'The Uses and Abuses of History in Zimbabwe', Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute 2005p. 7-15, (online) <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Digital-Library/Publications/Detail/?ots591=0c54e3b3-1e9c-be1e-2c24-a6a8c7060233&lng=en&id=96065> [date accessed: 9 March 2011].

endeavour to build on past critical perspectives on femininity as a site of struggle in Dangarembga's work.

### **Approaches to the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera**

Introduced to Irene Staunton, the editor of Baobab Books, by the Nigerian poet, Niyi Osundare, Yvonne Vera submitted her first manuscripts for local publication through Baobab Books. Her initial publication through Baobab was a collection of short stories *Why Don't You Carve Other Animals* (1992) that was first published in Canada by TSAR Publications in 1991. When Vera moved back home to Zimbabwe in the early 1990s, Baobab Books produced her first novel, *Nehanda*, in 1993. By this period, several factors made it easier for women to get published; firstly the Literature Bureau was no longer in existence, secondly the establishment of bodies such as the Zimbabwe Women Writer's Association and the more liberal Baobab Books meant that more women's works were printed and thirdly, the international success of women writers like Maraire and Dangarembga encouraged other women, like Vera, to write and publish.

A key figure in Zimbabwean literature, Vera portrays through powerful narrative, gender as a site of struggle. Her disturbing woman-centered narratives of resistance and pain signify the complexity of gendered her/stories that depict a rejection of cultural and political control over the

female body and seek to recover female-centered rites such as spirit possession and child naming ceremonies in *Nehanda*. Zimbabwean historian and close friend of the late Vera, Terence Ranger (2002) comments on the narrative strategy as deploying a ‘matrilineal mode of storytelling.’<sup>70</sup> Sharing this view, Lene Bull-Christiansen (2004) comments that, ‘[*Nehanda* is] a feminist re-writing of the history of colonial occupation and anti-colonial resistance’, and the text articulates ‘[a] form of spiritual counter history.’<sup>71</sup>

This woman-centered gaze sets the tone for Vera’s four subsequent novels and to explore this, I draw on Ranger and Christiansen’s interpretations to enhance my reading of Vera’s figurations of women as spiritual leaders, mothers and midwives. Further to this, my exploration into disturbing acts such as mariticide and self-abortion aims to show the struggles of women to reclaim their bodies from socially and politically oppressive forces. Described as experiences ‘out of history’<sup>72</sup> because they offer individual, non-official narratives of life at different temporal periods in the nation-story, Vera’s women are history makers. Analysing the interplay between history and fiction through a gendered lens Nana Wilson-Tagoe<sup>73</sup> (2002) argues that inscription of a female voice into discourse, ‘enlarges a contrasting portrait of *Nehanda*’ the legendary figure. Wilson-Tagoe reads *Nehanda* as a text that uses a circular storytelling style to defy linear

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<sup>70</sup> Terence O. Ranger. ‘History has Its Ceiling: The pressures of the past in *The Stone Virgins*’ in Muponde & Taruvinga (Eds.), 2002. pp. 203–216, p. 204.

<sup>71</sup> 2004, pp. 19-20.

<sup>72</sup> ‘Sign and Taboo: An Introduction’, in Muponde & Taruvinga (Eds.), 2002. p. xv.

<sup>73</sup> ‘History, Gender and The Problem of Representation in the Novels of Yvonne Vera’ in Muponde & Taruvinga (Eds.), 2002. p. 156.

history's account of Nehanda and the First Chimurenga in 1896 which ended with Nehanda's death and the defeat of the Shona people. Her reading suggests that by offering an alternative point of view that weaves myth and oral memory into history, Vera's novel offers a gendered reinvention of national myth promoting Nehanda as a nationalist matriarch. This perspective supports my reading of the figuration of motherhood in *Nehanda* as a spiritual cyborg. Defying the biological processes of growth, Nehanda goes from young immediately to old then spirit force and so within the Zimbabwean imagination, Nehanda has a historic presence that spans over almost a century. Wilson-Tagoe argues that the experiences of Zimbabwean women embodied in Nehanda cannot be reduced to a single, silenced experience, but are part of the fundamental communal and spiritual roles women play. By seeing Nehanda as leader of the people, it can be argued that female roles such as spirit medium, prophet, matriarch, revolutionary and daughter become historicized as images of Zimbabwean identity and national consciousness.

Similarly, Maurice Vambe (2005)<sup>74</sup> focuses on the 'return-to-roots style'<sup>75</sup> of Vera's first novel. He theorizes spirit possession as a form of resistance and as a woman-centered anti-colonial narrative, which shows the multiple roles that women perform within different social spheres. Like Wilson-Tagoe, Vambe is critical of the utopic traditional past he suggests

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<sup>74</sup> 'Spirit Possession and The Paradox of Post-colonial Resistance in Yvonne Vera's *Nehanda*', in Muponde & Taruvinga, (Eds.) 2002. pp. 127-140.

<sup>75</sup> Maurice T. Vambe, *African Oral Storytelling Tradition and the Zimbabwean Novel in English*, Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2005. p.79.

Vera tries to create, although Vambe's essay brings to bear *Nehanda's* gendered re-appropriation of national myth and cultural symbols as constructive of an alternate national discourse and historiography. Such a perspective reveals how the text inscribes a history, culture and politics of resistance through the maternal dimension. In agreement with this view, I intend to show how *Nehanda* inscribes and affirms women as the transmitters of a dynamic oral history and revolutionary spiritual power that reinforces the importance of maternal traditions in Shona custom and Zimbabwean national discourse.

The spiritualist theme establishing a link between the people, the ancestors and the land is repeated in her subsequent novel *Without a Name* where the remembering of customary rites is a redemptive act for the young protagonist, Mazvita. Ruth Lavelle (2002)<sup>76</sup> discusses Mazvita's disturbing response to rape through infanticide as a psychologically self-destructive act. Lavelle maps the protagonist's movements from Kadoma to Harari in a bid to suppress the memory of sexual violation, arguing that for Mazvita to find true peace and freedom, her journey must be completed by returning to her rural home, Mhondoro. This cyclical movement centralizes the land and the ancestors as sites of 'remembering, healing and new beginning' thus enabling the protagonist to 'redefine herself and reclaim her name' (2002: 114) Lavelle's essay offers my thesis a way of exploring the thematic dimension of motherhood under conditions of war, displacement and the devastating result of sexual

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<sup>76</sup> 'Yvonne Vera's *Without a Name*: Reclaiming That Which Has Been Taken' in Muponde & Taruvinga, (Eds.) 2002. pp. 109-116.

violation. Motherhood, as I shall illustrate, is a site of resistance where impoverished women commit acts of cultural and civil disobedience to reclaim control and agency over their bodies and their choice to mother.

Carolyn Martin Shaw (2004)<sup>77</sup> and Eva Hunter's (2000)<sup>78</sup> respective explorations of the maternal figure in Vera's fiction produces another angle of analysis that centralises the effects of pain and violence visited upon the maternal body. To date, these are the only three published papers that focus explicitly on the maternal theme in Vera's fiction. Shaw makes the claim that Vera's novels represent 'matrophobia' because the sexual violations of women's bodies construct a fractured image of motherhood and mother-daughter relationships. Hunter shares this same view by suggesting that women resist the colonial and domestic trappings of Black motherhood in *Butterfly Burning*. My analysis of four of Vera's novels, in subsequent chapters, considers Shaw's generational perspective as a suitable way to view motherhood, though at the same time, I strongly disagree with Shaw's interpretation of Vera's protagonists as matrophobic. Rather, my argument seeks to give a more positive view of the fractured image of motherhood in Vera's fiction. By viewing the maternal through the processes of 'multiplicity and becoming' as articulated by Deleuze and Guattari, I seek to demonstrate that spirit possession, other mothering, abortion, suicide and infanticide are not a rejection of mothering or mothers but symbolize women's 'minoritarian

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<sup>77</sup> See 'Turning Her Back on the Moon: Virginity, Sexuality and Mothering in the Works of Yvonne Vera' *Africa Today*, 2004, pp. 35-51.

<sup>78</sup> 'Zimbabwean Nationalism and Motherhood in Yvonne Vera's *Butterfly Burning*', *African Studies* 59 (2), 2000, pp. 229-243.

and revolutionary<sup>79</sup> responses to racial injustice and political and cultural oppression.

In addition to reading the female body as historicized and maternal, memory and language in Vera's fiction have also been read as sites of gendered resistance. Deploying literary theory on language as a reading framework for two of Vera's novels, Kizito Muchmewa (2002)<sup>80</sup> argues that the adaptation of oral storytelling modes into text offers a new discourse for women. In his view, the oral is re-invented into novelistic form in order to vocalize women's experiences of trauma and sexual violation in *Without a Name* and *Under the Tongue*. By this means, Muchemwa convincingly argues for orality as a female rite where words are offered in a cyclic pattern between speakers as seen in *Under the Tongue*. This analysis is useful to my thesis because it centralizes orality as a valid textual medium of representation of women's minds and in their record of private feminine voices, Vera's novels thus articulate the many unheard voices and suppressed identities of women.

The opposite of voice is silence, which is another valid form of internal discourse in Vera's fiction, argues Meg Samuelson (2002).<sup>81</sup> Samuelson's essay captures the internalized narrative of *Under the Tongue* as strongly indicative of an oppositional discourse, one against patriarchal

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<sup>79</sup> See Deleuze and Guatarri 1987a, 1987, 1994.

<sup>80</sup> 'Language, voice and presence in *Under the Tongue* and *Without a Name*' in Muponde & Taruvinga, (Eds.) 2002. pp. 3-14.

<sup>81</sup> 'A River in My Mouth: Writing the Voice in *Under the Tongue*' in Muponde & Taruvinga, (Eds.) 2002. pp. 15-24.

domination, colonialism and one-party state nationalism.<sup>82</sup> Speechlessness and pain function as effective metaphorical responses to systems of sexual abuse and cultural discrimination. Samuelson's reading is useful in illustrating the interplay between speech and silence as symbolic of how women recover ownership over their bodies, connection to the land and domain over particular customary traditions. When considered in terms of thematic concerns of motherhood and sexuality, this viewpoint offers a way of understanding how language is a signifier of feminine practices of power and resistance as seen in how the protagonist Zhizha learns how to speak again through the maternal figures, Runyararo and Grandmother. My reading of these densely woven gendered representations intends to show how speech in the role of mothering enables women to heal a child's trauma and to recover the spiritual domain of motherhood as one that is closely connected to the earth.

The maternal theme in Vera's novels also points to another dimension of femininity as an embodied subject affected by patriarchal practices and colonial rule. In reaction to and as a result of these varied forms of domination, Violet B Lunga (2002)<sup>83</sup> and Ranka Primorac (2002; 2007)<sup>84</sup> in their separate papers are concerned with how Vera's characters struggle to reclaim control over their bodies through the most tragic means. Both critics examine how time and space function as narrative devices telling of female resistance and self-expression in *Butterfly Burning*. Lunga

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.* p.15.

<sup>83</sup> 'Between The Pause and The Waiting: The Struggle Against Time in Yvonne Vera's *Butterfly Burning*' in Muponde & Taruvinga, (Eds.), 2002. pp. 191-202.

<sup>84</sup> 'Iron Butterflies: Notes on Yvonne Vera's *Butterfly Burning*' in Muponde & Taruvinga, (Eds.), 2002. pp. 101-108.

examines how the characters of *Butterfly Burning* ‘live within the cracks’ (1998: 25) of colonial containment in Makokoba township. Using Bakhtin’s neologism of chronotope, ‘the temporal and spatial indicators that are artistically expressed in literature’,<sup>85</sup> Lunga examines these novelistic aspects in order to analyse the minds of Vera’s women. Adding a third dimension, ‘memory time’,<sup>86</sup> Lunga attempts to show how the characters use their bodies in order to survive against extreme poverty and racial discrimination in the colonial city. Lunga’s discussion opens up an additional narrative dimension of significance to my analysis of ‘anomalous mothering’ in this text because it explores how the characters use their bodies to resist physical control of space in the city by the State and the social exclusion of Black women. Determining their own destinies, the characters turn to prostitution, desert their babies, perform self-abortion and commit suicide in order to break free. In my analysis, these acts of freedom identify motherhood as the site of plural struggle where women resist social oppressions while simultaneously committing ‘anomalous’ acts as ways of regaining control and agency over their bodies and their reproductive rights.

Like Lunga, appropriating Bakhtin’s time and space chronotope as a model for the analysis of plot development, Primorac argues that the characters of *Butterfly Burning* show an inability to break out of the cycle of poverty caused by racial containment in this 1940s ghetto. Identifying

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<sup>85</sup> Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M Bakhtin* Ed. Michael Holquist, trans. C. Emerson & M. Holquist (2000 [1981]), Austin: Texas University Press, 2000.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

sparse plot and dialogue as characteristic of Vera's fiction, Primorac suggests that these gaps and silences are distinctive textual strategies that give complex meaning to the narrative. In *Butterfly Burning*, 'emotional and physical transactions...are conducted in silence' (2002: 108) and the protagonist, Phephelaphi, yearns to be free of the silence that symbolizes racial containment in the township, containment by Fumbatha as her lover in their plastic shack, and the containment of life as a vegetable seller struggling to escape the livelihood of her female peers and relations who, despite relative economic freedom, have to sell their bodies in order to live. While Primorac reads the complexity of Phephelaphi's act as failure to cope with life, my reading differs from Primorac's negation and chooses to read the suicide as an existential escape from the hardship of life which symbolizes reclamation of her body rather than the unsuccessful end Primorac suggests. Rather, I read Phephelaphi's suicide as representing an escape from colonial containment and poverty. In Chapter 2 on motherhood, I enquire whether it is possible to read the abortion and suicide as a way of extending the rights over a woman's body to include death. Arguing that the right to life translates into the right to end one's life, for a Black woman like Phephelaphi struggling for the right to life and rights over her own body denied by the colonial state, the ability to assert her right to ending her life is a triumph.

Further exploring the assertion of women's rights, the right over one's body and sexuality is the focus of my reading of *Under the Tongue*. I draw centrally upon the work of Boehmer (2003) who subversively reads

same-sex love in *Butterfly Burning*, an act that is culturally forbidden and legally prohibited in Zimbabwe. Disputing the cultural sanction on same-sex relations, Boehmer situates her argument in African women's texts that allude to same-sex desire, and gives anthropological evidence of women's friendships in African societies. Although Boehmer's work lends crucial insight into my reading of female relations, by giving an anthropological account and surveying contemporary political and cultural attitudes toward homosexuality, she does not engage in conversation with specific African feminist/womanist theorists who reject same-sex loving relationships as un-African. I intend to stage this dialogue to show the contradictions within the different types of culturally-grounded feminism(s)/womanism(s), like African womanism and motherism.

Instead, Boehmer constructs a criticism towards a gay selfhood in *Butterfly Burning* as a mode of African women's resistance. She argues that there is a 'yearning'<sup>87</sup> in Phephelaphi for something other than the love she has with Fumbatha. Her use of the term 'yearning' refers to 'the force of longing, a force that is sometimes objectless'<sup>88</sup> and this is clearly illustrated in her reading of same-sex desire. Boehmer writes:

[c]easelessly mixing abstractions and unadorned plain nouns, fascinated with repetitive, non-object related activity and the movements of music, Yvonne Vera's style offers a peculiarly appropriate vehicle for the articulation of such yearning.<sup>89</sup>

Boehmer claims that in *Butterfly Burning* there is a hidden sensuality in the rhythmic language that signifies a homosexual longing in the

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<sup>87</sup> It is an adaptation of hooks (1991) definition of yearning as a homoerotic desire with a political dimension see footnote 1 in 'Tropes of Yearning and Desire', Boehmer 2003.

<sup>88</sup> 2003, p. 138.

<sup>89</sup> 2003, p.142.

protagonist.

It is difficult to assess whether Boehmer succeeds in exploring the possibility of a gay selfhood in both this text and *Nervous Conditions* because her discussion of both novels is too brief and compacted into six pages in a longer essay, which frustrates a fuller examination of the enigma of erotic desire. Nonetheless Boehmer does offer a valuable, incisive and succinct argument that broaches the culture of silence on women's sexuality that I consider in my analysis of the prostitute women of *Butterfly Burning*. She explores another dimension of meaning by analyzing Vera's and Dangarembga's characters through a political lens. Her reading thus shows how sexuality becomes a part of the everyday negotiations performed by women within and against society and the norms of custom in these novels. As an imaginative and ideological challenge to structures of power, Vera and Dangarembga's writing thus opens out a creative space to women, in which they may explore their multivalent, complex subjectivities.

These diverse, insightful discussions of history, space, time, orality, voice and sexuality as evidence of how femininity is pluralistically figured in Vera's writing, affirm womanhood that is heterogeneous and continually transforming, rather than as one, static identity. In particular, the papers by Boehmer, Hunter, Lavelle, Lunga, Primorac, Samuelson, Shaw and Wilson-Tagoe provide crucial, conceptual support to my exploration of issues connected to the figuration of the maternal in Vera's oeuvre.

While the individual essays give informative perspectives on the two authors, my thesis seeks to offer a much more developed analysis on the fiction. My reading of the multiplicity of meanings in womanhood in the novels also aims to foreground a systematic approach that consistently draws on four sources of knowledge, namely post-structuralist theory, Western feminist theory, African feminist theory and my personal ‘insider knowledge.’ This unique approach aims to make an original contribution to the scholarship on Zimbabwean literature and hopefully produce alternative ways of reading of womanhood in Dangarembga and Vera’s spiritual, cultural and politically centered narratives.

### **Framing a Theoretical Approach**

As stated at the outset, my theoretical approach is a carnivalised one that brings together diverse theoretical and cultural perspectives to represent not only the complexity of female subjectivity, but also the colonial entanglement of Africa with Europe. Postcolonial critics Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall (2004) write, ‘[t]o ask whether Africa is separated from the West by an unbridgeable gulf seems pointless.’<sup>90</sup> Mbembe and Nuttall allude to the ambivalent relationship between African and Western discourse; elsewhere Mbembe has independently developed this view, arguing that the narratives of these two spaces are inextricably bound up in each other. In his book, *On the Postcolony* (2001) Mbembe states,

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<sup>90</sup> Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall. 'Writing the World from an African Metropolis,' *Public Culture* 16(3), 2004, pp.347–372.

the postcolony encloses multiple *durées* made up of discontinuities, reversals, inertias, and swings that overlay one another, interpenetrate one another, and envelope one another: an *entanglement*.<sup>91</sup>

Invoking the politics of globalization and modernity, Mbembe argues that the world is more closely connected and through colonial contact, there can be no distinct and separate Western or African way of producing discursive knowledge. Sharing this view towards theory, my theoretical approach synthesizes diverse theoretical voices that offer critical and crucial insight into the complex collective and individual constructions of motherhood, sexuality and femininity in the selected texts. By combining Western post-structuralist theory and African feminist discourse to engage in critical dialogue, I seek to widen the scope of meaning in the texts analyzed.

It must however be stated that my appropriation is with caution and limitation since, for example, Deleuze and Braidotti's theories are not without problems. Carol Boyce Davies (1994) describes the unequal relationship of privilege and discrimination between Western philosophy and Black women's theory. Boyce Davies states:

[t]heory as it is reified in the academy, still turns on Western heliocentric (master) or feminist "gynocentric" (mistress-master) philosophy...The language of theory is loaded with references to European male theorists accompanied by a certain ponderousness and linguistic and syntactic convolution. Additionally there are definable centers (journals, press, universities, news magazines for the canonization of theories and theorists).<sup>92</sup>

Theory turns on an Anglo-European axis and has historically privileged the voices of particular White male and female researchers as authorities largely to the exclusion of oppressed groups. Boyce Davies argues that the

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<sup>91</sup> *On the Postcolony*, Berkley: University of California Press, 2001. p.14.

<sup>92</sup> *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*, London: Routledge, 1994. pp. 39-40.

academy has been historically Eurocentric and androcentric in its gaze and coupled with the economic advantage the West has enjoyed over the rest of the world, the production of mainstream theory is along these historic lines. This has resulted in the voices of oppressed groups remaining silenced and their knowledge(s) marginalized.

The shaping influence of Eurocentrism on the development of formal theories by African intellectuals is another form of knowledge marginalization. Nelson O.T Fashina (2003) refers to this as ‘wasting the creating endeavors of African writers [and scholarship].’<sup>93</sup> Fashina argues that reliance on Western theory leads to the interpretation of African knowledge systems of the world through a Western lens and ‘European theoretical configurations of African literary texts [are] as a subset of Western universal discourses.’<sup>94</sup> This critic rightly identifies some of the dangers in negotiating theory as the tendency to obscure and have a reductionist effect on non-Western forms of knowledge. In this literary research, I maintain an awareness of this pitfall and this is partly why my thesis draws on my personal insider knowledge as well as African feminist theory together with Western feminist and post-structuralist theories.

Critical of how non-Western and non-White discourses remain a ‘subset

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<sup>93</sup> Nelson O.T Fashina. ‘Re(-)Placing Theory in African Studies: Ifa Literary Corpus, Origins, Universality and the Integration of Epistemology’ paper presented at Aegis Conference, Leipzig, Germany, 2009, [www.uni-leipzig.de/~ecas2009/index.php?option=com](http://www.uni-leipzig.de/~ecas2009/index.php?option=com) [date accessed: 19 January 2010]. p. 7.

<sup>94</sup> ‘An Image of Africa’, *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 9, No. 1, Special Issue on Literary Criticism. (Spring,1978), pp. 1-15.

of European feminist universal discourse', Pelagia Goulimari writes:

[In] radical sexual difference feminism...Braidotti throws the bone of constant variable to minorities; the importance of variables like race and sexual preference, especially lesbianism were late in coming to the fore in feminist debates.<sup>95</sup>

Goulimari criticises Braidotti's over-romanticising feminism as a unified, diverse movement ignoring the rifts between different feminists and the relative invisibility of feminism(s). This critical blind spot in Braidotti leads Goulimari to re-interpret Deleuze and Guattari's concept of becoming-minor<sup>96</sup> within a feminist frame to give voice to those occluded voices within the movement.

While Braidotti may have modified her stance towards non-Western feminism(s),<sup>97</sup> as unique forms of feminism(s) rather than a 'subset', her initial lack of recognition of diversity is still a cause of tension within feminist discourse. In my engagement with African feminism, I consider these debates to be of importance because these tensions help to shape my thesis and think through how the literature addresses issues like rape, infidelity and same-sex sexuality as a way of showing that African women have their own specific ways of challenging cultural taboos and speaking out against sexism that are not modelled on Western feminism. The tensions between African and Western feminist discourse creates a divide which African scholar Amina Mama confronts with the rhetorical

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<sup>95</sup> Pelagia Goulimari. 'A Minoritarian Feminism? Things to do with Deleuze and Guattari.' in *Deleuze and Guattari: Critical Assessments by Leading Philosophers* Genosko, Gary (Ed.) London: Routledge, 2001. p. 1497.

<sup>96</sup> *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, Trans. Dana Polan, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1986. pp. 10–13. Also see *A Thousand Plateaus* pp. 275–292.

<sup>97</sup> See Rosi, Braidotti & Gabrielle, Griffin. (Eds.) *Thinking Differently: A Reader in European Women's Studies*, 2002.

question, ‘in white-dominated contexts, feminism looks white, and who would want to collude with northern based, white women's monopoly of feminism?’<sup>98</sup>

Making a similar criticism of invisibility within academic discourse, African-American womanist scholar Patricia Hill Collins (1990) writes of the marginalisation of Black women’s knowledge(s) in academic discourse which has historically privileged White Western male and feminist theory as the *only* authorities. She goes further by identifying power and dominance as patterned within history, as the underlying reasons for marginalisation when she writes that:

If such a rich intellectual tradition exists why has it remained virtually invisible until now? ...The shadow obscuring this complex Black women’s intellectual tradition is neither accidental nor benign. Suppressing the knowledge produced by any oppressed group makes it easier for dominant groups to rule because the seeming absence of dissent suggests that subordinate groups willingly participate in their own victimization.<sup>99</sup>

If as Michel Foucault (1972) argues,<sup>100</sup> discourse/knowledge is how a people are created, then those institutions controlling discourse also control how Black women are represented. The knowledge on Black women as Collins points out is created by historically racist and patriarchal hegemonic forces and in an effort to shift power relations to give voice to Black academic, experiential and folk knowledge(s), race, culture and gender become the key battlegrounds for discursive power.

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<sup>98</sup> Elaine, Salo. ‘Talking About Feminism in Africa’ an interview with Elaine Salo, *African Women’s Voices*, [http://www.wworld.org/programs/regions/africa/amina\\_mama.htm](http://www.wworld.org/programs/regions/africa/amina_mama.htm) [date accessed: 5 December 2009].

<sup>99</sup> *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment: Perspectives on Gender* 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990. p. 3.

<sup>100</sup> See Michel, Foucault. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972 – 1977*, trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, et al., New York: Pantheon, 1972.

In my appropriation of Deleuze and Guattari's ideas, their insufficient attention to race, non-Western culture and gender means I can only go 'a piece of the way with them,'<sup>101</sup> otherwise the women in the novels I read, are rendered invisible. John Marks makes a similar observation in his criticism of Deleuze and Guattari, and refers to them as 'Eurocentric.'<sup>102</sup> This highlights the gap in knowledge that develops when poststructuralist theory is translated into the African context where nomadism is a way of life rather than a deviation from the norm of a permanent settlement, as Deleuze, Guattari and Braidotti imagine Europe to be.<sup>103</sup> Drawing on Braidotti's conception of the 'nomad' which is an evolution of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the nomad, I discuss Mazvita's migration in *Without a Name* as an act of implicit resistance against the political order and the sexual assault she suffers. However, the application of Braidotti's figuration of the nomad is with caution, as the geo-cultural location of *Without a Name* is a region in Africa where nomadism has been practised for centuries.

In an effort to deconstruct the historic privilege of Western scholars over discourse, Gayatri C. Spivak's impassioned plea to academic discourse in *Death of a Discipline* (2003) is of significance. She states, 'We must learn to let go, remember that it is the singular invariability of the literary from

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<sup>101</sup> Boyce Davies, 1997. p. 31.

<sup>102</sup> Gilles Deleuze: *Vitalism and Multiplicity*, London: Pluto Press, 1998. p. 142.

<sup>103</sup> This is not to say Deleuze and Guattari's work does not lend itself to work on the social exclusion of travellers or Roma gypsies in places like Italy and England. See Ronald Bogue, *Deleuze's Way: Essays in Transverse Ethics and Aesthetics*, 2007.

which we are attempting to discern collectivities.<sup>104</sup> Collectivity, like multiplicity, is a useful concept that seeks to erase oppositional thinking and it is within this frame that specifically Dangarembga's novels can be read as revising the binaries of tradition/modernity and Western/African by interweaving oral tradition with modern writing and colonial education with customary knowledge(s). My analysis of *Nervous Conditions* and *The Book of Not* will discuss this *metissage* which underscores the connectivity of worlds as described by Mbembe above, and Anim-Addo, earlier, and also echoes Jean-Luc Nancy's (1997) words:

the world is a multiplicity of worlds, and its unity is the mutual sharing and exposition of all its worlds— within this world. As for the “sharing of the world,” it is, fundamentally, “the law of the world.”<sup>105</sup>

While carnivalizing theory argues for a pluralistic theorizing of a ‘shared world’; there is also need for an evolutionary approach to theory – building upon the inadequacies of theory in order to develop new critical insight as has been the response to Deleuze and Guattari within European gender discourse. In the 1980s, feminists such as Alice Jardine<sup>106</sup> and Luce Irigaray<sup>107</sup> criticized the notion of ‘becoming-woman’ in *A Thousand Plateaus*, which Deleuze and Guattari argue is a means of resistance, a ‘becoming-indiscernible.’<sup>108</sup> Although Deleuze and Guattari's views have been contentious, they foreground the possibility of imagining oneself as the marginal figure as a way of challenging and

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<sup>104</sup> *Death of a Discipline*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.

<sup>105</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

<sup>106</sup> ‘Woman in Limbo: Deleuze and His Br(others)’, *Sub/Stance*, Vol. 13 No.3/4 1984, pp. 46-40.

<sup>107</sup> See *Irigaray and Deleuze: Experiments in Visceral Philosophy*, Loraine E. Tamsin. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999.

<sup>108</sup> 1987, p. 245.

undoing the oppressive binary of man/woman or the racial divide of White/Black or man/animal.

Jardine argued that for women to undergo a becoming-woman threatens to dismiss the hard-won struggles of feminists that enabled women the power to claim subjectivity in the first place. According to Elizabeth Grosz's<sup>109</sup> 1994 review of early feminist critiques, Luce Irigaray opposed the use of becoming-woman as a universal figure of change for all, including men, because it suggested a masculinist appropriation of the feminist struggle. However since the 1990s, a number of feminists commonly referred to as, 'Deleuze's disciples,'<sup>110</sup> like Clare Colebrook, Grosz and Braidotti in their work on corporeal feminism<sup>111</sup> have attempted to re-read Deleuze and Guattari in a positive light, an open and experimental approach (as in Deleuze tradition) to body politic. Following in their footsteps, up to a point, my thesis fuses together diverse theories on feminism and subjectivity in an attempt to most effectively explore figurations of women's social and political agency.

Central to my argument is Rosi Braidotti's notion of figuration that evolved out of Deleuze and Guattari's idea of the nomad. In *Patterns of Dissonance* (1991) Braidotti suggests that feminism(s) is a singular multiplicity which is a fusion of the concepts singularity and multiplicity

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<sup>109</sup> *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.

<sup>110</sup> For example see R. Braidotti (1998), P. Kaufman (2004), C.L Miller, (2003), P. Patton (2000).

<sup>111</sup> Corporeal feminism is a term coined by Elizabeth Grosz and a feminist theorizing of the body.

proposed by Deleuze and Guattari. Where Deleuze and Guattari argue that multiplicity is not totalizing but pluralistic and interconnected in nature, Braidotti sees feminism(s) as a unified, territorial movement in which women can inscribe their discursive presences. Developing her thinking further, Braidotti states that:

Each woman is a multiplicity in herself: she is marked by a set of differences within the self, which turns her into a split, fractured, knotted entity, constructed over intersecting levels of experience.<sup>112</sup>

In recognizing the subject as always and already constituted as plural and fragmented, she argues for a feminist mapping of the subject via political and discursive cartography, as a way of claiming that feminism(s) enables women to claim a speaking voice. Braidotti's theoretical revisioning provides a powerful and insightful critique on female subjectivity and feminism(s) as a means by which to (re)imagine women as empowered and autonomous.

Crucial to my understanding of figurations is the cyborg, a metaphor challenging binaries that cast social identities and practices as polar opposites such as hetero and homosexuality or nature/culture or body/machine. Haraway's exploration of the relationship between the body and machine is an important one to consider in the context of motherhood in Zimbabwe's modern colonial period (1890<sup>113</sup>-1979) where

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<sup>112</sup> 'Sexual Difference Theory' in *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy* Allison M. Jaggar and Iris, Young. (Eds.), Massachusetts and Oxford: (Blackwell) Malden, 1998. p 303.

<sup>113</sup> The first modern city, Harare, was founded in 1890 as a frontier settlement by Pioneer Column, a British military volunteer force under the leadership of Cecil John Rhodes II. See Hoste Skipper & N.S Davies, *Gold Fever*, Salisbury: Pioneer Head, 1977. Also see Yoshikuni Tsuneyo. *African Urban Experiences in Colonial Zimbabwe: A Social History of Harare Before 1925*. Harare: Weaver Press, 2007. pp. 9-13.

Black bodies provided labour as the machines that built city from which contemporary technology has developed. When gender is added as a dimension to the cyborg metaphor, the maternal becomes a central issue. Appropriating Haraway's idea, Pattie Belle Hastings (2002) convincingly argues that the reproductive abilities of women make mothers living in the modern world, the original cyborg. In the *Cyborg Mommy Manual* Hastings states that:

While movies and fiction depict the Cyborg as a futuristic superhuman or technological monster, I propose that it is *actually* your average Mother and Housewife that are among the first so-called Cyborgs. The machine has extended the body of the mother for centuries as she tended the stove, cranked the washer, peddled the sewing machine, and vacuumed the house, but she hardly exists in discussions of technological culture, except as a consuming unit for manufacturing and advertising or in the case of reproductive technologies – the body that carries the baby.<sup>114</sup>

It is worth considering the present-absence of Black mothers throughout technological evolution from traditional to modern society because women provided the private domestic labour and gave birth to generations of Black labour which enabled this transition. In reading the maternal as cyborg in Vera's *Butterfly Burning* and *Without a Name* where the choice between reproducing a child to be born into the menial colonial labour system for Black is weighed up against the freedom of not having to raise a child in poverty. In my analyses of these two novels I argue that the cyborg provides a way of rethinking the role of Africans in colonial development. Further to that, the machine/human binary in feminist discourses on science and technology is often to the exclusion of Africa and yet tracing back the history of technology, it is one of empire and Africa is an important part of that story. As the reproducers of colonial

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<sup>114</sup> Pattie Belle Hastings. 'Introduction', *The Cyborg Mommy Manual*, [http://www.icehousedesign.com/cyborg\\_mommy/introduction.pdf](http://www.icehousedesign.com/cyborg_mommy/introduction.pdf) 2002, p. 2 [date accessed: 25 October 2010].

labour and the maids and cleaners in the homes and offices of technology developers, factory and shop owners,<sup>115</sup> African women are deeply embedded in the colony's processes of technological evolution. Seeing motherhood as part of modern capitalism includes African women as historical figures in discourses on technology and feminism. Locating the cyborg maternal figure within African feminist thought attempts to make visible the historic role of women within science and technology. Although I merely scratch the surfaces of this issue in this thesis, I intend to explore a few thoughts on this subject which will hopefully be useful for future investigations into the relation between the cyborg, reproduction and technology in Africa.

While multiplicity, the cyborg and figuration are the key theoretical tools applied in my reading of the representation of Zimbabwean women in the selected writing, it is important to note that for the body as the site through which anorexia, suicide, same-sex love and pregnancy are experienced by the characters, feminist theorizing is important. While the experiences of the women reveal much about the body, the theorization of the body in African feminist discourse is still in its early stages, as I discuss in my reading of anorexia/bulimia in *Nervous Conditions*. In discussing the different figurations of the body in the writing, corporeal feminism provides an ideological framing in which the representation of bodies can be explored, despite this not being one of the main theoretical

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<sup>115</sup> In *Butterfly Burning* Baloos Store, a department store in downtown Bulawayo is a background feature of colonial modernity as it is the place where manufactured goods and processed foods (Roller Meal cornmeal) are sold.

tools that I draw on as I am more interested in exploring the images of womanhood produced by certain experiences of the corporeal subject.

Corporeal feminism is:

crucial to understanding woman's psychical and social existence, but the body is no longer understood as an ahistorical, biologically given, acultural object...It is concerned with the *lived body*... [and] tend to be more suspicious of the sex/gender distinction...Instead of seeing sex as an essentialist and gender as a constructionist category, these thinkers are concerned to undermine the dichotomy.<sup>116</sup>

This brand of feminism is a radical attempt to refigure the body 'so that it moves from the periphery to the centre of analysis, so that it can be understood as the very *'stuff'* of subjectivity.'<sup>117</sup> Within this ontological framing, the body is imagined as an inscriptive surface upon which lived experience can be articulated. To this end, Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick<sup>118</sup> (1999) offer useful insight on writing on femininity as a site for both bodily construction and bodily disruptions. *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader* is a collection of the writings of over forty feminist thinkers in which the bio-politics surrounding the gendered body are discussed from a range of scholarly perspectives. Shildrick and Price's feminist approaches to figuration create new possibilities for re-figuring embodiment proposing a discursive movement between and through biological processes and social practices that construct gender and the body. In a radical move, Shildrick and Price taking their cue from Gayatri Spivak's position against the notion of *the* body,<sup>119</sup> argue that this concept

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<sup>116</sup> E. Grosz. *Volatile Bodies*, pp.17-18; Grosz includes Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Gayatri , Jane Gallop, Moira Gatens, Vicki Kirby, Judith Butler, Naomi Schor, Monique Wittig, and others as thinkers of corporeal feminism.

<sup>117</sup> *Volatile Bodies*, Grosz (emphasis added).

<sup>118</sup> Janet Price & Margrit Shildrick. 'Introduction' to *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*, Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 1999. pp. 1-15.

<sup>119</sup> In an interview with Ellen Rooney (1989), Gayatri Spivak states that: 'There are thinkings of the systematicity of the body, there are value codings of the body. The

is flawed:

there are multiple bodies marked, not simply by sex but an infinite array of differences – race, class, sexuality, age, mobility, status, are those commonly invoked – none of which is solely determinate. In such a model the universal category of the body disappears, not as the result of the disembodiment characteristic of masculinist discourse, but in favour of fluid and open embodiment. (1999: 8)

Shildrick and Price highlight the danger of universalizing assumptions of the female body; as a uniformed entity. Within the socio-historical context of Zimbabwe, Shildrick and Price's critique is useful to deconstruct traditional and colonial perspectives on African femininity particularly with regards to motherhood and sexual morality as both colonial and patriarchal discourses tend to have a narrow view of the female body, albeit in different ways. My reading of the gendered body seeks to situate the body in a specific social context, in which a body can act and be acted upon. This situated body is the site of both the production and consumption of cultural meanings, which suggests that women have political and social agency against patriarchal hegemonies which enforce a one-way relationship dictating how women should act. My analysis will show how women respond to and challenge cultural and colonial controls on body movement.

To effectively approach the task of reading how women assert themselves, I draw finally on aspects of African feminist theory which offers a contextually appropriate understanding of how African women's feminism is articulated. Feminist scholar, Obioma Nnamaeka (1998) explains that:

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body cannot as such be thought.' Gayatri Chakravorty, Spivak. 'In a Word.' Interview, *Differences* 1.2 (1989) pp.124-156.

the majority of African women are not hung up on ‘articulating their feminism’; *they just do it*. In my view it is what they do and how they do it that provide the “framework” is not carried to the theatre of action as a definitional tool. It is the dynamism of the theatre of action with its shifting patterns that makes the feminist spirit/engagement effervescent and exciting and difficult to name.<sup>120</sup>

The ‘theatre of action’ suggests that even though the terminology for feminism(s) may not exist; the action is there. Providing further evidence to this, Susan Arndt<sup>121</sup> argues that the anti-colonial movements in Zimbabwe, Kenya, Namibia and South Africa are the roots of feminism in Africa. She is also careful to point out the influence of other forms of feminism namely, White Western and African American, on the African women’s movement.

Distinguishing African women’s struggles from Western women’s movements, Buchi Emecheta passionately declared that:

I don’t like being defined by them [Western feminists]...I believe in an African type of feminism. They call it womanism, because you see you Europeans don’t worry about water, you don’t worry about schooling....<sup>122</sup>

Commenting on education as a struggle for basic rights, one that is different from Western feminist priorities, Yvonne Vera’s publisher, Irene Staunton states that:

We are concerned here with matters which are more essential, more basic, and might even regard such issues as trivialities. A European feminist certainly wouldn’t say this, and this quite rightly so, now they can move on to pitch for other rights, ones that might seem very secondary here.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Obioma Nnaemeka. (Ed.) ‘Introduction’ in *Sisterhood, Feminisms & Power: From Africa to the Diaspora*, Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, 1998. p. 5. (Emphasis added.)

<sup>121</sup> *The Dynamics of African Feminism: Defining and Classifying African Feminist Literatures*, Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, 2002.

<sup>122</sup> 1986 Stockholm Second African Writer’s Conference. In *Gender in African Women’s Writing: Identity and Sexual Difference*, Julianna Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997. p. 7.

<sup>123</sup> Tendai Marima. ‘Interview on Yvonne Vera’ with Irene Staunton, in *Southern African Diaspora Review: Celebrating Academic and Creative Writing*, Vol. 1 Knox, Chitiyo (Ed.), Pretoria: SADR, 2006.

Staunton's criticism emphasizes not only the continued need for differentiation between African and Western feminists, but also stresses the ongoing effort to attain basic amenities like primary education and to overcome cultural and economic problems which are similar to the barrier that Tambu has to overcome in *Nervous Conditions*.

The need for some distance between African and Western feminism(s) highlights the importance of feminist perspectives grounded in African realities. As Kolawale succinctly puts it, 'You *cannot* let a stranger name your struggle.'<sup>124</sup> I take this literally as support for framing my exploration of the literary figurations of Zimbabwean women from a Zimbabwean perspective. Having 'insider knowledge'<sup>125</sup> of Shona and Ndebele cultures is a privileged position of knowledge, as an insider reader has a keen sense of the place and culture from where the stories emerge, that an unfamiliar reader may not have.

In Chapter One, analysing *Nervous Conditions*, I explore African feminist perspectives such as African womanism (1984) and STIWANISM<sup>126</sup> (1997) that appear to have a feminist nationalist outlook as they stress women's rights as fundamentally a race-based struggle and a national struggle against neo-colonialist imperialism.

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<sup>124</sup> 2005, p. 34, emphasis added.

<sup>125</sup> Sandra Harding. *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*.

<sup>126</sup> An acronym for Social Transformation to Include Women in Africa articulated by Molaria Ogundipe Leslie, (1997).

Thus far in this discussion on the theoretical framework of this thesis, I have discussed various theories which explore the different aspects of femininity and subjectivity. Bringing these theories together, in a process of carnivalizing theory is also a way of testing out the theory to see what happens when womanism is placed, for example, in conversation with Deleuze and Guattari's multiplicity and Braidotti and Haraway's cyborgs, nomads and figurations. Two questions of importance arise: in what ways are literary theory and practice modified by such critical dialogue and how might an understanding of African femininities then be articulated? This is the crux of my carnivalizing of theory; to provide a new strategy that recognizes the heterogeneity of African women and identifies difference as an exercise of agency rather than cultural taboo.

The fusion of African and Western knowledge creates a space in which cultures and modernity may be placed in dialogic relation and this results in dissonances and convergences between the novels, theory and knowledge which symbolize and underscore the disparate, messy and fragmented nature of feminine identities in the writing. This *metissage* of theory also produces a multiplicity; that which Deleuze and Guattari would term an extensive numerical multiplicity.<sup>127</sup> This type of multiplicity does not change in shape but increases in number, so that the more theories I 'carnivalize'; the more multiplicities are produced. Extensive multiplicities are composed of individual entities in order to produce a whole or quantity of things; and this rationale works toward the

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<sup>127</sup> Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus: Schizophrenia and Capitalism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983, p. 348.

idea of a collective multiplicity, so that by combining diverse theories together a whole is produced.

A 'becoming' as Deleuze and Guattari<sup>128</sup> define it is 'always in the middle, one slips in, enters in the middle; one takes up or lays down rhythms' (1987: 279). Becoming is the continual movement between and in the middle of things; that which occurs in the 'and.' Paul Patton (2000) develops a political perspective on becoming and multiplicity as the fundamental characteristics of a reactive force. Patton argues that, 'there is no society that is not reproducing itself on one level, while simultaneously being transformed into something else on another level.'<sup>129</sup> He suggests that a multiplicity of forces are always and already active in political thought and his particular application of Deleuze's thought to the political provides a way of thinking that in the context of my thesis suggests that social identities and their representation, are a means of resistance.

In the novels analyzed, women have multiple social and familial roles into which they are constructed, but in simultaneous reaction, they reproduce themselves as the antithesis of their roles; for example mother/prostitute, mother/murderer, grandmother/mother, sister/mistress represent the normative and alter-egos of some of the characters in the novels. That these contradictory identities can co-exist within one character underscores the rationale that every woman is multiplicity as she is more

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<sup>128</sup> Becoming-woman according to Deleuze is the first phase in a journey towards becoming-imperceptible which is 'the immanent end of becoming' in a line between states displacing and disorienting subjects and identities, from *A Thousand Plateaus*, 1987, pp. 279-281.

<sup>129</sup> Paul Patton. *Deleuze and the Political*, London: Routledge, 2000. p. 107.

than just one identity. Furthermore, the contradictions signify the becoming of women. Deleuze and Guattari argue that within a multiplicity, the boundary between things is collapsed, thus the roles of mother/abortionist, for example, can be thought of as fluid identities. The ‘/’ symbolizes a becoming where it can be (re)imagined as a marker of a fractured maternal temporality in *Butterfly Burning*. Outside of linear time as constructed by the colonial order, the Black characters are pushed to the margins of time as the absent subjects of the state contained in the township of Makokoba. The self-abortion of the protagonist, Phephelaphi, intervenes in chronological time and colonial control by taking control of her own body. Read within terms of multiplicity and becoming; she ‘lives within the cracks’ of linear time by escaping from a future of poverty. This interstitial existence, gives her a sense of control so that her abortion is an, ‘action [that] had been about tidying up. Ordering the disorder.’ (108)

Becoming-woman according to Deleuze is the first phase in a journey towards becoming-imperceptible which is ‘the immanent end of becoming’ (1987: 279) in a line between states displacing and disorienting subjects and identities. *Butterfly Burning* opens, ‘There is a pause. An expectation.’ (1998: 1) indicative of a break in time that Lunga in her critical essay on Vera, interprets as, ‘the space between the pause and the waiting announces a tension...an indeterminable space in which the characters exist.’<sup>130</sup> Within a Deleuzean schema becoming is in the

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<sup>130</sup> ‘Between the pause and the waiting: the struggle against time in Yvonne Vera’s *Butterfly Burning*’ in Muponde & Taruvinga (Eds.), 2002. p. 191.

middle, 'it's the border... The least perceptible of things,'<sup>131</sup> this is the plane of immanence where life takes place. Phephelaphi's 'ordering of the disorder' of colonialism can also be said to be on the plane of immanence because of the alternate ways in which she challenges the hegemonic state.

Further exploring the meanings of femininity embedded in the writing, the question, 'what is a woman?' (1988:186) posed by the young female characters of *Nervous Conditions* is of central importance with regards to the depiction of sexuality and body image. Discussing how anorexic boyish-looking Nyasha contradicts the endorsed Shona image of the ideal female body which translates to ideal woman in the novel, I suggest that the eating disorder pushes the boundaries of African epistemological and cultural definitions of womanhood.

Such a push seeks to open up an important discourse on African gender practices which are primarily constructed on a hetero-normative bias, yet there is evidence to show that in some cultures there are same sex acts such as women friendships among the ZeZuru of Mazoe<sup>132</sup> in Zimbabwe or the Meru in Kenya.<sup>133</sup> The experimentation alluded to when Tambu and Nyasha share a bed in *Nervous Conditions* references cultural practice and

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<sup>131</sup> *Negotiations* trans. M. Joughin, New York: Columbia University Press, 1995. p. 45.

<sup>132</sup> See Marc Epprecht. *Hungochani: The History of a Dissident Sexuality in Southern Africa*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 2004. p. 48, p. 224.

<sup>133</sup> See David Machacek & Melissa M. Wilcox. *Sexuality and the World's Religions*, Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2003. p. 19.

in Chapter Three on sexuality, I discuss the discovery of sexuality enacted within a specific cultural framework by the girls. My reading probes whether subjectivity can be located in sexual desire and if situating sexual difference evokes questions of women's collectivity, freedom, family, and nation. The theoretical premise underpinning this investigative reading is Haraway's transgressive post-gender cyborg and anthropological evidence of sexual practices which challenge contemporary hetero-centric views of sexuality in Africa. Questioning the gendered construction of bodies, Braidotti puts forwards that, '[the body is] neither biological nor a sociological category, but rather a point of overlap between the physical, the symbolic and the material social conditions.' (2003: 44) Rejecting an essentialist position, Braidotti broadens ways of thinking about post-gender subjectivity as specific to the African context where there is ample evidence showing that gender is, to an extent, a recent 'colonial invention.'<sup>134</sup> If I am able to successfully adapt Braidotti's expansive outlook as well as the other various sources of knowledge that I draw on, my thesis hopes to offer a nuanced exploration of the different expressions of subjectivity and their varying relations to each other and to feminist and cultural paradigms of African womanhood within the selected texts.

## **Structure**

My thesis is structured into three Chapters each exploring the multiple

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<sup>134</sup> Oyerinke Oyewumi. *The Invention of Women: Making African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press. 1997.

figurations of women according to the themes of femininity, motherhood and sexuality. In Chapter One I read Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* and to a limited extent, *The Book of Not*. In exploring the figurations of femininity in the 1988 novel, I examine the nature of the female collective at the level of narrative structure and characterization. This exploration reveals how writing functions as a mode of representation that produces new, alternative histories about women and further to this, the figuration of ancestral memory, communality, corporeality and gendered resistance that show how the women collective functions and how each character challenges the fixity of customary discourses, colonial and nationalist orders as well as African feminist theory. The work of European feminists, Braidotti and Haraway and African feminists like Acholonu, Ogunyemi and Oyewumi is placed in critical conversation with the various issues of femininity in the novels.

Similarly interrogating the fixity of femininity as constructed by cultural and political structures of power, Vera's novels problematise motherhood and this is my concern in Chapter Two of this thesis. Adapting Braidotti and Haraway's cyborg and nomad metaphors to the Zimbabwean context, I intend to explore the multiple ways in which women constitute themselves as mothering subjects, whether as a spiritual leader or an abortionist, for example.

My discussion attempts to map the maternal characters of the texts as historical figures from the pre-colonial period through to the liberation

struggle. Mapping images of motherhood that are simultaneously contradictory and complimentary to the dominant Afro-centric feminist and cultural conceptions of motherhood enables me to explore more diverse unconventional forms of motherhood as expressed by the writing.

Further exploring rebellious forms of femininity in the texts, in Chapter Three I investigate the possibility of subversive textual constructions of same-sex relationships in *Nervous Conditions*, *Under the Tongue* and *Butterfly Burning*. Reading in between the lines that same-sex relations are encoded in the writing, I attempt to argue that by subversively portraying the suggested same-sex friendships as located in-between hetero/homosexuality, the writing dismantles the binary between the permissible and the forbidden behaviors of women within African culture. The question ‘what is a woman?’ (186), posed by the young female characters of *Nervous Conditions* is of central importance in my reading of the female friendship that develops between Nyasha and Tambu (*Nervous Conditions*) and the relationships of the women in *Under the Tongue* and *Butterfly Burning*. I will argue that the subversive same-sex longings encoded in the writing, suggests that these texts convey a different image of femininity which challenges the silencing of same-sex relations within African society.

Framing the narrative themes of femininity within the theoretical concepts of multiplicity, figuration, material corporeality and sexual difference alongside cultural and African feminist perspectives offers fertile ground

for ways to rethink African feminine subjectivity. I hope that the unique combining of these disparate yet relational<sup>135</sup> knowledge(s) point towards a much needed reading strategy for this body of texts through which my thesis will make a fresh, scholarly contribution to the growing body of work on Zimbabwean and African women's writing.

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<sup>135</sup> Edouard Glissant. *Caribbean Discourse* trans. Betsy Wing, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1997.

# Chapter 1: *SheRebels* - Figurations of Femininity in Dangarembga's Fiction

## **Framing an Analysis of Femininity**

In this Chapter on *Nervous Conditions* and *The Book of Not*, I discuss figurations as a literary and theoretical tool deployed to imagine women as figures bearing social and historic agency. By arguing that their rebellious acts that include fighting their brothers and fathers and starving oneself as a form of social protest are legitimate responses to the

prevailing social conditions of gendered and racial oppression, I hope to show these various figurations of colonial women indicate the multiplicity of gendered subjectivity. Specifically, I intend to illustrate my application of Haraway's (1992; 2004) work on figurations in reading of the representations of women in Dangarembga's novel. In the texts, the unique images of women defy patriarchally prescribed gender roles, subverting and transgressing socially constructed gender boundaries of nature/culture, personal/political, private/public which assign women to the former, lower categories.

Haraway's figuration is based on the technological metaphor of the cyborg (1991) which is an attempt to locate the biotechnological intersection of nature and culture as a radical questioning of 'myths of origin naturalised by science.'<sup>136</sup> Locating Haraway's concept in the historical context of Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, it can be seen that the boundaries of decolonized male/colonized female are transgressed and reformulated through the figuring of anorexia/bulimia as a political metaphor. The figuring of an eating disorder, for example, exposes the social constructedness of gender and identity to ongoing critical revision as Nyasha becomes a rebellious, emaciated figure so contrary to cultural images of African femininity. In this instance, the concept of the figuration provides a broad canvas upon which to begin to rethink the images associated with womanhood. Further, Dangarembga and Vera's mutual attempts to construct rebel women who break taboos as resistance

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<sup>136</sup> Susan Paasonen. 'Thinking Through the Cybernetic Body: Popular Cybernetics and Feminism', *Rhizomes 4*, Spring 2002 (online) <http://www.rhizomes.net/issue4/paasonen.html> [date accessed: 23 August 2010].

against oppression provide new ways of thinking about the ways in which women represent the interrelatedness, intersections and dissonances between gender, sexuality, culture, nature, history and collectivity.

Exploring the critical relevance figurations to history, Haraway sees the cyborg images as a transformative metaphor for (re)remembering the past and unearthing previously unheard narratives and a means of inscribing women into discourse. Haraway writes that:

Figures collect up hopes and fears and show possibilities and dangers. Both imaginary and material figures root people in stories and link them to histories. Stories are always more generous and capacious than ideologies...I want to know how to inhabit histories and stories rather than deny them.<sup>137</sup>

Applying this reasoning to my analysis, I briefly discuss Zimbabwean women's literary history to show how Dangarembga's figuring of colonized women adds a fresh voice to the discourse of the nation which has been dominated by Black male and White voices. In addition I intend to argue that by representing women, as figures of discourse, Dangarembga's writing offers the possibility of exploring the social codes and meanings given to women as sexed bodies and as gendered identities. By situating each of the women characters within a specific context, Dangarembga sheds light on a particular lived experience, such as the depiction of anorexia/bulimia in Nyasha and nervous breakdowns in both Nyasha and Tambu which raise critical questions about the impact of colonialism on Black women's bodies and identities. In choosing to read these struggles as well as those of Lucia and Maiguru as a range of

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<sup>137</sup> *The Haraway Reader*, London: Routledge, 2004.

complex resistances against multiple structures of oppression, I hope to show how the texts re-invest gendered identity and corporeality with a new, more complex meaning that represents women as subjects rather than objects of the colony. Such an examination envisions the possibility of expanding and re-shaping the boundaries of discourse, knowledge and culture to include the experiences of those deemed social rebels and outcasts. In giving a platform to showcase the cultural contradictions and social contestations of Black Zimbabwean female subjectivity, I hope to provide important commentary on the continuously evolving and fluid nature of femininity and also contribute a different, fresh opinion to African feminist perspectives on the construction of corporeal and colonial subjectivities.

In addition to examining the figuring of female colonial subjectivity particular to each character, I am also concerned with the figuration of the collective and how this is used as a narrative device in order to transform the classic *bildungsroman* from an individual's transition childhood to adolescence. Not only does the figuration of the collective form the frame through which individual and interconnected figurations can be seen, but it also engenders the idea of a collective multiplicity. The concept of multiplicity, as first theorized by Guattari (1974) provides a useful methodological frame for understanding group identity politics. According to Guattari, a molar multiplicity<sup>138</sup> always operates on a large

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<sup>138</sup> Mark D. Seem & Félix Guattari. 'Interview: Félix Guattari', *Diacritics*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Autumn, 1974), pp. 38-41. p. 3, p. 38.

scale with two principles: group participation and power.<sup>139</sup> It is the dominant faction that is authoritarian in nature at the political level of social life; state/global politics or tribal groups. The concept of molecular multiplicity imagines different spaces of agency in which a group can operate where there are no hierarchies or divisions, but exists as a collective group 'of semiotic flows, certainly, but also material and social flows, flows of all kinds.'<sup>140</sup> His Marxist rationale is located in the context of a capitalist society that depends largely on production and within this setting, the masses struggle against the bourgeoisie demanding fairer representation and workers' rights. Guattari suggests that the dialectic between production and representation of the struggling masses is not a dialectic, but a series of continuous flows. In this vein, the concept of molecular multiplicity is a form of subversive collectivity. When multiplicity operates in this way, there is no break between production and representation as the subject-group is now a democratically empowered group and not an object of the capitalist system as might be the case with subjugated groups. The notion of molecular multiplicity, provides a lens through which I can read the figuring of femininity in both Dangarembga and Vera's novels because it identifies the different spaces and modes of agency for a group of peoples who are often subjugated because of the varied and intersecting oppressions of race, gender, poverty, colonialism and womanhood as identified by Ma'Shingayi in *Nervous Conditions*. In arguing that Dangarembga figures the collective as a narrative frame by which to explore how gender operates as a tool of patriarchal and colonial

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<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.* p.38.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

oppression and also women-centred resistance, I hope to also show how this narrative style contributes something new to the genre of the *bildungsroman* as the text inscribes African women's literary presence in a field dominated by African and European men.

From the outset it is clear that *Nervous Conditions* is a collective narrative as the protagonist, Tambu, tells the reader that this is, 'the story of four women whom I loved and our men.' (204) In my view, by interweaving the experiences of four women Tambu, Maiguru and Lucia, into one story, Dangarembga attempts to present a network of bodies and identities whose strategies of negotiation and social rebellion re-constitute meanings of femininity within the Shona family. On a wider, continental scale, the figuration of the collective resonates with the lived experiences of African women under colonialism and patriarchy,<sup>141</sup> so that the fiction creates alternative models of African subjectivity that challenge hegemonic perception of women as a homogenous entity.

Using the complex structure of the Shona family as a framework for a pluralistic, interwoven narrative, Dangarembga's writing presents the collective as connected through blood and marriage, each assigned with a specific cultural role that contributes to the group dynamic. For example, Maiguru in English culture would be her aunt-in-law, but in Shona culture the name given to her means 'big mother' and in the novel, she is called mother by Tambu, as is the cultural practice. When Maiguru speaks to her

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<sup>141</sup> See Jean Marie Allman, Susan Geiger & Nakanyike Musisi (Eds.), *Women in African Colonial Histories*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002.

daughter Nyasha, she refers to Tambu as ‘Sisi Tambu’ (88, 92), which translates to Sister Tambu. Although Nyasha and the protagonist are cousins, in Shona custom, a cousin is considered a sister. The application of terms like, ‘mother’ and ‘sister’ to the non-biological parent or family member can be read as a collapsing of Western constructed boundaries between the biological/social meanings of family. Christine van Boheemen-Saaf (2006) reads this blurring as, ‘the hybridization, ambiguity, and redoubling of plotlines and multiple notions of identity.’<sup>142</sup>

The transmission of family history via oral memory from Mbuya to Tambu underscores the importance of Dangarembga’s text as a source of knowledge. As Tambu ploughs with her grandmother, she is often told stories about the Sigauke’s past and it is a ‘history that could not be found in the textbooks.’ (17) Mbuya’s story is significant in figuring ancestral memory, as discussed further, below, and establishes a clear genealogical relationship of the Sigauke clan to the land. Their undocumented history becomes documented via the novel.

Not only does *Nervous Conditions* seek to confer historical subjectivity upon an African family, it also reveals key processes by which a character experiences being-in-the-world. In the novel, the interplay between the individual and community is essential to becoming-subject in the colonial

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<sup>142</sup> Christine Van Boheemen-Saaf. ‘*Nervous Conditions* as Hybrid Family Romance: Dangarembga’s Appropriation of a Colonial Topos’ in *Family Fictions : The Family in Contemporary Postcolonial Literatures* : (Proceeds of an international conference, hosted by the Department of English, University of Groningen in August 2005, CDS Research Report No. 23) Irene Visser, Heidi van den Heuvel-Disler (Eds.) Groningen, Netherlands: CDS Research Report, 2006. pp.11–26. Quote from p.18.

world. The relationship collapses the binary division between the Multiple and the One, in a Deleuzian sense as alluded to in the Introduction of this thesis.<sup>143</sup> This principle of the collective is reflected in the various examples of dialogic relations between the women. Sisterhood, connecting three generations of women through oral memory, solidarity against patriarchal oppression and mother-daughter relations are examples that indicate collectivity within the text.

Collectivity also means how the relations between the women are negotiated within both a traditional and modern world in order to achieve self/collective development and how the familial network aids women in their resistance against patriarchal and colonial oppression. To help explore how this is depicted in the writing, I draw on the work of Aegerter who looks at the matrix of collectivity and communality of Dangarembga's narrative. Aegerter states that:

[*Nervous Conditions*] synthesizes traditional notions of African community from a womanist perspective with women's autonomy defined from an "African" perspective. Their voices are both individual and collective; they negotiate both individual biography and historical contextuality and community.<sup>144</sup>

The dialogic and collective principle of the text works through the exchange of voices such as the conversations between Tambu and her grandmother as well as Nyasha where characters other than the protagonist become the storytellers or the story itself as Nyasha's nervous breakdown *is* a nervous condition, as the title of the text suggests. The narrative moves in and out of Tambu and Nyasha's lives allowing the

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<sup>143</sup> See pp.12- 13.

<sup>144</sup> 1996, p. 231.

reader insight into the different ways each woman experiences a similar political and patriarchal oppression.

In thinking through the different, interwoven narratives, the novel becomes a ‘knowledge space’<sup>145</sup> in which multiple experiences and ways of knowing can be mapped. Haraway argues that figurations help to describe and map difference which results in the refigured ‘mutated witness’<sup>146</sup> of history. Mapping the various experiences of women, Dangarembga’s *bildung* not only mutates into a collective narrative, but the story of Tambu, evolves into a sequel, *The Book of Not*, discussed below. Dangarembga’s 2006 novel is analysed in terms of the sequel genre and to a limited extent in my examination of how Tambu negotiates her subjectivity in a nation in a constant state of political flux. In my analysis of both these texts, I intend to argue that the multiplication and continuity of narrative through the collective *bildung* and the sequel enables an historical and gendered mapping of a people’s transitions through colonialism and independence.

### **The Collective *Bildung***

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<sup>145</sup> Maja Van der Velden. ‘What’s Love Got to Do with IT?: On ethics and accountability in telling technology stories’, on [www.globalagenda.org/file/12\\_2008](http://www.globalagenda.org/file/12_2008), [date accessed: 28 March 2010].

<sup>146</sup> Donna Haraway.

*Modest Witness@Second Millennium.FemaleMan©\_Meets\_OncoMouse*<sup>TM</sup>, New York: Routledge, 1997.

To illustrate how the *bildungsroman* novel embodies the figuration of the collective, I consider storytelling techniques that Dangarembga deploys such as: orality, the doubling of characters and dialogic voice. The oral folk tale is the earliest form of storytelling and in showing how Dangarembga appropriates this practice for the written text I will argue that this is the source of collectivity as a literary metaphor and also the site of literary authority for Dangarembga as a Black woman writer. Drawing on the work of Mae G. Henderson (1989) on the authorizing of Black women's text and Aegerter's analysis on the cultural matrices of kinship and interdependence in *Nervous Conditions*, I intend to show how the woman-centred aesthetic functions in the *bildung* and its sequel challenge the traditional, objectified images of women by figuring womanhood as vested with considerable creative authority. Such power enables women writers to frame social relations and values as experienced by women, thereby constructing women as figures of discourse, as the argument of this thesis suggests.

Before examining the narrative features of the writing, it is useful to look at the historical obstacles affecting African women writers and material conditions surrounding Tsisti Dangarembga's personal struggle to publish her work as these complications reflect the real-life barriers Zimbabwean women face comparable to the trying situations of the fictional characters. These two issues highlight how and why women writers challenge the identity myths of racial inferiority and cultural silencing to create their own image of historicity and female identity.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, the intention to re-construct subjectivity through writing is one of the key functions of literature. Deleuze and Guattari see literature as ‘a fabulation,’<sup>147</sup> a creative means to give power to the becoming of a people because it is ‘the invention of a people who is missing.’<sup>148</sup> Although Deleuze and Guattari formulate this perspective on literature in their reading of European writers James Joyce<sup>149</sup> and Franz Kafka,<sup>150</sup> I borrow their interpretations of these major works as the ‘invention of a people’ to enable my reading of Dangarembga’s fiction. In my analysis, I take ‘missing people’ to mean those who are absent from master discourses, as human beings with a history and language, of whom Achebe in his criticism of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1975) argues that, ‘Africa was not supposed to have a language...the natives only howl, screech, they don’t speak.’<sup>151</sup> As people who form the animalistic other in Conrad’s text and have occupied the margins of history African women are a missing people, one who, through writing, invent their voices and stories into history in order to claim subjectivity.

‘Using the tools of the master,’<sup>152</sup> texts like Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*<sup>153</sup> (1996) and Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* appropriate the style of

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<sup>147</sup> Gregg Lambert. *The Non-Literature of Gilles Deleuze*, New York: Continuum International Publishing, 2002. p.18.

<sup>148</sup> *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1986. p. 16.

<sup>149</sup> *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1917).

<sup>150</sup> *The Trial* (1925).

<sup>151</sup> Chinua Achebe speaking at Queen Mary University, London, 6 October, 2005.

<sup>152</sup> Audre, Lorde. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, New York: The Crossing Press, 1984.

the European novel in order to ‘invent’ and give voice to ‘missing’ Africans. Both Achebe and Dangarembga experiment with narrative by fusing African oral mode of storytelling with the European written tradition so as to claim a presence within the larger space of global literatures. This literary reinvention and discursive intervention is exemplary of how figuration, as imagined through writing, map the cultural and historical subjectivity of women, as both Haraway and Braidotti argue.

From the perspective of Deleuze and Guattari, literature has revolutionary potential. In *Essays Clinical and Critical* (1997), Deleuze describes the political function of literature as, ‘the collective enunciation of a minor people, or of all minor peoples, who find their expression only in and through the writer.’<sup>154</sup> In the context of the historical development of Zimbabwean women’s writing, a writer like Dangarembga can be seen as speaking for women’s marginalisation and seeking to ‘overturn the “zero image” of blackness’<sup>155</sup> that Black women have historically been assigned.

Flora Veit-Wild’s survey<sup>156</sup> shows that, of the African literature published by the Rhodesian Literature Bureau since the late 1950s, out of 280 novel

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<sup>153</sup> *Things Fall Apart* London: African Writer’s Series, [1958], 1996.

<sup>154</sup> Gilles Deleuze. ‘Literature and Life,’ in *Essays Clinical and Critical* Trans. D. W. Smith & M. A. Greco, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. pp.1-7.

<sup>155</sup> Madhu, Dubey. *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994. p.3.

<sup>156</sup> Flora Veit-Wild. *Survey of Zimbabwean Writers – Educational and Literary Careers*, Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies, 1992.

and play titles, only 30 had been by women<sup>157</sup> and when *Nervous Conditions* was published in 1988 there had only been short stories and plays by women in English since 1976 as the Literature Bureau, an instrument of the State,<sup>158</sup> strongly encouraged African writers to write in the vernacular. As the first novel in English by a Black Zimbabwean woman, *Nervous Conditions* fills a significant literary gap and seeks to make the presence(s) of women known as a symbolic triumph over the obstacles in publishing, such as manuscripts being published under male names or being burnt.<sup>159</sup> The extreme material, social and political hardships faced by women writers in the production and reception of literature signifies Dangarembga's 1988 publication as a momentous overcoming of gendered and racial barriers for Zimbabwean women. In terms of literary representation of African women, a novel like *Nervous Conditions* can be read as a radical rewriting of woman-as-subject as compared to the savage images of woman-as-'other' in imperialist master texts like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>158</sup> Rekai Makamani. 'An Analysis of the Influences of Discourse in the Anthology: *Zimbabwean Poetry in English*': Conference paper from [http://www.polytechnic.edu.na/academics/schools/comm\\_legal\\_sec/com/presentation/ZIMBABWEAN\\_POETRY.pdf](http://www.polytechnic.edu.na/academics/schools/comm_legal_sec/com/presentation/ZIMBABWEAN_POETRY.pdf) [date accessed: 16 February 2010].

<sup>159</sup> Collette Mutingwadza explains in an interview to Veit-Wild how her husband discovered her manuscript and burnt it because 'he did not like what I was writing about.' in Veit-Wild, 1992, p.51.

<sup>160</sup> Describing a native African woman in the Congo, Conrad writes, 'She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress.' In *Heart of Darkness*, London: Plain Label Books, 1975. p.168.

In their respective essays, Anim-Addo (2009) and Luz Gomez Garcia (2009) use the term ‘present absent’<sup>161</sup> to describe the inadequate depiction or non-representation of women within historical discourse. Women are the ‘present absent’ figures whose existence throughout history has not been properly accounted for and race, racism and colonialism exacerbate the lack of representation of Black Zimbabwean women even more. In accounting for the experiences of the colonized ‘present absent,’ Dangarembga’s *bildung* thus functions as a means of historical figuration in its production of an alternative female-centred narrative that redresses the absence or misrepresentation of women in both White colonial and African male writing.

To further analyze the literary importance of *Nervous Conditions* as a *bildung* narrative, I begin by referring to the observations of David J Mickelsen. (1986)<sup>162</sup> Commenting on the distinctive qualities of the African *bildung*, Mickelsen argues that the African reinvention of the novel of social progression differs from European variations in that it articulates a heightened awareness of the chaos of colonialism and post-liberation experiences specific to a particular African nation. Exploring the cultural conflict and moments of synthesis between colonial and traditional power, between rural and urban worlds, between maleness and femaleness, between mother tongue and the colonizer’s tongue, these

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<sup>161</sup> Luz Gómez-García. ‘The Arab Other: Gender Interculturality and a Linguaging Language’ in *Interculturality and Gender*, Joan Anim-Addo, Giovanna Covi and Mina Karavanta (Eds.), London: Mango Publishing, 2009.

Joan Anim-Addo. ‘Tracing Knowledge, Culture and Power: Towards an Intercultural Approach to Literary Studies’ also in *Interculturality and Gender*, 2009.

<sup>162</sup> David J. Mickelsen. ‘The *Bildungsroman* in Africa: The Case of *Mission terminée*.’ *The French Review* 59.3 (1986): pp. 418- 427. See pp. 418–420.

narratives of socialization are ‘an expanding of horizons.’<sup>163</sup> The portrayal of conflict shows literature as a medium figuring the African subject located at the intersections of colonial modernity, culture, gender and race politics. The point of intersections is where subject formation takes place and the present absent figure as symbolized in Tambu, negotiates power. Importantly, Tambu constructs her identity by synthesizing the colonial/traditional and rural/urban world. This signifies a collapsing or transcending of social binaries that has the effect of reconfiguring power relations between the colonized present absent subject and the colonizer.

By locating the protagonist in multiple worlds, Dangarembga’s writing muddies the colonial lines of history, race, class, modernity and tradition, thereby asserting the colonial experience for the native as complex and messy. Focusing on the political worlds portrayed in the African *bildung* genre, Nyaitetu-Wegwa<sup>164</sup> describes this as ‘a liminal space’<sup>165</sup> through which an anti-colonial literary canon is constructed which counters the colonial canon that portrays Africans as ‘primitive savage’ of Conrad’s text. The protagonist is a trans-colonial figuration inhabiting multiple, often conflicting cultures where she struggles for a place of belonging as shall be seen in the discussion of Tambu in *The Book of Not*, below. As a collective, the women suffer the displacing effect of colonialism in different ways. How this is experienced in each of the women will be examined below.

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<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.* p. 418.

<sup>164</sup> qtd. in Kwadwo Osei-Nyame Jnr. ‘The ‘Novel of Education’ in African Postcolonial Fiction: Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*’ pp. 234–259.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.* p. 7.

While Dangarembga's novel presents her characters as trans-colonial subjects in the process of experiencing colonial modernity, Dangarembga's *bildungsroman* as part of the feminist/womanist genre also represents an evolving category of literature in Black Zimbabwean literature. Critics such as, Primorac and Vambe<sup>166</sup> have argued that there is no one Zimbabwean novel that strictly falls into the genre of the African *bildung* like, Camara Laye's *L'Enfant Noir* (1954) does. Rather, there is a general consensus, among critics on two Zimbabwean novels that come closest to resembling the *bildung* novel. These are Shimmer Chinodya's *Harvest of Thorns* (1989) and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. Both these novels re-appropriate the European tradition to insert African voices into literary discourse while *Nervous Conditions* adds a gendered dimension further hybridizing the *bildung* novel.

The title of the book, *Nervous Conditions* taken from Jean Paul Sartre's epigraph, 'the condition of the native is a nervous condition' (1963: 20) in Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* (1963) can and has been read against these violent reactions to male domination.<sup>167</sup> Against Fanon's argument that reads, '[colonialism is] violence in its natural state and it will only yield when confronted with greater violence' (1963: 61) Zwicker reads the novel as symbolic of a nation undergoing political transition where violence against women creates an oppositional violent and creative

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<sup>166</sup> See R. Primorac (2007) and M.T Vambe. (2005).

<sup>167</sup> As discussed on pp. 22-23 in the Literature Review section of this thesis.

response.<sup>168</sup> The outbursts of Lucia, Tambu and Nyasha in reaction to the oppressive cultural conditions that silence women deny them the right to education and enforce control over bodily freedoms that lead to a greater response against colonialism as a gendered struggle.

In another sense, the ‘nervous condition of the native’ also refers to the hybridized existence of the colonized subject who must balance the demands of both the colonial and traditional world. Tambu and Nyasha, as discussed below, struggle with this balance so much that it affects their psychological well-being. The ‘nervous condition’ is aptly named by Tambu’s mother as the Englishness, because it is resultant of modernity in both of the girls. At the level of subjectivity, the ‘nervous condition’ shows the construction of subjectivity is not a neat and easy process, but a chaotic and fractured one.

*Nervous Conditions* as an account of life in colonial Zimbabwe presents a female collective suffering the colonial displacement and knock-on effect of patriarchal oppression in different yet connected ways. The family is the locus of the narrative and in depicting familial gender relations in the stories of Tambu, Maiguru, Lucia and Nyasha, Dangarembga provides a critique on how colonialism and tradition naturalise gender difference. After the fight scene, Tambu realizes that social assumptions about maleness and femaleness arise from biological difference. Comparing her situation to the other women, Tambu notices:

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<sup>168</sup>Zwicker, ‘The Nervous Collusions of Nation and Gender’ in Treiber and Willey (Eds.), 2002. pp. 4-24.

Babamukuru condemn[ed] Nyasha to whoredom, making her a victim of her femaleness, just as I felt victimised at home in the days when Nhamo went to school and I grew my maize. The victimisation I saw was universal. It didn't depend on poverty, on lack of education or tradition... all the conflicts always seemed to come back to this question of femaleness. Femaleness as opposed and inferior to maleness. (115-116)

Tambu's realisation makes clear that the nature of women's suffering in the family is primarily gendered. From Maiguru's spousal subjugation, to Tambu's second-class status as a daughter, to Ma'Shingayi's quiet acceptance of her husband's infidelity with Lucia and Nyasha's fight with her father; *all* of the female characters experience some form of gendered oppression at the hands of different patriarchal figures. Regardless of the men's age, religious belief, or social standing, they show a gender bias, like Nhamo who exploits his siblings on the basis of his male power or Babamukuru who is a Christian and head of the family who unflinchingly strikes his daughter, yet ironically brushes aside his younger brother's infidelity.

Similarly in Vera's novels there is an acknowledgement of the dominance of patriarchy, in not so explicit terms as Tambu experiences it, in the stories women like Mazvita of *Without a Name*, who is raped by a freedom fighter. He calls her '*hanzvadzi*' meaning 'younger sister', but he goes on to exert his physical and sexual power over her. There is a sense of male privilege exhibited by the freedom fighter, as I discuss in Chapter Two, because he feels he has a right to her body, even though she says no and resists his force. Like Tambu, Mazvita and the other women of Vera and Dangarembga's novels, occupy subjugated positions. Gender as a socially and politically constituted set of relations places men and women

in complex unequal relation to each other because of a sexist patriarchy that assigns women to socially subordinate roles.

In *Nervous Conditions*, power and control rests with the colonial state and Shona patriarchy, and to undermine that power, the women characters reconfigure power on their own terms. Education, despite its shortcomings is a means to an end, a way for women to redefine their position against the subjugating cultural and political forces that proscribe them as child-bearers and unworthy of educating. This is exemplified in the unfair treatment of Tambu by her father. Aged approximately nine or ten, she pleads with him for her school fees and he scornfully responds, ‘Stay at home with your mother. Learn to cook and clean. Grow vegetables.’ (15) This cultural limitation on women ‘to cook and clean’ has the effect of creating a domestic expectation that women should carry out their roles dutifully, such that a demand for the right to go to school, as Tambu does, is considered un-womanly. Equally unwilling to play the role of the subservient, silent Shona woman or dutiful Christian daughter, Lucia and Nyasha, respectively, wage the most outspoken rebellions in the text. My discussion of these domestic uprisings seeks to show how the characters’ acts constitute social agency against patriarchal and imperial systems which symbolizes femininity as a figuration of social mobility.

The informative observations of Eldred Duorsimi Jones and Marjorie Jones (1998) distinguish woman-centered African *bildungs* from those with a male hero. Of female-centered fiction they comment:

the education of the heroine is important for the African woman writer. This becomes an arena of conflict and struggle for the heroine seeking educational advancement as her pathway to independence. By virtue of her gender such aspiration usually creates schism between the heroine and her family. Undoubtedly gender becomes the intersecting point between the heroine's educational aspirations and the roles assigned to her by tradition. The embedded conflict is usually the focus of the writer's artistic exploration.<sup>169</sup>

As a novel of female development and education, *Nervous Conditions* examines the gendered iniquity faced by Tambudzai who is denied the right to schooling because culture dictates that girls are not an educational priority. As the 'novel of education'<sup>170</sup> for the female child, this *bildungsroman* expresses the gendered frustrations that result from a culture of patriarchal silencing.

Primorac comments that African women's narratives have, 'a doubling of narratives centred on women who in their response to male domination are the antithesis of each other.'<sup>171</sup> Suggesting doubling as a literary motif in *Nervous Conditions*, Primorac sees Tambu as paired with Nyasha and Lucia with Maiguru,<sup>172</sup> a view other critics<sup>173</sup> have also expressed. Aegerter sees the doubling of characters as complimentary to the collective matrix of African femininity when she writes:

[*Nervous Conditions*] synthesizes traditional notions of African community from a womanist perspective with women's autonomy defined from an "African" perspective. Their voices are both individual and collective; they negotiate both individual biography and historical contextuality and community. (1996: 231)

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<sup>169</sup> Eldred Jones & Marjorie Jones. *Childhood in African Literature*, Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1998. pp. 2-3.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.* p. 2.

<sup>171</sup> *The Place of Tears: The Novel and Politics in Modern Zimbabwe*, Harare: Weaver Press, 2007. p. 114.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>173</sup> See L. Aegerter, (1996), J. Treiber, (2002), S. McWilliams, (1991).

The dialogic and collective principle of the text works through the exchange of voices, thereby allowing the reader insight into the different ways each woman experiences a similar political and patriarchal oppression. This multiplicity of perspectives brings to the fore the importance of interdependency. The relations between the two girl cousins, Mbuya and Tambu, Lucia and her sister, Ma'Shingayi, the womenfolk at the family tribunal, reflect a sisterhood and solidarity. The kinship ties are a mode of survival for not only the women, but the wider family, as women are the core maintainers of the economic system. As food producers, Tambu, Mbuya and Ma'Shingayi work the land. As an investment in the future, Babamukuru sends Tambu to school so she may one day earn enough money to lift her family out of rural poverty, while as a reproducer; the pregnant Lucia carries the future of the clan in her womb. Although the community would break down without the contributions of women, the patriarchy shows little recognition of their importance. In weaving a narrative based on female kinship ties, Dangarembga's text de-centres patriarchy as the singular head of the family and pluralizes the dimensions of power. By (re)situating African women's roles as central to the family, Dangarembga deftly illustrates how women are centrally embedded in every aspect of cultural life, thereby subversively overturning patriarchal dominance in family affairs.

Tambu's mother accurately describes the intersecting structures of oppression subjugating females when she describes 'Womanhood' as a 'heavy burden.' (16) Ma'Shingayi says to her daughter:

This business of womanhood is a heavy burden.... How could it not be? Aren't we the ones who bear children? When it is like that you can't just decide today I want to do this, tomorrow I want to do that, the next day I want to be educated! When there are sacrifices to be made, you are the one who has to make them.... And these days it is worse, with the poverty of blackness on one side and the weight of womanhood on the other. (16)

Although there is a bitter tone to her words, her view describes the sufferings of the novel's women: Tambu is prevented from going to school, Nyasha experiences racism and cultural alienation while Maiguru is educated, but she is not an independent woman because she has the responsibility of being a wife, daughter in law, aunt and mother. Ma'Shingayi's identification of race, gender, poverty, culture and motherhood as the obstacles facing African women is shared by African feminist theorist Ogundice-Leslie who argues, 'the African woman has six mountains on her back.' (1997: 228) Naming her brand of feminism(s), STIWANISM<sup>174</sup>, she adapts Mao Tse Tung's four mountains of oppression on the Chinese woman's back to six metaphorical burdens carried by African women. She explains:

One is oppression from outside (colonialism and neo-colonialism?), the second is from traditional structures, feudal slave based, communal etc, the third is her backwardness (neo-colonialism) the fourth is man, the fifth is her color, her race and the sixth is herself.<sup>175</sup>

Ogundice-Leslie points out that, although oppression of women is universal to patriarchal societies, these intersecting loads are specific to the condition of African woman and played out differently across the Continent.

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<sup>174</sup> As mentioned in the Introduction of this thesis, STIWA is an acronym for Social Transformation Including Women in Africa.

<sup>175</sup> *Recreating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations*, Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, [1994] 1997, p. 228.

Both academic and fictional analyses name the same material and historical conditions which create gendered hierarchies and the ‘burdens of womanhood’. Through its articulation of a common marginalisation, *Nervous Conditions* attempts to account for the experiences of women as a collective counter discourse against patriarchal and colonial hegemonies. By positioning the various present absent figures of femininity as resistant of historical silencing and erasure from discourse, the novel, ‘disrupts [masculine] privileging [and] disrupts external notions of essence, of sameness: the cultural text of femininity,’<sup>176</sup> that Theresa de Lauretis (1989) views as the function of feminist literature.

In symbolizing the record of new history through narrative, Zimbabwean women are constructed as both historic and self-writing subjects. Black feminist thought describes this type of creative invention as an act of ‘conjuring’. It is a womanist term that Marjorie Pryse (1985)<sup>177</sup> uses to describe how Black women inscribe and (re)inscribe their histories through the legacy of oral tales, traditional practices that have been bequeathed to Black women by their mothers, grandmothers, great grandmothers and so on. Reading Black women as ‘conjured figures’, Dangarembga fuses the oral tradition with modern writing in order to signify the continued presence of women negotiating their individual/collective subjectivities at different historical periods.

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<sup>176</sup> Theresa de Lauretis. ‘The *Essence of the Triangle* or Taking the Risk of Essentialism Seriously in Italy, the U.S and Britain’, *Differences*, 1, No. 2, 1989.

<sup>177</sup> See Introduction in Marjorie Pryse & Hortense, J. Spillers (Eds.) *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition (A Midland Book)*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985.

*Nervous Conditions* constructs a complex negotiation between the oral past and the experience of the modern present where the written word is the dominant form of creative expression. Merging past with present, women's custodial role as *sarungano* (storyteller) is figured in Mbuya's story, discussed below, and in passing on her story as a witness of history Mbuya is also a custodian of Black women's creativity. This is an artistic and womanist strategy that Alice Walker passionately describes in the short essay, 'In Search of Our Mother's Gardens.'<sup>178</sup> Walker writes:

And so our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see...so many of the stories are my mother's stories....through years of listening to my mother's stories of her life, I have absorbed not only the stories themselves, but something of the manner in which she spoke something of the urgency that involves the knowledge that her stories - like her life - must be recorded. (1984: 240)

Here, Walker argues for the importance of creativity as a repository of Black women's collective consciousness. Against the tide of history, writing offers the creative (re)construction and documentation of Black experience that has been denied to women. Writing therefore offers women an alternative historic imaginary in which to weave generations of storytelling from the pre-colonial oral to colonial *bildung* and the colonial/post-independence sequel. The collective narrative thus aims to re-tell the nation-story through a female-centered world and to construct femininity as a legitimate source of history. It enables women to mark their historic and continued presence, countering discursive exclusion.

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<sup>178</sup> Alice Walker. *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose*, London: Women's Press, 1982.

Mbuya's story-telling (re)constructs an African subaltern history that pre-dates colonialism, locating new metaphorical spaces of Black subjectivity as they are the subjects of this history she gives to Tambu. It is a 'history that could not be found in the textbooks' (17) and Mbuya recalls a past that interrogates the authenticity of colonial historic accounts, a questioning that becomes important to Tambu when she attends the mission school. Mbuya's stories (re)create an alternative temporality subverting dominant colonial temporality that marks colonial settlement as the beginning of Zimbabwe's history, but Mbuya's stories contradict this by revealing a history that pre-dates the arrival of European settlers.

She tells Tambu:

Your family did not always live here, we did not move to this place until after the time I was married to your grandfather. We lived up in Chipinge, where the soil is ripe and your great-grandfather was a rich man in currency of those days having many fat herd of cattle, large fields and four wives who worked hard to produce bountiful harvests. (18)

The story invokes images of a traditional past where farming was the central aspect of communal life and the indigenous people had dominion over fertile land. The area named, Chipinge, is one of the most fertile areas in Zimbabwe in the Eastern Highlands where the country's major fruit and tree plantations are found and until the recent fast-track land program of the Mugabe government, the land was pre-dominantly white-owned. The re-telling of the displacement of Tambu's family reveals a counter-history to Rhodesian claims of ownership of the land as claimed in Wilbur Smith's *The Sunbird* (1976), for example.

Shunted to a less fertile area, 'grey sandy soil of the homestead, so barren' (18), the Sigauke clan continues the practice of farming as land is an

important aspect of their traditional livelihood. From grandmother to granddaughter as oral history is passed, there is also a disinherited lineage in Tambu who is the third generation of the family to be born in the 'barren' lands of southern Manicaland. These narratives of land and generational dispossession produce a narrative claiming right of possession by the indigenous, gendered 'knowing subject'<sup>179</sup> which challenges settler discourses of ownership. Woman as a complex and situated historical force confronts the structures of power that control production of knowledge. The novel illustrates a complex, multi-dimensional relationship between the females with the land; it is historical, ancestral, a site of Shona cosmology and links generations of women. As a diviner and/or a spirit medium, in *The Book of Not*, Tambu's mother and Mbuya in *Nervous Conditions* communicate with the ancestral world for guidance.

Orality is important in offering an alternative account against a dominant colonial narrative that violently repressed indigenous historiographies. In addition, it is also a principal way of inscribing feminine subjectivities as bearers of folk custom in a non-literate society. Orality also functions as the primary mode of communication and memory as the chief method of retaining that spoken word. Mbuya has the role of *sarungano* (storyteller) and Tambu is the novice, Mbuya's understudy who will later tell her own

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<sup>179</sup> See Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, New York: Routledge, 1991, p. 188. Also see Sandra Harding, 'Feminism Science and the Anti-Enlightenment Critiques' in *Women, Knowledge: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*, Anne Gray & Marilyn Pearsall (Eds.) New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 298, pp. 308-310.

story as she is the voice of *Nervous Conditions* and also its sequel, *The Book of Not*.

Whereas *Nervous Conditions* symbolizes a nation undergoing political transformation, *The Book of Not*, as sequel to this 1988 novel continues the war narrative and the early years of post-war Zimbabwe which shows that narrating the story of the nation is an unfinished business. Continuing Tambu's story in another novel fulfills the claim that Tambu makes in *Nervous Conditions* '[our story is] a process whose events stretched over many years and would fill another volume,' (204) which although unbeknown to both writer and fictional narrator at the time, hints at a future desire to continue Tambu's narrative. The ongoing tale of Tambudzai Sigauke in *The Book of Not* breaks new ground as the first ever published sequel by an African woman.

Sequels and trilogies are not common in African Literature<sup>180</sup> and these forms of narrative signify a temporal and ideological shift from the old colonial world portraying the impact of European settlement on African tradition to the new liberated world depicting an independent Black nation emerging from war as the novel traces the successes and failures of Black rule. This literary genre also signifies the establishment of continuity of the nation-story whose development is often paralleled with the growth or maturation of 'the native' as seen in Wole Soyinka's (1981; 1989; 1994)

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<sup>180</sup> The most notable examples are Camara Laye (1954; 1966), Wole Soyinka (1981; 1989; 1994) and Ben Okri (1991; 1994; 1998).

memoir trilogy<sup>181</sup> of Nigeria's transition from colonial to nationalist and military rule and the nation's experience of historic events like the Second World War (1939 -1945) and the Biafran War (1967-1970). All of these occurrences are written of in a mixture of fact and fiction,<sup>182</sup> as they are experienced from the personal viewpoint of the narrator.

For Dangarembga, the successful publication of *The Book of Not* leaves a third novel, *Bira: Stopping the Time*,<sup>183</sup> to complete a narrative that can be mapped onto a tripartite phase of the nation from British colonial rule to a liberated Zimbabwe up to recent times where it has become a nation in crisis under Robert Mugabe's nationalist rule. The gendering of the story of the nation; the *bildung*, its sequel and forthcoming third offering creates an alternative, new history of marginalized figures who mobilize around the power of kinship.

The shift of literary genres from *Nervous Conditions* as womanist *bildung* to the development of sequel and trilogy in *The Book of Not* and the forthcoming *Bira: Stopping the Time* represents experimentation with formal literary techniques as a mode of organizing narrative, thus signifying a radical widening of the scope of women's literature. This is because the narrative poetics of sequel and trilogy advance new ways of presenting women as literary figurations as illustrated in the use of the

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<sup>181</sup> Soyinka's novels are Aké: *The Years of Childhood*, London: Collings, 1981. *Ìsarà: A Voyage Around 'Essay'*, New York: Random House, 1989. *Ibadan: The Penkelemes Years: A Memoir: 1946-1965*, London: Methuen, 1994.

<sup>182</sup> See the 'Foreword' to *Ibadan* in which the author states the novel is a form of faction (fiction and fact).

<sup>183</sup> Unpublished, as yet.

trope of family and the effect of colonization upon different male and female family members ‘in order to articulate Tambu’s gradual awakening to the predicament of the postcolonial condition.’<sup>184</sup>

The narrator shifts in the sequel (and trilogy) marks a temporal and spatial fluidity in the narrative that allows a crossing between texts and fictional worlds. The reader is able to read back and forth between the figurations of femininity that trace and connect<sup>185</sup> the patterns of colonial and cultural oppression and the reader may also see how the women collectively and individually undo these structures of power in their everyday. Reading back, forth and between these narratives I offer an analysis of the women figures inhabiting these novels. Beginning with the main character Tambu and connecting to Nyasha, Lucia then Maiguru, I intend to show the various ways that femininity is narrated in the story through, for example, the *metissage* of customs and modernity or performances on the body as an assertion of self-identity. This method of reading endeavors to illustrate in more detail how the novel as a speaking agent for women undoes the fixed and marginalising patriarchal images of Black Zimbabwean femininity and instead produces female-constructed figurations.

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<sup>184</sup> Van Bohemeen-Saaf, 2006, p. 23.

<sup>185</sup> Braidotti, 1994, p. 32.

## Remembering You, Remembers Me

The above sub-heading echoes Tambu's parting thoughts before she leaves her family to go off to the exclusive mission school. Her classmates and family beg her not to forget them and as she watches everyone leave she wonders to herself:

Don't forget don't forget...If I forgot them, my cousin, my mother, my friends, I might as well forget myself and that, of course could not happen. So why was everybody so particular to urge me to remember? (188)

Tambu's family and friends stress the importance of roots and culture in order to be successful and in my analysis of the protagonist, I examine Tambu's transition from childhood to adolescence to adulthood, marked out through the physical movement from the rural homestead to the mission to the private girl's boarding school and finally to Harare. As she journeys through these spaces, she negotiates the traditional way of life with the modern world and in showing how she performs this strategic navigation, I suggest that this action is a figuration of *metissage*.

*Metissage* is a term mainly used within Francophone and Caribbean studies to describe racial mixing during the period of the French Empire. Caribbean theorist, Edouard Glissant (1997) has used this term to argue that the mixing of blood and cultures refutes any colonial or postcolonial discourse of racial purity. Arguing that the practice of *metissage* is proof of the interrelatedness of all people, Glissant writes:

the practice of cultural creolization is not part of some vague humanism which makes it permissible for us to become one with, the other. It establishes a cross-

cultural relationship in an egalitarian and unprecedented way among histories which we know today in the Caribbean are interrelated.<sup>186</sup>

*Metissage* as perspective on the inter-racial and intercultural communities of the Caribbean theorizes a multiple and complex social, historical, and cultural positionality which, when applied to Zimbabwean colonial context of *Nervous Conditions* and cultural mixing points to the processes of how black female subjectivity is constituted under British rule.

Unlike, the French system of colonisation by assimilation, the British method was segregation. Mbuya's story to Tambu is exemplary of how the tribal trust lands or native reserves were setup for the Africans, while the Europeans lived on best land and had a pass system controlling the movement of Blacks between places. Another example of segregation is seen in *The Book of Not* where Tambu and the other four Black girls in the school have to share a room together. Regardless of their different forms, the privileges of having a personal study in the Sixth Form do not extend to the Black girls, therefore Tambu shares a dormitory with her juniors who are in Form Two.<sup>187</sup> Tambu copes in this world of boundaries inherent with contradictions, she lives in the modern world with all the conveniences of tampons, toothbrushes and libraries, yet she is simultaneously excluded from interaction by a racist system that fears and legally prohibits the mixing of the races. Acculturation into the colonial way of life, while retaining one's Shona identity in order to survive, thus

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<sup>186</sup> *Caribbean Discourse* trans. Betsy Wing, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1997. pp.462–463.

<sup>187</sup> The equivalent of Year 9 in the UK.

destabilizes notions of a separate, but equal Rhodesia and also creates a new hybridised identity.

The creation of a new colonial subject position is an assertion of presence within the nation's imaginary. In figuring a new subjectivity of Black femaleness, Dangarembga gives historical voice to a marginalised figure and, to give political meaning to this narrative, Tambu's transformation can be mapped against significant historical events taking place in the 1960s in which the text is set. In 1965 the Rhodesian government, illegally declared Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) from Britain, marking the beginning of White minority rule under the Rhodesian Patriotic Front (RPF) with Ian Smith as Prime Minister. UDI was also a breakaway from the Central African Federation (CAF), a union of three British colonies, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe formed in 1953. In response the British government imposed economic and humanitarian sanctions against Rhodesia, because UDI was seen as an act of treason and betrayal to the Crown and also crushed all possibility of Black majority rule.

Against this backdrop, the figuration of the native colonial subject's coming of age in Tambu and particularly Nyasha, is an unstable evolution. Coming of age under the colony turned multinational super-state, now turned 'rogue state' and to become a liberated state in thirty five years or so, makes Tambu's transition from childhood to adolescence a complex journey, but in terms of subjectivity formation, the continuous political

changes unwittingly dispel the myth constructed by the state that Black colonial subjects are static, singular identities. As power relations are constantly negotiated by the Rhodesian state to assert its political status, power is also constantly bargained by the state's subjects in order to make their place in the world. Coming of age can be characterised as a symbiotic relationship between the political and the personal, the traditional and the modern, and the political figuration of *metissage* can be a useful way of locating experience and theorizing femininity in African feminist discourse.

*Metissage* as the process linked to trans-colonial subjectivity, differs from Homi Bhabha's (2004) notion of mimicry, a term often used by critics<sup>188</sup> to describe the protagonist's uncle, Babamukuru. Mimicry is defined by Bhabha as, 'a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite.'<sup>189</sup> Bhabha views the colonized intellectual as imitating the master's tongue and culture, yet equality will never be achieved. *Metissage* as a concept differs in that power is viewed as relational and it is always shifting such that the powerless can become empowered through the ambiguous and unstable processes of 'cultural mixing' that is both politically enforced and voluntary.

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<sup>188</sup> See L. Aegerter, (1996) and Anne, Donadey 'Overlapping and Interlocking Frames for Humanities Literary Studies: Assia Djebar, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Gloria Anzaldúa' *College Literature* – 34 (4), Fall 2007, pp. 22-42 as well as Sally, McWilliams. 'Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*: At the crossroads of feminism and post-colonialism' *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* Volume 31, Issue 1 Spring 1991, pp. 103–112.

<sup>189</sup> *Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 2004. p.86.

In my exploration of complexities of colonial subjectivity in Tambu, I argue that synthesis for her and all the characters of *Nervous Conditions* is a natural result of what happens when cultures mix, it produces an unequal power relation. *Metissage* can thus be seen as a form of defiance against a political order that wants to contain Africans in the reserves, but at the same time tries to strip the urbanized African of their culture and sense of belonging which is why Nhamo, Tambu and Nyasha suffer from the ‘Englishness’ as I discuss below.

*Metissage* is also used by Maria Karafilis<sup>190</sup> in her insightful paper on the fiction of Caribbean woman writer Jamaica Kincaid and Mexican, Sandra Cisneros to show how by deploying diversity as a literary motif, the traditional genre of the *bildungsroman* is revised into a cross-cultural literary form. Karafilis argues that the characters of these novels attain, ‘autonomous subjectivity’ (1998: 68) in their respective Anglo-American and Mexican, Antigua and Anglo worlds through the process of *metissage*.

Sharing Karafilis’ view that in the *bildung* novel, *metissage* is a strategic fusion of cultures in order to construct an ‘autonomous subjectivity’ for a racial and gendered subject, I explore how this is articulated in *Nervous*

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<sup>190</sup> ‘Crossing The Borders of Genre: Revisions of the “*Bildungsroman*” in Sandra Cisneros’s “The House on Mango Street” and Jamaica Kincaid’s “Annie John” in *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Winter, 1998) pp. 63–78.

*Conditions*. 'Caught between two knowledges'<sup>191</sup> when she goes to live at the mission, Tambu's sisters, cousin and mother express fears that she will lose her ways for those of the colonizer. When she returns home for the holidays, her sisters greet her '*vekuchirungu*' (176) (the one from the English). She has the influences of the colonial world upon her, but is warned by Nyasha of the corruptive nature of colonial assimilation. When she applies to the elite, all-white boarding convent, Nyasha says it is a school that would make Tambu, 'forget who you were, what you were and why you were that. The process, she said, was called assimilation... an honorary space in which you could join them and they could make sure you behaved yourself.' (178-179)

Nyasha warns her to think critically about the choice she is about to make, the opportunity to study further and with 'better equipment, better teachers, better furniture, better food, better everything.' (179) The cost of being in a 'better' world would make her numb to the prejudices of the system, 'to forget' as Nyasha puts it. Nyasha fears that her cousin's initiation into the world of the convent would make Tambu lose her identity, an identity Nyasha lost because she spent the early years of her childhood in England.

Tambu sees her progression from the rural homestead to the mission and eventually the convent, as a positive accession to a newly acquired status and it is the materialization of her dreams. However she takes on board

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<sup>191</sup> R. Radhakrishnan. 'Post-modernism and the Rest of the World' in *The Pre-Occupation of Postcolonial Studies* Fawzia, Afzal-Khan, Kaplana & Seshadri-Crooks, (Eds.) North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2000. p. 59.

the practical advice of Nyasha, and the others offer a way for Tambu to mediate between the two cultural worlds. Her dreams of education in the colonial world are anchored in awareness of what mobility it offers her, 'I would take the chance. I would lighten my burdens. I would go.' (180)

This synthesis of tradition and modernity is a negotiation of cultural roots and guidance in one realm and formal education and self/collective legitimated modern subjecthood in another. Tambu shows the ability to mediate the historical experience by asserting one's presence in a world privileged for the colonizers. At a cultural level, *metissage* is also shown in the way Tambu appropriates English traditions of reading texts like *Little Women* and comparing Mbuya's stories to European fairy tales of the princess and the frog. The fusion of storytelling cultures signifies a fluid crisscrossing and a contesting of colonizer/colonized binaries where the power relation between these two entities becomes transformed with the native accessing and appropriating the European colonizer's stories. In comparing the fairy tale with Mbuya's stories, Tambu performs an act of decolonization. By placing the European and African stories at the same level, both are legitimate and this legitimacy invents a missing people's history and creativity into history.

Tambu in her awakening to modern life through her educational development uses her mother's life as a mirror to reflect how she does not want to turn out. Willey has read this as a distancing from her traditional roots and her mother as Tambu imagines her mother viewed her life with,

‘a certain regret.’<sup>192</sup> Tambu is determined not to bear the ‘heavy burden of womanhood’ and through the process of *metissage* articulates a dialectic between modernity and tradition. The oppressive elements of Shona culture are deflected in the potential she sees in the ‘Englishness’ ‘dazzled by the affluence’ of the Convent and Nyasha’s ‘various and exotic library.’ (all p. 194) Tambu is convinced that she ‘[is] on the path of progress [and] did not want to be left behind’ (195), thus her shifts between the worlds of tradition and modernity through education can be read as a metaphor for the development of African women in response to the demands of the modern world. Her becoming is a cultural synthesis that refutes the fixed and silenced constructions of African women imposed by hegemonic forces such as colonialism and stereotypical Western images.<sup>193</sup>

At the same time, Tambu realises the freedom offered by formal education without forgetting her past. The complicated balancing of worlds is underscored by the novel’s depiction of the new, material status by the main protagonist. Tambu accedes to a new sense of self, a ‘clean, well-groomed, genteel self’ (198) in a new life that contrasts with the labour intensive experience of the rural home. Her transformation is a *metissage*; from the rural to ‘entering’ the urban, modern world of the convent. In *Bira*, an extract published as an early excerpt from *The Book of Not*, an older Tambu looks back again on her background. She speaks of, ‘an

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<sup>192</sup> ‘Modernity Alienation and Development: *Nervous Conditions* and the Female Paradigm’ in Treiber and Willey (Eds.), 2002. p. 69.

<sup>193</sup> See C. Mohanty, (1997) and G. Spivak (1988).

unfaceable return to my Strong Rural Background.<sup>194</sup> Its acronym ‘SRB’ is sometimes used as a derogatory slang term Zimbabwe to refer to people who come to the city from the rural areas. This contrasts with ‘nose brigade’ which is a term describing middle-class private school educated children who are said to speak English and their mother tongue in a nasal twang imitating White people.

The Tambu of *Nervous Conditions* finds that a synthesis of worlds is a legitimate way to ease the ‘burdens of womanhood’ but without disregarding the valuable knowledge(s) she has gained from the women around her. On the other hand, the alienation of one world to appease another is a predicament faced by the Tambu of *The Book of Not* who has made the cultural transition from an SRB to a city girl. She does not deny, but ‘remembers’ her roots as a dualistic site of memory; as a source of woman-centered knowledge(s) and customs and as experience of gendered oppression. She cannot go back to the chores of the homestead that are unequally distributed between the genders, nor can she return to its life of poverty, but chooses to live in response to the demands of modernity in order to grow. In a rapidly developing neo-colonial Africa, Tambu’s tricky compromise between identities as an ‘SRB’ and ‘the educated English’, is as her mother says, to ‘carry her burdens with strength.’ Her strength lies in the books.

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<sup>194</sup> published online [www.africabookcentre.org/dangarembga/bookofnot.html](http://www.africabookcentre.org/dangarembga/bookofnot.html) [date accessed 17 September 2009].

However Tambu fails to balance her worlds and becomes susceptible to cultural loss of identity. Described by Kennedy as, ‘a novel of “unbecoming”— of the loss of identity, feeling, and attachments,’<sup>195</sup> *The Book of Not* shows how Tambu fails to perform *metissage*, but rather is engulfed by what Ma’Shingayi calls ‘the Englishness.’ She blames modernity for the cultural alienation of Chido and Nyasha. Ma’Shingayi also cites this as the cause of Nhamo’s death. Although Tambu resists her mother’s predictions when she says, ‘I was a much more sensible person than Nyasha, because I knew what could or couldn't be done’ (208), she succumbs like her mother before her, in *The Book of Not*. An early sign of change in Tambu is seen in *Nervous Conditions* when she leaves the mission for the elite boarding school. She becomes aware of her transformation:

I Tambudzai, lately of the mission and before that the homestead - was I Tambudzai, so recently a peasant, was I not entering, as I had promised myself a world where burdens lightened with every step. (191)

‘Entering’ a new world, Tambu’s coming of age is a process of realization of the advantages offered to her by formal education. Although at this stage she still ‘remembers’ her past as a voice that will guide her in this future world, in the sequel she grows distant from her roots. In the opening Chapter of *The Book of Not*, Tambu recalls how much she dreads returning to the homestead during school holidays:

I spent the holidays at the mission, using [as] an excuse the intensifying of war, when in reality I did not have the heart to return three times a year to fetching water from the river, the juddering paraffin lamp light and sadza with only one, extremely small, portion of relish. (2006: 7)

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<sup>195</sup> ‘Mortgaged Futures: Trauma, Subjectivity and the Legacies of Colonialism in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *The Book of Not*’ (Critical Essay) in *Studies in the Novel*, Vol. 40, Spring Summer 2008, pp. 86–107. qtd, p. 89.

She has changed. Much like Nhamo who adopted airs and graces after mission education, Tambu also adopts an attitude of disdain for her background. Her mother notices this and rightly diagnoses Tambu as one who 'suffers' from the Englishness that killed Nhamo. She mocks her daughter, 'Oh you *wekuchirungu!* Do you still like *matumbu*, Tambudzai! Can you white people eat *mufushwa* with peanut butter?' (7)

In translation, Tambu is viewed as someone who is anglicised and Mai sarcastically asks her if she still eats the traditional foods such as offal (*matumbu*) or dried greens (*mufushwa*) cooked in a peanut butter sauce. While these are considered delicacies in traditional cuisine, Mai suggests that Tambu having adopted European airs no longer eats these foods. Like Nhamo who would not speak Shona unless he had to, Tambu as she admits, avoids going back to the homestead as it now represents a dirty, backward and impoverished place she would sooner forget. If Nhamo dies because of a self-destructive Englishness then Tambu in *The Book of Not* suffers from a similar condition complicated by an obsessive desire to achieve the best in order to receive affirmation from her benevolent patriarch and the white colonial educators. Addressing questions of the impact of colonial education on the African, Ngugi wa Thiong'o gives this accurate, personal observation:

[L]ook at colonial education, it tended to alienate the educated from his immediate environment. Look for instance at the way I was brought up in school. We were punished for speaking our mother tongues in the school compounds...If you punish a child for speaking his mother tongue what are you really doing to the mentality of that child? You are really making him hate the language which was the basis for his humiliation.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong'o. 'The Commitment of the African Intellectual' *Review of the Political Economy*, No. 32, April 1985, pp. 18-24. p. 20.

Similar to Ngugi's experience, Tambu is not allowed to speak Shona at the mission school neither are they allowed to discuss the war otherwise they will be expelled. Dangarembga's text thus makes it clear that a disconnection with that which is your own and the constant need to fit it in with that which is alien. To be accepted and to excel in the colonizer's system can contaminate, especially the most promising like Tambu.

Without the Siguake sisterhood, she is left to grow on her own at the boarding school and she grapples to find her feet in this new world. Tambu is caught in a system that drives her to achieve educational excellence, but at the same time refuses to acknowledge her outstanding abilities because she is Black as seen when Sister Emmanuel announces, 'The award for the best O-Level results is awarded this year to a very deserving hard-working young lady...Tracey Stevenson' (155). In truth it is Tambu who has the highest marks with seven ones and second highest is Ntombi, another Black classmate (150), but White classmate Tracey Stephens is awarded the trophy for the best O-Level results for six ones. The school honor roll has names of those who did exceptionally well, but Tambu sadly realizes, 'my name was not recorded.' (155) The school is blind to her achievements because she is an African.

As a moral lesson and to reinforce the power of the collective, *The Book of Not* shows what happens when Tambu loses touch with her family, she fails as a person (139) and grows cold and is unable to sympathize with her classmate, Ntombi, who grieves the murder of her relatives by the

Rhodesian soldiers. (88) Tambu's disconnection from her roots is discussed below as indicative of what happens when the dialectic of autonomy and community breaks down. Echoing African principles of humanity and group consciousness, *The Book of Not* makes use of the *unhu*<sup>197</sup> metaphor in depicting Tambu's lack thereof. *Unhu* embodies the notion of humanity and humility which as Tambu rightly comments, the wellness of an individual is dependent on that of another. She describes it as, '*Unhu*, that profound knowledge of being, quietly and not flamboyantly...demanded that I consoled myself, that I be well so that others can be well also.' (103) Unlike classical Western humanist ideologies of Hegel and Des Cartes which are centred on the Self, or the theory of man, *unhu* or *ubuntu* is based on the theory of community of which the Self is a member. The notion that the individual cannot exist without the collective is underscored in Shona customs and language in which the speaker's wellbeing is dependent on another, for example when Tambu greets her family she says, 'I am well if you are well too.' (123) Examining the principle of *unhu* in *The Book of Not*, Rooney (2007) rightly suggests that, 'the ever-ready and responsive fine-tuning of yourself to the changing states of others' (130) is what individual growth depends on within Shona society as reflected in the greetings and cultural mindset.<sup>198</sup> Indeed, the practice of *unhu* is what keeps Tambu grounded in *Nervous Conditions* and the loss of this internal moral compass of *unhu* because of her desire to become a modern subject is what stunts her

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<sup>197</sup> *Unhu* is also known as *ubuntu* in Zulu.

<sup>198</sup> Feeling duty-bound by the principle of *unhu* Tambu takes it upon herself to knit. She tells the reader "we southern Africans are famed for, what others now call *ubuntu*, demanded that I consoled myself, that I be well so that others could be well also." (p. 103)

development *The Book of Not*. It is ironic that Tambu takes up knitting, 'she shows her team spirit or her solidarity for the Rhodesian war', as Rooney notes (2007: 132) and yet she fails to sympathise with her dorm mate, Ntombi who breaks down in front of her when she receives news that her family has been murdered by Rhodesian soldiers. 'No one is alive!' (172) Ntombi cries to her, but Tambu is unable to show *unhu* and empathise with her schoolmate because she has suppressed her own family's experience of war's horrors at the hands of the guerilla soldiers. (1-3) In addition, the anti-nationalist sentiment in the school makes it difficult for her to fully discuss Ntombi's tragedy, the Sisters of the convent call the freedom fighters 'terrorists' (110) and Sister Emmanuel warns that any African girl with links to this dissident group risks expulsion from school. (97) In this environment, 'the war between the fathers and clans cannot be educationally addressed'<sup>199</sup> and news about the war is filtered through a Rhodesian lens in which the killings of White farmers by 'terrorists' are openly talked about while Tambu and Ntombi's experiences of the armed struggle as Africans, are the censored antithetical narratives of a present-absent people.

Further to this, Tambu's inability to deal with Ntombi's tragedy is also because she feels shameful of her Blackness and the village gatherings (*morari*) where people were made to pledge support to the guerilla fighters. Despite that *morari*, under the right circumstances (i.e. liberation fighters not terrorizing other Africans) is supposed to symbolize the

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<sup>199</sup> Rooney, 2007, p. 134.

political embodiment of *unhu*, Tambu feels, 'a sense of inferiority that came from having been at the primitive scene' (27) so she is keen to dissociate herself from having any knowledge of *morari* gatherings and she refuses to openly bear witness to the war around her and how it has affected her family and Ntombi's. Instead she keeps it all in by knitting and reading.

While Nyasha's breakdown can be read as a resistive disordering of the colonial order, Tambu's collapse is a failure to cope under the mission school system that renders her invisible as discussed above. In terms of the dynamics of the female collective, I would strongly argue that Tambu illustrates what happens when the collective is absent and when one 'forgets' their home, whereas for Nyasha the collective comes together and is a source of strength as she crumbles in a desperate search for her roots and to 'remember' her past.

Commenting on Tambu's condition in *The Book of Not*, Kennedy writes:

In narrating Tambu's struggles to become someone, and the undoing of her subjectivity, the novel dramatizes ordinary, everyday acts of racism in a gendered colonial context. By locating the story in the context of a colonial war in which the colonized are not unified against the white minority, the novel reflects on the psychological and political effects of witnessing traumatic events in a culture in which no one is supposed to remember what they saw. Tambu's experiences of loss and denial are therefore not merely personal; they are symptomatic of larger national struggles.<sup>200</sup>

An 'undoing of subjectivity' as Kennedy describes it, is a result of the internal psychological manifestations of racism that problematizes the conception of a figuration as a form of resistance and assertion of

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<sup>200</sup> 2008, p. 88.

subjectivity. The depiction of Tambu's subjectivity is one fraught with contradiction because her story is not one of triumph over circumstance as in *Nervous Conditions*. Without taking anything away from the positive figure of Tambu in the 1988 novel, the 2006 text presents a more complex, experiential view of colonial racism. In depicting the difficulty of constructing and publicly negotiating Tambu's Black presence, Dangarembga shows how racist ideologies of African inferiority become internalized. She also shows the psychologically damaging effect of this mentality that Ngugi, as referred to above, describes.

When, as in Tambu's case, one is isolated and separated from the united collective, one is more susceptible to 'the darker side of postcolonial subjectivity.'<sup>201</sup> African subjectivity comes to embody otherness because the negative Eurocentric associations with Blackness become internalized and Whiteness is seen as the positive ideal that is to be attained. This can also be as suffering from the 'Englishness', a condition that refers to the psychologically destructive effects of racism and colonialism.

It can be argued that, Tambu constitutes an 'impossible subjectivity' as she is split between the colonial and cultural world and in the isolated space of the mission, with all its racially biased rules and teachings, she grows into a type of absent-presence<sup>202</sup> which is being marked absent from a society she desperately longs to be a part of but she will never

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<sup>201</sup> Kobena Mercer. 'Decolonisation and Disappointment: Reading Fanon's Sexual Politics' in *The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation* Alan Read (Ed.), London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1996, pp. 114–131. p.118.

<sup>202</sup> This is not to be confused with Anim-Addo (2009) or Gomez-Garcia's (2009) conceptions of the 'present-absent.'

become because the racist order is so impossible to overcome, even in a politically liberated Zimbabwe. The complexity of this impossibility is further illustrated in her relationship with Dick, a young White man with whom she works at the advertising agency. Although their relationship might suggest that romance overcomes racial barriers, their relationship is tied to money. On two occasions he gives her 'a roll of papers' (232) and 'a couple of crumpled red two dollar notes.' (236) At work he prefers that their relationship remains a secret and when Dick is due to pitch her idea to a client, she is politely told not to be present. She says:

I was not to meet the client. My copy was, but I was not good enough to merit that. And even that, I thought bitterly, like everything else about me was incorrect. My copy was not good enough; under someone else's name, it was. (236)

For the second time, Dick hijacks her creative idea, this time it's for a proposed airline advertisement. The racial politics of love and work shows the difficulties with which the 'new Zimbabwe' is beset. Dick still occupies an exploitative racist position with effect that is no different to the racism she encountered at the colonial mission school. As Tracey was falsely awarded the prize for the best marks, Dick takes credit for her idea and she is denied both academic and career achievement. He treats their relationship as a commercial one and this raises historic questions of the unequal dialogic relation between Black women and White men.

For Rooney, the figuration of Dick represents a colonial subject to whom Tambu is an object, 'the native or colonized [who is] his belated copy, dependent on his precedent.' (2007: 137) As a White middle-class male, Dick's position of privilege is enacted at the expense of others, despite that

independent Zimbabwe is meant to be a country of racial equality. For this entitled White man, *plus ça change*. The meanings of political change and Black majority rule are yet to be realised, but until then business ethics, fairness and economy are still determined along the traditional racial lines of the colonizer and colonized. Therefore, Tambu and Dick's relationship is racialized and shaped by the nation's past of fetishization and sexual exploitation of the Black female by the White male figure. Positioned by socially constructed racial lines and barriers she and Dick are not on equal footing as lovers as he refuses to 'go public' about their affair and financially maintains her as his secret lover. Believing her interracial romance is symbolic of a new Zimbabwe, Tambu accepts this, yet in Dick lacks *unhu*; because through his settler gaze, an African woman is undeserving of equal treatment.

Refusing to be subject to racist and sexist treatment any longer, Tambu resigns. It is a definitive attempt to reclaim power over her subjectivity and a refusal to no longer comply with the White order as its submissive Black subject with an inferiority complex seen throughout the book. Her resignation, though significant, is not celebrated as a moment of triumph, but one that signifies the end-result of her mother's warnings against the Englishness. It has killed Tambu, in a figurative sense. She has achieved less than average grades at school and is now without a job because of it. Added to this, she is too ashamed to go home because she is unemployed and cannot provide financial support for her family. She made the wrong choices because she was so eager to blindly rather than strategically

assimilate into the modern colonial world. The novel ends with Tambu, symbolizing a victim of the Englishness, suffering from the internalized effects of racism and colonialism. This is indicative of how identity legacies of colonialism linger on long after the war of liberation has been won and politically the nation is free, but the individual still suffers from a colonial identity complex. The book does not offer the collective as the mode of healing from this because perhaps, Tambu like the nation is physically and culturally separated from her roots. She, like young Zimbabwe must stand on her own two feet and navigate the way forward.

### **Disordering Disorder: Nyasha**

While Tambu is infected with 'Englishness,' her narrative double,<sup>203</sup> Nyasha, suffers from a nervous disorder which, although it negatively impacts on her physical and mental capabilities, can be read as symbolic of political resistance. In my reading of Nyasha's breakdown, I examine three episodes, the fight with her father, her bulimic/anorexic eating disorder and the nervous breakdown for which she is hospitalized. In these scenes I explore how Dangarembga presents the fighting, anorexic body and the psychologically unstable mind as tropes to show that subjectivity is renegotiated through a contestation of the patriarchal and imperialist limits placed on the body and on femininity. Central to my analysis of the anorexic figure is the figuration of the body as a site where power

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<sup>203</sup> See R. Primorac (2007) and L. Aegerter (1994).

relations are redefined in ways that reinforce the agency and authority of the female African collective and individual, and simultaneously deconstruct African-centred beliefs on female beauty and body image.

When Nyasha comes home after curfew from the school dance, her father is upset with her. He begins to shout at her and she answers him back, to which he responds:

Do not talk to me like that, child... You must respect me, I am your father. And in that capacity I am telling, I-am-telling-you, that I do not like the way you are always walking about with these – er – these young men. (1988: 114)

Contrary to the silent response that might be expected in a situation like this, Nyasha replies to his rhetorical question ‘what will people say’ by saying, ‘You know me... You’ve taught me how I should behave. I don’t worry about what other people think so there’s no need for you to.’ (114) This angers him even further and he calls her a “whore” to which she sarcastically responds, ‘Now why... should I worry about what people say when my own father calls me a whore?’ (115) This is the final straw for Babamukuru and he slaps her on both cheeks with great force. Despite Nyasha and her mother’s pleas for mercy, he strikes his daughter again as if to reinforce his commandment, ‘You must be obedient.’ In angry retaliation Nyasha lunges for her father ‘punching him in the eye’ and he, in reaction, seizes her, ‘alternately punching Nyasha’s head and banging it against the floor.’ (115)

This violent scene between father and daughter is a struggle for a patriarch’s primary authority over a defiant child. Like David versus

Goliath, Nyasha wrestles her father whose authority has never been challenged. It is cultural taboo for a child to fight with a parent, and it is even more shocking that this taboo is broken by a girl. It is considered a bad omen for a child to confront a parent because it is thought that a child who hits a parent will never get the blessing he or she needs to succeed in life. Fighting her father is also a gender taboo as voiced in her brother, Chido's disapproval and reprimand, 'You are the daughter ... There are some things you must never do.' (117) For a daughter to do this is a breach of the gender code of the family where the girl-child is supposed to be a symbol of moral virtue as well as respectful to her father as Babamukuru says in his tirade. The rejection of his moral and paternal authority by Nyasha is the ultimate insult to him that causes him to spit '*Pthu*' (115) and outright disown her.

Nyasha's rebellion is significant for a girl-child as it is a bold questioning of male power. The physical fight also signifies a refusal of the multiple controls over the female body, what she may wear, what time she can come home, where she may or may not go and with whom she can form friendships. These controls posit the female body as the patriarchal site on which cultural and moral codes of gender are inscribed in order to enforce authority.

The subservient expectation on the women of *Nervous Conditions* is resisted through the body; both Nyasha and Tambu resort to fists when enraged by their paternal and fraternal counterparts. These violent

responses suggest that femininity can also be embodied through resistance as a way how a person articulates herself and defends her identity. These incidents are also signifiers of a deeper unrest and discontent with the status quo of patriarchal privilege. They also offer an insight into issues of subject formation within a male dominant society. Tambu sees this through the realization that assumptions about maleness and femaleness arise from biological difference. Gender is the collective marker for the different oppressions women experience and in turn, the biological body becomes the site upon which challenges to the status quo are waged. Thus, reading Nyasha's eating disorder as a figuration of resistance raises the most provocative cultural and political questions about the relation between African womanhood, tradition and the colonial state.

Susan Bordo writes that anorexia is a political statement 'employing the language of femininity to protest the conditions of the female world,'<sup>204</sup> but it is self-defeatist because the body is starved of nutrients and becomes emaciated whilst the 'protest' becomes a life-threatening disorder. Bordo's observations are in the context of contemporary Western culture where the body is used to make a statement against the image of women as domesticated feeders of the family whereas Nyasha's context is quite different. She *does* use her body to protest the condition of women and Black people under colonialism and Shona women under patriarchy. Her disorder is a form of anti-colonial resistance rather than merely protesting against the domestic goddess image embodied by her mother, Maiguru.

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<sup>204</sup> Susan Bordo. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body*, Berkley: University of California Press, 1995.

Nyasha reaches a point of crisis in her life and is unable to 'keep it in for much longer' and pukes 'all the lies of colonialism' and goes on a rampage, 'shredding her history book between her teeth.' (all p.121) Her response to colonialism's historical mistruths is further played out on the body as she stops menstruating because of her self-starvation. Her protest against the political order is also internalised with an internal disorder that expresses cultural and familial alienation as well as the fear of becoming 'fat.' (91)

The only means to gain control over her fat-phobia and her multiple oppressions is through self-starvation and 'gagging', but she loses emotional and physical control when she completely breaks down towards the end of the novel. Exhausted by her protest, the 'burdens' of colonialism, race, gender and alienation, her body becomes gaunt and 'grotesquely unhealthy.' (199) Tambu describes her body at a point of crisis:

[t]hen she sat on her bed and looked at me out of her sunken eyes, her bony knees pressed together so that her nightdress fell through the space where her thighs had been, agitated and nervous and picking her skin. (200)

Sugnet has suggested that Nyasha's disorder is 'a way of refusing her femaleness'<sup>205</sup> because she stops menstruating, but I would argue that this is not so much as a rejection but a means of biological resistance and self-purification. When Nyasha pukes, she wants to get rid of all the lies of

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<sup>205</sup> Charles Sugnet. 'Nervous Conditions: Dangarembga's Feminist Reinvention of Fanon' in *The Politics of (M) Othering: Womanhood, Identity and Political Resistance in African Literature*, Obioma, Nnaemeka (Ed.), London and New York: Routledge, 1997. p. 43.

colonialism, when her body stops menstruating because of starvation, it is another sign of cleansing, preventing the bloodshed of the liberation struggle taking place in colonial Zimbabwe from being symbolized in the female body in Black nationalist and Rhodesian tropes of the nation as female. She rejects the cultural stereotypes of femaleness and projects the image of an almost purified self.<sup>206</sup> Adapting Walter Bion's model of the container and the contained as well as Klein's concept of the introjective and the projective, Gianna Williams (1998) argues that the anorexic is a 'container'<sup>207</sup> for the events going on around them. The anorexic takes it all in and when they can no longer 'contain' their world, they shut down. This is a useful way of explaining the psychological processes within Nyasha: she 'contains' both of her parent's contrasting images, 'contains' and resists colonialism then when it all becomes too much for her, she becomes more emaciated and regresses into a child-like state, craving love and attention. She also immerses herself in Shona culture and becomes obsessed with making clay pots (150), which symbolizes the making of containers to store all projections rather than in her own body.

On another level, the hyper-feminine desire for the ultra-slim, 'svelte' (130) and curve-less can also be read as a rejection of conventional values of African femaleness rather than a rejection of femaleness per se, as Sugnet suggests. The internalising of Western thinness, yet outward yearning for belonging to Shona society shows a complex struggle within the individual to acquire self-meaning, for a certain kind of femininity that

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<sup>206</sup> See Gianna Williams. *Internal Landscapes and Foreign Bodies: Eating Disorders and Other Pathologies*, London: Routledge, 1998.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.* p. 103

speaks to the multiple dislocations she experiences. As an allegory of transnational displacement, Nyasha signifies exclusion in one sense, but the navigation of British modernity and Zimbabwean culture presents an alternative figuration of trans-colonial experience. The metaphorical intersection of the experiences and identities of Mother Empire/Colonized Native/Diaspora Returnee within the anorexic/bulimic subject revises power relations as mediated by the colonial empire and traditional patriarchal culture. The re-ordering of power dynamics creates a different, more complex subjectivity embodying the contradictions and tensions towards Black female subjectivity in each location.

The resistance to imperialism and patriarchal culture through the body and food can be seen, to an extent, as the reconceptualising of femininity into an ambiguous figure. Helen Malson (1997) argues that anorexia is a 'signifier of non-feminine subjectivity'<sup>208</sup> in the resultant boyish, anti-feminine figure. In *Nervous Conditions* Nyasha's boyish frame transcends the traditional gender divide between male/female, straight/curvy as a rejection of social codes that enforce hierarchical opposition between the genders similar to Haraway's cyborg which is a metaphor for deconstructing binary oppositions and creating new subjectivities.

The anorexic/bulimic body stands against official colonial discourses which silence Black women and nationalist myths and narratives that romanticize the curvaceous, 'mother earth' figure as national matriarch

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<sup>208</sup> Helen Malson. *The Thin Woman: Feminism, Post-Structuralism and the Social Psychology of Anorexia Nervosa*, London: Routledge, 1997. p.116.

while simultaneously silencing women's voices. The representation of the body/nation figure in Nyasha, also stands against Afro-centric feminist theory which essentialises the 'rounded' female physique and unknowingly colludes with structures that maintain gendered inequality.

In African and African-American feminism/womanism theoretical models, 'roundedness' is used as a term to describe the Black feminist. American author, Alice Walker (1982) writes that a womanist, 'loves roundedness... loves herself,'<sup>209</sup> and Afro-centric motherist, Catherine Acholonu (1997) in proposing motherism as a form of African feminism, suggests that, '[a motherist] loves roundedness.'<sup>210</sup> Although the definitions of Walker and Acholonu do not explicitly state what 'roundedness' refers to, given the earthly wholeness definition of motherism/womanism/feminism in which the term is situated, it can be taken to be a celebration of feminine physicality and spirituality. Roundedness can also be understood to refer to body shape; a curved woman as the symbol of femininity and feminism(s).

As a theoretical and cultural concept, roundedness is idealised, but Nyasha rejects the notion that all girls want to be 'round.' She rejects the culturally-endorsed image of 'plumpness' and 'child-bearing hips' (32) that Tambu and her grandmother valorise. As Tambu 'grew quite plump' (95) from Maiguru's cooking, Nyasha wryly comments, 'Pity about the

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<sup>209</sup> Introduction to *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, London: Women's Press, 1982. p. ix.

<sup>210</sup> Catherine Acholonu. *Motherism: An Afro-Centric Alternative to Feminism*, Lagos: AFA Publications, 1997. p. 63.

backside....It's rather large.' (91) Her disdain for the 'rounded' physique shows an internalisation of Western notions of thinness are equated with beauty and femininity due the powerful marketing of the beauty, media and fashion industries.

By contrast in Shona society, the voluptuous body shape is valued as a sign of wealth, happiness, fertility and beauty; fat women are often revered as a sign of womanhood. Continuing her conversation with Tambu, Mbuya says that, 'I had strong and heavy hips.' (32) Hips as a sign of the ability to bear children in the cultural imagination is valued. In many Black communities, curvaceous women are regarded as fertile as they have 'child-bearing' hips as echoed in womanism and motherism's lauding of the curvier figure as a celebration of womanhood.

Despite the emaciating and sometimes fatal result of anorexic eating disorders, Dangarembga's literary figuring of the anorexic/bulimic can be read as a rejection of cultural practices that objectify women's bodies for the pleasure of the patriarchy. Across African societies, different cultural values and practices are attached to body size and beauty as part of the journey to womanhood and marriage. Cultural rites such as *leblouh*<sup>211</sup> in Mauritania and the fattening up of girls in Nigeria<sup>212</sup> and Somalia<sup>213</sup> are

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<sup>211</sup> Among both the White Moor Arabs and Black Moors there is the practice of *lebouleh* where girls from the age of eleven are fattened up on rice and camel milk for marriage. See Alex Duval Smith. 'Girls being force-fed for marriage as fattening farms revived' *The Guardian*, 1 March 2009. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/mar/01/mauritania-force-feeding-marriage> [date accessed: 04/08/10].

<sup>212</sup> Among the Annang of Nigeria, although women are treated as partners rather than subordinates, when a young woman is about to be married she is sent to the fattening room of the compound where she is literally fattened up and also taught the values of

designed for the patriarchal gaze with the intention of attracting a good suitor. In Zimbabwe, proverbs and sayings<sup>214</sup> in the indigenous languages equate beauty with being curvaceous, implying that a thin woman is traditionally deemed undesirable.

While an eating disorder is not an oppositional antidote to the practices of force feeding and over feeding, pitting anorexia against the varieties of eating practices is one way of opening up dialogue about body extremes, food and culture in Africa. Anorexia is not solely a Western phenomenon and although marginally documented in Africa,<sup>215</sup> texts like those of Dangarembga, Lindsey Collen (1990)<sup>216</sup> and Sabrina Kherbiche (1993)<sup>217</sup> draw attention to this emerging condition. The literary portrayal of eating conditions signals a need to African feminist theory to seriously and critically discuss corporeality and the material to better understand the complexity of colonialism and neo-colonialism.

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life. See Pamela J., Brink. 'The fattening room among the Annang of Nigeria', *Medical Anthropology*, Vol. 12, Issue 1 (November 1989), pp.131–143.

<sup>213</sup> Particularly among Somali refugees, there is a positive status given to fat women and children and there is a tendency to overfeed babies with milk. (Anecdotal evidence, See: A. Mc Ewen, L. Strauss, H. Croker, 'Dietary beliefs and behaviour of a UK Somali population', *Journal of Human Nutrition and Dietetics* (online) [http://www.ucl.ac.uk/hbrc/tobacco/pubs/Dietary%20beliefs\\_30.pdf](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/hbrc/tobacco/pubs/Dietary%20beliefs_30.pdf) [date accessed 11 August 2010].

<sup>214</sup> A woman who is fat is described as '*mukadazi anemuviri*' or meaning a woman who has a body as opposed to a thin woman has no body (*hanamuviri*) or 'akafara' which also means wide or happy – and one who is fat is presumably one who is happy, whereas a thin woman is described as '*akanyanya kutetesa*' meaning she is as thin as a reed.

<sup>215</sup> See Dinah Bennet. 'Anorexia nervosa among female secondary school students in Ghana', *The British Journal of Psychiatry* 185, (2004) pp. 312-317.

<sup>216</sup> *There is a Tide* (1990) is the futuristic story of a young anorexic woman, Shynee who goes on a hunger strike to protest sweatshops in Mauritius and her own separation from her traditional culture and the natural environment of the island which faces extinction in 2051.

<sup>217</sup> *La Suture* (1993) presents the story of a newly-wed young woman of French and Algerian parentage whose husband when he discovers she is not a virgin on their wedding night, publicly shamed and cast her out of her community. The young woman escapes to France where she struggles with anorexia and depression.

Although in Zimbabwean society in 1988, anorexia and bulimia are of marginal presence, a study by Buchan and Gregory in Harare in the 1980s with private school students<sup>218</sup> shows anorexia as more prevalent amongst White than Black girls. This is not to say it did not exist in the Black community at this time.<sup>219</sup> Diagnoses and cases of anorexia/bulimia are difficult as Dangarembga says in a conversation with Kirsten Holst Peterson:

Cases of anorexia have been reported in Zimbabwe. The diagnosis of anorexia is something difficult. If a woman in Zimbabwe, rural or urban is depressed, loses weight etc. who is to say that is anorexia or not? <sup>220</sup>

Buchan and Gregory share a similar view to Dangarembga in their concluding remarks of their report:

It is our view that psychosocial rather than biological factors account for the rarity of anorexia in black patients, and that investigation of the interactions within extended families, possibly using repertory grids, would have heuristic value. (330)

Although traditionally roundedness is idealised, Nyasha's transcultural urban identity suggests that not all girls want to be 'round'. Women align themselves along other body ideals and although anorexia is an extreme aspiration to 'thinness', it serves as a critique of the valorisation of 'roundedness'. It represents the material process that the body undergoes to acquire self-meaning, for a certain kind of femininity that questions the value placed in the biological processes of femaleness.

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<sup>218</sup> T. Buchan and L.D, Gregory encountered a case of one young Black man in 1982 that had Fabry's disease shows he had signs of what would be termed today as manorexia. In another case, a patient, who is most likely Tsitsi Dangarembga, as the family background and date of birth match, has symptoms very similar to Nyasha and was diagnosed with anorexia. See T. Buchan & L.D Gregory, 'Anorexia nervosa in a black Zimbabwean' *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 145 (1984): pp. 326-330.

<sup>219</sup> The study of this young man was done over a ten year period by M.Z Borok & R., Gabriel. 'Alpha-galactosidase: A deficiency (Fabry's disease) in a black Zimbabwean' in *SAMU*, Vol. 83, 1993.

<sup>220</sup> Kirsten Holst Peterson. 'Between Gender, Race and History: Kirsten Holst Petersen Interviews Tsitsi Dangarembga' *Kunapipi*, 16.1 (1994): pp. 345-348. Qtd. pp. 345-346.

Using starvation as political and cultural metaphors, the figuring of the anorexic/bulimic subject in the novels presents complex and chaotic female subjectivities located at the intersections of gender, culture, race, corporeality and politics. As a transnational figure at the point of these multiple intersections, Nyasha feels alienated at all levels, from her native roots, the colonial state and the British society where she spent part of her childhood. Nyasha simultaneously rejects and identifies with the cultural values of these societies. Although she is desperate to know more of her native culture by respectfully greeting her elders by the totems and titles and obsessively making clay pots (150), she simultaneously rejects the fat cultural ideal preferring the slender Western figure. However, the experience of racism in British society leaves her marginalised. Thus the transnational figure remains in transit in a space of non-belonging and her anorexia is the response to the multiple displacements and internal fragmentation she suffers.

The experience of different places and cultures does not exist in isolated memories, each place neatly separated by geographical distance inside of Nyasha. Instead, it is all mixed up, and the histories of places collapse and collide inside of her. Opening up to Tambu she says, 'I know it's not England anymore, and I ought to adjust. But when you've seen different things you want to be sure you're adjusting to the right thing.' (117) When she can no longer take the feelings of uncertainty and cultural anxiety anymore, Nyasha 'pukes' (123) it all up and refuses to eat as a way of

refusing to take in any more of the transnational encounter and the patriarchal curvaceous expectation.

The physical body becomes the inscriptive text through which Dangarembga can attempt to figure the African body anew as an ambiguous, hybridized form and open up the possibility to refigure our understanding of anorexia as a contemporary African illness. By writing her personal experiences as a transnational subject and former sufferer of anorexia into the text,<sup>221</sup> Dangarembga collapses reality and representation into each other so that feminist biography and fiction inhabit the same narrative space. Thinking through Dangarembga and Nyasha's, interwoven narratives, the novel becomes a 'knowledge space'<sup>222</sup> in which multiple experiences and ways of knowing can be mapped.

Reading into the political meaning of Nyasha's condition Zwicker argues that:

Nyasha's eating disorder has several meanings in the text...it is a response to her father's authority... [m]ore figuratively, Nyasha's anorexia is a response to the collusion of patriarchal and colonial domination.<sup>223</sup>

Through bodily starvation, Nyasha protests both colonial and cultural interlocking systems of oppression. Susan Andrade<sup>224</sup> argues that Nyasha's rebellion is such a significant interruption to the colonial

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<sup>221</sup> See Buchan and Gregory. 'Anorexia nervosa in a black Zimbabwean,' 1984.

<sup>222</sup> Maja Van der Velden. 'What's Love Got to Do with IT?: On ethics and accountability in telling technology stories' 2008, (online) [www.globalagenda.org/file/12](http://www.globalagenda.org/file/12) [date accessed: 28 March 2010].

<sup>223</sup> 'The Nervous Collusions of Nation and Gender: Tsitsi Dangarembga's Challenge to Fanon in Treiber & Wiley (Eds.), 2002. p. 55.

<sup>224</sup> 'Tradition, Modernity, and The Family: Reading the Chimurenga struggle into and out of *Nervous Conditions*' in Willey & Treiber (Eds.), 2002, p. 14.

narrative that it is a point of ‘productive crisis’ (55) for Nyasha. Fanon,

*The Wretched of the Earth* states that:

The immobility to which the native is condemned only to be called into question if the native can only be called into question if the native decides to put an end to colonization...and to bring into existence the history of the nation – the history of decolonization.<sup>225</sup>

Andrade reads, ‘the construction of the native via Nyasha [as making] [t]he ideological connection between the two discourses of decolonizing nationalism and feminine subjectivity.’ (53) In this way, Dangarembga’s literary depiction of African women interacting with the colonial state, revises how women’s identities are formulated and shaped as individuals possessing historical presence and social agency. Reading beyond Andrade, Dangarembga’s figuration of the starving body also tries to rethink the discursive practices of African feminist theory to include the material and corporeal experiences of *all* women living in the colonial state, not just the Tambus and Lucias who fit the Afro-centric mould as women who invoke their culture in resisting and negotiating patriarchal and colonial oppression.

Further to the anorexia/bulimia, Nyasha also suffers a mental nervous breakdown and is admitted to hospital. In a highly emotional episode after Nyasha shreds her history books with her teeth, she cries, ‘I don’t hate you Daddy’ and ‘Mummy will you hold me?’ (200) Craving for the parental fold as a source of love, security and belonging, Nyasha returns to a childlike state when she ‘curl[s] up in Maiguru’s lap, looking no more than five years old.’ (201) Babamukuru speeds to the hospital in Salisbury

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<sup>225</sup> Franz Fanon. ‘Concerning Violence’, *The Wretched of the Earth* trans. Constance Farrington, New York: Grove Weidenfield, 1963. p. 51.

as Maiguru and Tambu constantly talk to Nyasha. Having reached the level of purity by returning to a childlike state through rejecting the ‘container/contained’<sup>226</sup> process, she reaches out to her family for the comfort for which she has longed for. However her, childlike state is a ‘chaotic cluster of painful feelings and sensations’<sup>227</sup>, she craves their attention but also rejects the two extremes in her parents, the mother’s submissiveness and the father’s dominance as well as the cultural expectations placed on her as a girl. When she can no longer contain this, it is repeatedly expressed through the body.

Mental illness among African women was believed to be non-existent within colonial mental health. Megan Vaughan (1991) notes how, in comparison to men, ‘African women, on the contrary, were not said to have reached the level of self-awareness required to go mad.’<sup>228</sup> Mental disorders were believed to occur only in men, particularly the urbanized, educated male who ‘would have been driven mad by the strains of deculturation. He would nevertheless go mad in a particularly ethnic way.’ (113) This assumption excludes all women, and rural and uneducated men as being psychologically inferior to mental illness.

Dangarembga’s novel shows the medical attitudes similar to that in Vaughn’s study, when Tambu describes the reaction of the White doctor, ‘Africans did not suffer in that way we had described. She was making a

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<sup>226</sup> See G. Williams. (1998).

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.* p. 26

<sup>228</sup> Megan Vaughan. *Curing Their Ills: Colonial Power and African Illness*, California, Stanford University Press, 1991. p. 22.

scene.’ (201) The refusal to treat her disorder, at first, shows how the mental health system also complied with and enforced colonial racist rule in treating Nyasha’s illness as simply a tantrum.

Lynette Jackson’s (2005) study<sup>229</sup> on mental illness in colonial Zimbabwe shows how the lunatic asylum was an institution of social control. Her research on women at Ingutsheni Mental Hospital shows how African women were kept against their will by the state. In *Nervous Conditions*, the asylum is simultaneously a space complicit with the incarceration policy of the colonial order and is also (re)imagined as a restorative space the collective action of women, such as the ‘practical attention’ (200) of her aunts helps to restore Nyasha. The maternal network (re)orders the clinical into a new familial space to give Nyasha a sense of belonging to the Siguake clan and her Shona culture.

The colonial nervosa<sup>230</sup> and transition characteristic of transnational Nyasha, are also common conditions to many of the women characters in Zimbabwean women’s writing, albeit experienced differently. For example Zhizha in Vera’s *Under the Tongue* suffers rape trauma and becomes muted, both Tambu in Dangarembga’s *The Book of Not* and Mazvita in Vera’s *Without a Name* experience nervous breakdowns.<sup>231</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> *Surfacing Up: Psychiatry and Social Order in Colonial Zimbabwe, 1908-1968*, New York: Cornell University Press, 2005.

<sup>230</sup> That is, the nervous condition suffered by the native as described by Fanon and Sartre.

<sup>231</sup> The most recent example of madness in Zimbabwean women’s writing is ‘An Elegy for Easterly’ in the short story collection of the same title by Petina Gappah. *An Elegy for Easterly*, London: Faber & Faber, 2009. The story is set on Easterly farm in Zimbabwe shortly after the 2000 land invasions and this short story tells how Martha Mupengo, a woman suffering from traumatic experience of the liberation struggle is further excluded from her community when the war veterans invade the farm.

For Tambu, the transition from adolescence to womanhood is marked by education and although she seems to have a promising start at the end of *Nervous Conditions*, she suffers a nervous break down when studying for her A-levels which is the result of an internalization of racism experienced at the prestigious school. Tambu's colonial nervosa, like Nyasha's condition, is resultant of an inability to cope with racism and successfully balance her cultural identity as a modern subject of colonial Zimbabwe.

Each of these writings reflect how through pathological conditions, women resist the extremely oppressive conditions of colonialism and nationalist dictatorship, to reclaim their experiential voices. This view is also endorsed by Ogunyemi when she writes:

[B]lack women occasionally go mad. Unlike negative representations of white madwomen, the black mad woman in novels written by black women knows in her subconscious that she must survive because she has people without other resources depending on her.... in the womanist novel, when the black woman's communion with the rest of society is established, there is a consonance that expresses the black way to authenticity and transcendence. Madness becomes a temporary aberration preceding spiritual growth, healing and integration.<sup>232</sup>

Ogunyemi suggests that the mental condition represented in Black women's writing has the underlying purpose of showing how the survival of an individual also ensures the continued existence of the community.

Although critics<sup>233</sup> have read Nyasha's breakdown as the failed end of a rebellion, I offer a different view suggesting that Nyasha's psychosis is a form of survival aided by maternal healing that reflects Ogunyemi's womanist schema. Madness as a form of growth and collectivity, as

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<sup>232</sup> 'Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English' *Signs*, Vol. 11 No. 1(Autumn 1985) p. 74.

<sup>233</sup> M.T Vambe, (2005), J. Treiber, (2002), C. Sugnet, (1997).

Ogunyemi argues can be seen as an end to the constant search for belonging Nyasha desires.

In the figuring of a hyper-feminine anorexic, Dangarembga produces a new image of femininity that rejects patriarchal and colonial hierarchy and shows the messy, fragmented and intertwined experience of being in the world. The depiction of anorexic Nyasha as an ambiguous and unstable character shows that there are no clear-cut boundaries signifying male cultural power, White colonial power or even Afro-centric feminist power. Rather, this analysis of Nyasha has tried to show how figuration as an ideological tool, points to a method of reconceptualising subjectivity and corporeality in African feminist thought so as to speak *to* and *about* the complex social conditions African women face.

### **Negotiating Diplomacy: Maiguru**

Biman Basu (2002) describes *Nervous Conditions* as, ‘a cultural document that maps the institutional spaces through which the shifting positions of the transnational intellectual must be plotted.’<sup>234</sup> In exploring the relationship between mobility, modernity, gender and shifting subjectivity, I have considered the impact of cultural and personal meanings on femininity in relation to the body and of political subjectivity in relation to race in order to show how Tambu and Nyasha assert their presence. Unlike Tambu and Nyasha who each suffer some form of

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<sup>234</sup> Biman Basu. ‘Trapped and Troping: Allegories of the Transnational Intellectual in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*’ in Treiber & Willey (Eds.), 2002, p. 108.

colonial nervosa, Maiguru presents a different kind of figuration, that of the homemaker. She is positioned within the family as a docile, homely personality who when unsettled by family disputes, responds with mixed success and failure.

Maiguru is not the embodiment of anti-colonial feminist resistance as might be said of the other female characters, but neither can she be easily dismissed as a figure of 'entrapment' as I discuss below. Instead her compromising, diplomatic persona and political apathy can be framed within African feminist diction which is, to paraphrase Nnaemeka, a language of negotiation and engagement.<sup>235</sup> Nego-feminism is Nnaemeka's notion of an African feminism of global negotiation and collaboration among feminists in recognition of the cultural specificities in which women have to negotiate the everyday.

For Maiguru, she has the task of balancing her Western Christian education together with the cultural roles she plays as mother, wife and daughter-in-law. As a mother and wife she is given the task of running the household and ensuring that the family is well fed while as a daughter-in-law she is responsible for the provision of meals for the clan. In my analysis, I examine how Maiguru negotiates these family duties together with her own educational achievements as a woman with a Masters degree. Throughout the novel, education is associated with emancipation (56), modern progress (147) and for Tambu it also represents, freedom

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<sup>235</sup> Obioma Nnaemeka. 'Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, Practicing, and Pruning Africa's Way' *Signs* Vol. 29, No. 2, Development Cultures: New Environments, New Realities, New Strategies (Winter, 2004), pp. 357-385.

(183) whereas for Nyasha, standardised colonial education represents entrapment, but alternative knowledge is perceived as true knowledge and as a means of autonomy. Maiguru however, is different, though her daughter sees her as a weak, soft woman. Speaking about her in an interview with Peterson, Dangarembga says, 'Her education enables her to see, to become conscious of it [colonialism], but it really doesn't enable her to do anything about it.' (1994: 346)

To a certain extent, I agree with Dangarembga's view of Maiguru's inability to act, but I would also argue that her passivity is one of the many effects of 'the Englishness' that Ma'Shingayi says killed Nhamo and afflicts Tambu and her cousins. Ma'Shingayi makes a very valid point about the numbing effect of 'Englishness', because looking at all of the formally educated people in *Nervous Conditions*; Maiguru, Tambu, Nhamo, Chido and Babamukuru, none of them, except Nyasha, develops a political consciousness that allows them to become activists for change. Maiguru although aware of the political conditions for Black people in colonial Zimbabwe, apartheid South Africa and racially-divided England, having lived in these countries, does not express any sense of political activism or an opinion on the current political events in the country.

Babamukuru's stoic Christian values prevent him from developing a political conscience and he instead plays the patriarchal moralist. Nhamo dies from the 'Englishness', alien to his culture and, removed from the reality of his world there can be little hope he would develop a sense of

awareness. Chido on the other hand, is alienated from his culture and prefers to take a more passive role: he tells his sister not to make a scene and take things too seriously. Tambu achieves a balance of the knowledge offered by mission and colonial education, but she does not develop a questioning mind sensitive to the conditions of Black people under colonial rule as Nyasha does. Nyasha, intensely aware of the draconian regime, wages a psychological battle of resistance, constantly rejecting colonial history and Christian traditions (such as, the wedding). Although she possesses this knowledge, its benefit is never fully realized because she falls ill and in *The Book of Not* she is a more subdued character and is almost eerily complacent with life, complying with the order so that she may get ahead in her education.

I would further argue that Maiguru's predicament must be viewed from the perspective of cultural roles of mother, wife, and daughter-in-law at loggerheads with the modern image of a teacher with a Master's degree. The contradictory positions that Maiguru juggles reflect the intersecting 'heavy burdens of womanhood' described by Ma'Shingayi and theorised by Ogunjipe-Leslie as discussed above. Arguing for a womanist approach that is acutely aware of the interlocking oppressions of African woman, Kolawole states that: '[womanism must] recognize the interplay of class, culture, ethnicity, religion and politics and the attendant result that African women's progressive gender consciousness differs from one society to another.' (253) Grounding her argument within the cultural dynamics of gender relations in Africa, Kolawole calls for a more contextually

sensitive approach to understanding how African feminine subjectivities are negotiated.

Reading the depiction of Maiguru with Kolawole and Dangarembga's words in mind, it could be argued that Maiguru represents the truncated nature of women's lives as well as a different dimension of autonomy that differs from the portrayal of subject formation through anti-colonial consciousness as in Nyasha and *metissage* as in Tambu. Further to this, I would suggest that Maiguru's struggle symbolizes a diplomatic defiance of the cultural and colonial institutions that oppress women. In *her own* way, she practices a feminism of *metissage*, synthesizing the demands of the worlds of tradition and modernity, individual self and familial collective. Although failing to balance these worlds, Maiguru's shifting between the roles of mother/wife and *muroora*/Maiguru (female in-law/aunt) also reveal the multiple forces of influence shaping her experience.

Returning from abroad, as an educated and qualified teacher, Maiguru works and lives at the mission alongside her husband, Babamukuru. A mother of two children, Nyasha and Chido, she has the responsibility of the family as well as for Tambu, as part of the extended family. On Tambu's first day of school she, 'fussed over me, clucking concern over my lack of appetite.' (92) She makes sure Tambu eats, disregarding Nyasha's remark that Tambu has a 'fat bottom,' in a loving manner when she says, 'Go on with you lovey-dove, Sisi Tambu isn't fat. Don't worry

about Nyasha's little ways.' (92) Portrayed as a domestic goddess, Maiguru contradicts the social expectations of a Western educated professional who may be more career orientated and independent rather than the docile, family woman she is.

Sugnet reads Maiguru as, 'analogous to the "Superwoman"' (1997: 39) image. He suggests that 'Maiguru's entrapment' (1988: 201) signifies the failures of radical Western feminism(s). In my opinion, Sugnet erroneously applies a singular and limited view of feminism(s) as radical feminism and as anti-male, but feminism is a global movement derived from different parts of the world and practiced differently according to cultural, economic and historic location. The perception of feminism as a monolithic women's movement derived in the West has led to tensions between some Western and African feminist thinkers. Ghanaian playwright and author, Ama Ata Aidoo (1986) rejected the accusation that she was learning feminism(s) from Lapland stating that:

African women struggling both on behalf of themselves and on behalf of the wider community is very much a part of our heritage. *It is not new and I really refuse to be told I am learning feminism from abroad, from Lapland.* Africa has produced a much more concrete tradition of strong women fighters than most of their societies. So when we say that we are refusing to be overlooked we are only acting as daughters and grand-daughters of women who always refused to keep quiet. We haven't learnt this from anybody abroad.<sup>236</sup>

Aidoo objects to feminism's origins being named as Western because it as an attempt to discredit African women's liberation movements as practices of feminism(s) as pointed out in the thesis Introduction.

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<sup>236</sup> In Kirsten Holst, Peterson. *Criticism and Ideology: Second African writers' conference, Stockholm 1986*, Edited by Kirsten Holst Petersen, with an introductory essay by Per Wästberg, Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1988. p. 136.

Sugnet argues that Maiguru is a weak character as, ‘the novel shows over and over how powerless she still is to stand up to her husband to protect her daughter’ (1997:39) when Nyasha rises up against Babamukuru. On the contrary, Maiguru is not wholly oppressed and weak as Sugnet suggests. Maiguru’s response has to be understood within the cultural context of the Zimbabwean family in which a woman does not outright rise up against her husband when he acts as family disciplinarian; she must find other ways. During the fight scene, Maiguru does not act radically in protection of Nyasha when Babamukuru’s anger escalates into rage, but she cries, ‘*Babawa Chido kani...If you must kill somebody, kill me. But my daughter, no leave her alone. Please I beg you leave her alone,*’ (1988: 115) in an attempt to stop him.

She tries to call him to reason, but he is driven by his anger, ‘insist[ing] he would kill Nyasha.’ (115) As family disciplinarian he uses his physical strength to crush dissension. In this highly charged and tense situation, Maiguru’s plea for mercy is a legitimate appeal of ‘protection’ for Nyasha. Where one mother might raise her fist at her husband, or use her body as a shield for her daughter, Maiguru’s diplomatic tactic is a way of avoiding worsening the situation if Babamukuru’s anger were to escalate. Acting on maternal instinct, her emotive offer to lay her life down for Nyasha is a form of strength that, speaking from personal knowledge is often the strategy that most Zimbabwean women would use.

At several points Maiguru is an influential voice, it is she who convinces Babamukuru to re-consider, when he refuses for Tambu to go to the convent, in fear that she will be corrupted by the ways of white people, looking at his own daughter Nyasha. In a 'soft, soothing voice' (180-181), she convinces Babamukuru that the benefits of education far outweigh its curtailment. Reminding him of the discriminatory treatment she was subjected to, as an educated woman in South Africa, she voices her concerns over her husband's slandering of women as 'prostitutes' (181) (ironically in moments of extreme anger, Babamukuru calls Nyasha a prostitute and a whore.) The influence of Maiguru is seen again when Dambudzo's birth threatens Tambu's future under Babamukuru's guardianship. Babamukuru suggests to Tambu she may have to return to the homestead now that there is another child to be educated, but it is Maiguru who convinces him to let Tambu continue her education at the mission school. Maiguru's influence is often underestimated, but her strategy of diplomatic negotiation is a sign of African feminism as it is characterized by 'language of feminist engagement'<sup>237</sup> according to Nnamaeka. (2003) Maiguru is weighed down by the 'burden' of family duties and her domestic role to prevent her from acting beyond this. Within this role as familial matriarch, she wages her own struggle against the pressures of the patriarchal function of the family. Fed up with the politics of the Sigauke clan, feeling invisible and unappreciated, in a highly tense moment she says, 'So today I am telling you I am not happy. I am not happy any more in this house.' (172) She leaves.

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<sup>237</sup> Nnamaeka, 2003, p. 380.

Her five-day hiatus is a symbol of resistance against patriarchal mistreatment. She is continually saddled with heavy tasks and when pushed to her limits she expresses it through action. This is a significant moment of the exercising of power for Maiguru, because she has never vocalized her frustration. Often she makes comments in passing, while internalizing the greater part of her true feelings. However, Babamukuru is unshaken and tells her, 'go where you will be happy.' (172) Her departure has a significant impact on the family as Nyasha talks of missing her, Babamukuru comes home late in that week and as soon as he hears word of her whereabouts, he speeds off in search of her at one in the morning. This scene shows how a subtle act is an effective and legitimate way of fighting patriarchy and chauvinism. Maiguru's departure is an act of strategic defiance, because it avoids permanently fracturing the family unit as there is chance for reconciliation, which may or may not have happened if Maiguru had had a violent outburst. According to African womanist, Mary Kolawole (199) the family is a central part of African feminism(s) and Kolawole writes, 'marriage and family values and assertion of feminine outlook are important canons of African womanhood.' (1997:197) Kolawole, like other African feminists, theorizes out of a culture where the family is a symbol of strength and where the cultural meaning of femininity is grounded in some of these family roles as has been shown in Mbuya's role as storyteller and Maiguru as the family caretaker. Functioning on the principle of reciprocity and humanity (*unhu*) the survival of the family is paramount to the

individual's survival, making it impossible for Maiguru to completely abandon Tambu, Nyasha and Chido, because of Babamukuru.

When Maiguru returns, it seems, as the narrator tells us, 'the change had done her good. She smiled more often and less mechanically...and was more willing to or able to talk about sensible things.' (175) As a way of practising African feminism, Maiguru's quiet rebellion shows that resistance does not necessarily have to be violent or confrontational for its effects to be felt. The lack of recognition of the different ways in which women fight their battles has caused an ambivalent relationship between African women and Western feminism(s). At a talk held in Brixton in 2005<sup>238</sup> Nigerian writer, Buchi Emecheta was asked why she was opposed to Western feminism(s) she responded that at the time it was necessary for African women to call themselves what they could identify with. She explained that for her, as a Black African woman in London in the 1980s at the height of radical feminism(s) and race tensions, she felt it was necessary for African women to stand together to articulate their common concerns rather than join the alien 'anti-male', radical feminist struggle. In addition, Kenyan translator and academic, Wangui waGoro<sup>239</sup> is of the view that women in Africa have similar yet different struggles as women in the West, but African women express themselves differently. She explained that cultural practices are different, so that whereas women burnt bras at Trafalgar Square as a sign of independence and as an act

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<sup>238</sup> 'Speaking Voices', Spread the Word Events, Black History Month, 5 October 2005, Brixton, London.

<sup>239</sup> Told to me, in casual conversation at the British Library, November/December 2006.

feminist liberation, as cultural practice when women in Kenya are angry they strip and walk around naked as a sign of extreme displeasure.

In the novel, Maiguru expresses her displeasure through passive resistance, for example during one Christmas period, Maiguru feels overwrought by the politics of extended family and she refuses to go to the homestead where she is supposed to cook for the occasion as a *muroora*, daughter in law. Although it is taboo for a *muroora* to refuse to cook, out of frustration, Maiguru refuses and her absence is felt in both Lucia and Ma'Shingayi's expressions when she visits the homestead in the new year. When Tambu and Nyasha discuss Maiguru's outburst, there is, 'a note of awe in her voice, that I had not heard before when she talked of her mother,' (172) Tambu says.

In this brief scene, there has been a transformation in Nyasha and Tambu's perception of Maiguru as a trapped woman. Tambu shifts yet again between two role models, Babamukuru and Maiguru wanting to be a part of their world as educated, modern people. Tambu's model of success is built on Babamukuru's educational achievements, but she comes to realise his oppressive nature as a male patriarch. (117) At this point, she turns to revere Maiguru, 'wanting to ask Maiguru whether she really had obtained a Master's degree' (100) and Maiguru tells Tambu how she overcame family scorn, 'I still studied for that degree and got it in spite of all of them.' (100) Tambu can share with Maiguru's struggle and thus by telling this story, Maiguru becomes a stronger figure in Tambu's eyes and

in some way takes over the role of Mbuya as storyteller as she shares brief personal anecdotes from the past in both *Nervous Conditions* and *The Book of Not*.

In this section it has been argued that exclusively reading Maiguru as 'analogous' to Western career women erroneously silences the power she negotiates and underplays the complexity of the worlds between which she is caught. In order to survive the convoluted pressures of these worlds, she practices a feminism of diplomacy, subtly negotiating familial and marital 'burdens' in order to articulate her subjectivity. Her resistance of gendered oppression maintains a humanistic collective vision as she avoids dismantling the family unit, at the same time it enables her to express her dissatisfaction in a non-confrontational way.

### **Rebel Woman: Lucia**

In contrast to Maiguru, Lucia represents a figuration of rebellion that is distinct from the cultural interplay of worlds seen in Tambu and Nyasha. Lucia's sexual promiscuity and opportunistic nature are symbolic of a direct confrontation and resistance to the limitations placed on women by family protocol. In Lucia as with Nyasha, Dangarembga shows how the female body is implicated in the mechanisms of power and sexuality, which is another strand to contested gender and corporeal relations. Corporeal practices are determined by culture, social situations, and the

environment, and are defined within those contexts. In my brief analysis of Lucia, I seek to explore the complex relationship between actual women's bodies and the cultural practices setting limits on women's bodies and policing women's relations with men. Lucia overturns these gendered prohibitions and uses her sexuality as a means of social mobility as well as redefining associations with the men to whom she stands in kinship relation. This signifies the cultural re-possession of women's bodies from paternal to maternal control and in my reading of Lucia; I discuss how body ownership is reclaimed.

I frame this analysis around the notion that bodies and sexualities as modes of feminist figuration within the world of *Nervous Conditions* convey the lived experience of corporeality. The body and sexuality constantly engage with, affect, and are affected by the lived world as Braidotti seems to suggest in her theorizing of the body:

The body is an inter-face, a threshold, a field of intersecting material and symbolic forces, it is a surface where multiple codes (race, sex, class, age, etc.) are inscribed; it's a cultural construction that capitalizes on energies of a heterogeneous, discontinuous and affective or unconscious nature. This vision of the body contains sexuality as a process and as a constitutive element.<sup>240</sup>

Sexual interaction is one of the most pervasive forms of social relation and within a quasi-polygamous context, such as Lucia's, sex is currency for women's freedom and challenging cultural norms which allow men to have more than one lover but prohibit women from doing the same. When the family tribunal is held, it is discovered that Lucia is pregnant with

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<sup>240</sup> Rosi Braidotti. 'Between the no longer and the not yet: nomadic variations on the body'. Lecture on <http://www.women.it/cyberarchive/files/braidotti.htm> [date accessed: 23 January 2010].

Tambu's father's child, although Lucia has her own boyfriend, Takesure. Whilst there is cultural acceptance of a man who sleeps with his wife's sister, as the sister is considered his younger wife, a woman having two lovers is unthinkable. There is no customary arrangement acknowledging her as Jeremiah's 'second wife' nor is there any Christian or Shona marriage constituting bonds between her and the cattle herder, Takesure. However it is often that a woman in her position would be '*Mainini*' (meaning younger wife in this context, not aunt) to Ma'Shingayi, as the second wife, officially or unofficially recognized by custom and certainly under no circumstances would she be allowed to have relations with Takesure in this situation. Lucia thus doubly commits cultural taboo.

The family tribunal (*dare*) convened by Babamukuru in Chapter 7 of the novel, has often been associated with Lucia's intervention of family proceedings of council, but in fact it is the opening when the family convenes for the weekend that she disrupts. The *dare* is only summoned after Babamukuru's request and Lucia intervenes during the greetings where she disrupts the proceedings by saying, '*Nyamshewe Mwaramu*' (131) addressing Babamukuru by his totemic name and respectful title as her brother-in-law.<sup>241</sup> According to custom, 'she shouldn't have begun the proceedings', because she is a younger sister-in-law and proceedings are begun by a senior male or female paternal member. Lucia may only greet guests after Maiguru or Ma'Shingayi as she is a young sister and relation by marriage, not blood.

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<sup>241</sup> This is offered as a loose English translation.

Undermining familial protocol, Lucia asserts her own authority to speak and no one can prevent her from doing so. Without regard for laws of social position, Lucia asserts her presence thereby mapping her own space as a subject. By asserting her presence in speaking first and talking back to Takesure, Lucia, ‘violat[es] the *male-owner/female-property* paradigm, she becomes a terrorizing threat to male authority.’<sup>242</sup> Takesure suggests to Babamukuru, ‘We need a good strategy to outsmart that woman. She is vicious and unnatural. She is uncontrollable.’ (145)

The notion of the African woman who is uncontrollable resonates with racist perceptions of the Black body and this further complicates the oppression of Black women. Within colonial discourse, constructions of the Black female body as a hypersexual birth machine as alluded to in DM Somerville’s (1976) *My Life Was a Ranch*, for example. The novel is an ‘adventure’ into the Save Valley of South Eastern Zimbabwe describes the native women and native custom. Somerville writes:

Women had no embarrassing modesty about their bare breasts or stomachs which – in a nation so devoid of clothing – was quite a practical attitude....The women’s voices are also much lower than those of white women....By Bantu custom, the native may have as many wives as he can afford to pay for....Little Baridzo, who was barely five feet tall, inherited six or seven women of various shapes and sizes, from one tall, lean female of nearly six feet to the buxom mothers of many children.<sup>243</sup>

Somerville’s description depicts African woman as a figure of hypersexuality that is highly fertile and primitive. This reinforces enduring European myths of Black women as Jezebels; lewd, immoral

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<sup>242</sup> Charles Johnson. *Talking Back: Dialogue and Discourse in Nervous Conditions* <http://charleswjohnson.name/essays/wri130nervousconditions.pdf> [date accessed: 2 April 2010].

<sup>243</sup> Salisbury Kaliani Books, 1976, pp.153, 155, 158, 160.

and inherently promiscuous. In portraying Lucia as a woman who is unapologetic of her sexuality and alluring voluptuousness, Dangarembga's novel openly confronts and reverses the stereotypes of Black women as represented in Somerville's novel, for example. Dangarembga rewrites colonial conceptions of the Black female as a sexual object and transforms her into a subject with a speaking voice. In challenging racist and patriarchal views held about women, the text does not place an overt emphasis on the body as a site of sexual fecundity, but uses it as a creative expression of women's struggles. The projection of Lucia as a woman of resilience and a vibrant persona admired by the other womenfolk retrieves the Black female body from cultural and colonial disdain and historical violation.

The body becomes a site of self-legitimated and empowered discursive flows that project an alternative form of power in sexual expression as a means of agency in a racially, culturally and gender determined world. Lucia's characterization depicts the connectivity of struggle with femininity to escape the bondage of poverty. Arguing from a feminist perspective, Lucia, as the figure of the Other shows how sexual politics produces multiple turbulent flows that shift dominant perspectives on the body as primarily a site of male sexual pleasure.

The *dare* is convened because of Lucia's uncontrollable desires, resultant in a pregnancy from Jeremiah. Although Jeremiah is prepared to take Lucia as a second wife, Babamukuru wants to rid the homestead of the

evil of polygamy and infidelity. His dogmatic Christian values mark Lucia as the villain, but there is no verbal chastisement of Jeremiah apart from forcing him to wed Ma'Shingayi according to Christian tradition. During the council the men show their weaknesses; Takesure and Jeremiah rather than standing up in defence of Lucia, malign her as a temptress and a witch. Exaggerating her character, Takesure purports:

You know what is said of her, that she walks in the night? ... She threatened terrible things. And we know what she is like. She would do them. *Ehe!* She would do them. She is probably the one bewitching Mukoma Jeremiah's children, so that he will marry her. (143)

As her lover he might defend her, but Takesure shifts the blame from himself to Lucia as the stubborn one who refused to leave Jeremiah's home before relations began between her and Tambu's father. Jeremiah is equally spineless and places her at fault for his own weaknesses. Determined not to be tried in her absence, Lucia barges in on the dare. In anger she pulls Takesure to his feet with, 'an ear between each finger and thumb.' (144)

Without regard for the members of the council, Lucia exerts her bodily force over Takesure and tackles him to the ground. Comparable to the physical fights between Tambu and Nhamo when she discovers he has been stealing her maize (31) and the battle between Nyasha and Babamukuru when she arrives home late, the resort to physical use of strength shows the extent to which gender iniquities force violent outbursts in the women. In the private domestic space of the kitchen, Tete and Maiguru recall Lucia's attack and both express their amusement and support for Lucia:

they shouldn't mess with women like Lucia!' They puckered their faces up and dissolved into helpless giggles. [Maiguru] "And now shall we have a cleansing or a wedding?" Tete asked...which is the better cure for Jeremiah's self-indulgence? Those men, *aiwa*, those men! (148)

Although during the proceedings Tete has sat as a member of the patriarchy, the kitchen, as an environment with a gendered coding, is a communal space for the women where patriarchal hierarchies are dispensed with. Tete and Maiguru stand in solidarity with Lucia and they concur that fault lies with the men, although this can never be said openly. Tete's ironic statement of a 'cleansing or a wedding' makes an important cultural comment on the practices of justice by the patriarchy and the influence of Christian values on tradition. The rupture of colonial contact with traditional systems of life, transformed customary practice as seen in the way Babamukuru uses his Christian value-judgement to conduct the *dare*. He orders a Christian wedding as a way of cleansing Jeremiah of his lustfulness while Lucia is demonised as evil. By contrast in the private, non-official domain, the women stand in solidarity with Lucia's disruption of the family council. The unity emphasizes the communal thrust of the novel, a 'wholeness'<sup>244</sup> similarly espoused by African womanism as a communal commitment to strategic confrontation of the patriarchy. This dialectic of collectivity, characteristic of the feminist *bildung* can also be understood in terms of Rita Felski's (1989) analysis of the female collective:

[it] functions as a barrier against and a refuge from the worst effects of a potentially socially threatening order by opening up a space for non-exploitative relationships grounded in common goals and interests. The feminist *Bildungsroman* thus combines the exploration of subjectivity with a dimension of group solidarity which inspires activism and resistance rather than private

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<sup>244</sup> Ogunyemi, 1985, p. 73.

resignation, and makes it possible to project a visionary for hope of a future change.<sup>245</sup>

Resistance of oppression by the disempowered is collective and individual as has been shown in this Chapter and it is also a strategy of survival. Both Tambu and Lucia take the opportunities offered by Babamukuru to escape the ‘burdens of womanhood’. When Lucia is offered a job by Babamukuru at the mission, she graciously accepts and to give thanks she ululates, ‘*Purururu!*’ and claps her hands saying:

Thank you Samusha, thank you Chiwaha. You have done a great deed. Truly, we could not survive without you. Those foreign places you went, did not make you forget us. No! They enabled you to come back and perform miracles! (158-9)

Although Nyasha disapproves of her flattery, Lucia knows she has something to gain by flattering Babamukuru. She is a strategic woman and escapes oppression in this way. Treiber (2002) in her essay ‘Strategic Fusions: Undermining Cultural Essentialism in *Nervous Conditions*’ states that when Dangarembga presented her film, *Everyone’s Child*, one critic commented that the male help the film’s protagonist received, ‘weakened the feminist critique of the film.’ (84) The female protagonist of her film turns to prostitution to support herself and her siblings and seeks the help of a male friend to get out of the trade. Treiber writes that Dangarembga responded, ‘you take help wherever you can find it,’ (84), signifying, thus that feminism is not divided along lines of gender but according to oppressive circumstance. Treiber rightly argues that the film shows ‘a commitment to strategic manoeuvre rather than adherence to ideological correctness that prescribes and forbids various representations.’ (85)

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<sup>245</sup> *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999. p. 139.

As *Nervous Conditions* shows, Lucia is clearly an opportunist and whenever a situation arises that can work to her advantage, she uses it, from the relationships she has with men, to farming, to finding an opportunity to move away from the homestead and out of poverty. Unlike her sister, Ma'Shingayi who was married at fifteen to deflect the 'burden' of poverty, Lucia is a single woman who is resourceful and independent. She uses her body as a means of survival, having 'dalliances with men who did not want to settle down with her but were often very rich.' (127) She is aware of the desire men have for her and uses this to her advantage.

Lucia's migration from the rural home to the mission signifies a shifting of political and physical boundaries as African women were not permitted to move freely and were subject to pass laws. In symbolic terms, the movement affirms what Avtar Brah (1996), argues in *Cartographies of Diaspora*<sup>246</sup>, 'the person [is] a complex and continually changing subject who is the site of multiple contradictions, and whose everyday practices are associated with effects that may reinforce or undermine social divisions.' (1996: 89) Physical territory, like body territory becomes contested and in mapping the female body to the land, (in Mbuya's story, the women ploughing the land, Lucia and Tambu's movement from rural to semi-urban spaces), the sexed and pregnant body as figuration, ruptures the historical privileging of Whiteness and masculinity in the production of hegemonic, colonial and disembodied geographical knowledge(s).

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<sup>246</sup> *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities (Gender, Racism, Ethnicity)*  
London: Routledge, 1996.

Further to re-taking ownership of herself and her future, Lucia decides to enrol in school and attends night school from elementary level. She has not had access to schooling because she is similarly weighed down by the 'burden of womanhood', poverty, race, colonialism and gender bias, like Tambu and Ma'Shingayi. Education is thus a means for freedom from the 'burden', though simultaneously colonial education can also be a site of entrapment and resistance in different ways for the four women.

When Ma'Shingayi falls ill, Lucia leaves her job at the mission to take care of her for three days. The concern shows a sisterly allegiance, and that although Lucia is opportunistic, she is neither selfish nor individualistic. She cooks and cleans for Ma'Shingayi and reserves the meat for her, which, when there is not enough to go around, is only eaten by the patriarchy.

Lucia's characterisation embodies a specific form of oppositional consciousness that revises the male subject/female object paradigm and reclaims the corporeal female body and its material experiences. As a figure, Lucia also functions as criticism of the processes which produce and maintain the material conditions for women's subjugation and claims a political and social space in which kinship relations are re-configured and African women can re-constitute themselves as embodied subjects.

## **Conclusion**

Dangarembga presents a compelling range of figurations of Zimbabwean femininity that inform how life is experienced in the colonial state. Writing as a means to advance women's creativity as discourse seeks to reverse and revise the perception of women as absent from history into present-absent figures. This Chapter has tried to show how the performance of socially taboo acts, the centring of oral memory and the negotiation of tradition and modernity construct women as discursive figures who challenge the narrative authority of colonial and early Black Zimbabwean writing.

Using the family structure and kinship relations as its narrative framework, *Nervous Conditions* offers a deeper understanding of how identities are interconnected through biological relation and shared oppression on the basis of gender and race as well as how subjectivities are created. To this end, the figuration of ancestral memory creates a legitimate, alternative history: anorexia symbolizes a tool of resistance against cultural stereotype; pregnancy is portrayed as a means of escape and psychosis as anti-colonial opposition. These various subjective and collective figurations of femininity contest the present-absent figure that African women have historically been assigned, and create new fluid figures that pluralize narratives of colonized and newly independent in ways that also reshape African feminist discourse. Further exploring this process of reshaping discourse through feminist figurations, I examine the

writing of motherhood and the maternal body in Vera's fiction in the next  
Chapter.

## Chapter 2

Mothering, Othermothering and Unmothering:

Figuring the Maternal in Vera's Novels

## **Introduction**

A common thread running through Vera's five published novels is the figure of the maternal subject who is either pregnant or a mother. As sub-text to the main narrative, each of Vera's stories tell of a troubled mother-child relationship, where mothers abandon their daughters, kill their children or avenge their violation. Similarly, in Dangarembga's writing, strained mother-daughter relations feature as one of the many sub-narratives in *Nervous Conditions* and *The Book of Not*, where the tensions between Tambu and Nyasha and their respective mothers, Ma'Shingayi and Maiguru, challenge the valorisation of the mother figure in African cultural discourse.

In this reading on the figuring of the maternal in Vera's fiction, I extend the previous Chapter's observations on rebel women as metaphors for feminist resistance to explore how patriarchal and colonial authority are deconstructed and female subjectivity is reconstructed through the figuration of mothering acts of taboo and civil disobedience. The alternative images of femininity presented in Tambu and Nyasha, and in this Chapter, Mazvita and Phephelaphi, for example, present new political possibilities of resistance through the body for the woman subject. Like the previous Chapter, one of the purposes of this reading on the figurations of motherhood is to conduct a carnivalised space in which African feminist discourses and theoretical ideas on the politics of the body, gender relationships and cultural practices associated with womanhood can engage with the selected writing, in the hope of

expanding feminist discourses on the multiplicity and complexity of African femininity.

To this end, I compare the biological and social meanings of motherhood conveyed in the texts with cultural and African feminist images of an earthy, fertile and loving mother figure. Placing these theoretical and cultural perspectives in dialogue with Vera's figurations of rebellious mothers presents a strong challenge to romanticized images of African motherhood. Vera's fiction points towards other ways of imagining motherhood and questions the culturally valorised images and presents a different model of Zimbabwean motherhood, as experienced under colonialism, war, and in traditional society. In my reading of the range of lived experiences, I adapt Haraway and Sandoval's figurations of the cyborg in order to show how modernity and the metaphysical impact on the experience of motherhood.

While Haraway's cyborg is a critical tool with which to explore the impact of modernity and technology on Black women's lives under colonialism in *Butterfly Burning* and *Under the Tongue*, in reading *Nehanda, Without a Name* and *Under the Tongue*, Sandoval's spiritual cyborg is a crucial lens through which to understand the cosmological realm of Shona motherhood represented in these novels in the context of colonial invasion, urban sprawl, civil war and oppressive Shona patriarchy. Sandoval locates the twentieth century figuration of the cyborg within a broader historical landscape to argue that, 'colonized peoples of the U.S.

have already developed the cyborg skills required for survival under techno-human conditions as requisite for survival over the last three hundred years.<sup>247</sup> Sandoval appears to suggest that ‘cyborg consciousness’ is oppositional, anti-colonial thinking, ‘developed out of a set of technologies that together comprise the methodology of the oppressed, a methodology that can provide the guides for survival and resistance under First World transnational conditions.’<sup>248</sup> She uses the cyborg to symbolise the resistive movements by marginalised urban women of colour in America and develops the ‘methodology of the oppressed’ to describe the range of coping strategies that women have deployed in surviving the oppressiveness of transnational hegemonies.

Taking imperialism and slavery to be global yet specific experiences of women, Sandoval’s theorization provides an enriching model of how marginalised femininities may be thought of as political identities that complicate the categories of race, class and sex as simultaneously intersecting variables of identity rather than distinct facets. The intersection of a raced, classed and gendered subject gives a different political meaning of the technological cyborg, thus Sandoval’s ‘Third World cyborg’<sup>249</sup> theorizes the strategies by women of colour<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>247</sup> Chela Sandoval. ‘New Sciences: Cyborg Feminism and the Methodology of the Oppressed.’ in *The Cyber Cultures Reader*, David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy, (Eds.) New York: Routledge, 2000. p. 374.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.* p. 375.

<sup>249</sup> Third World cyborg is used as a term to refer to the cyborg as a metaphor of Sandoval’s U.S /Third World Feminism.

<sup>250</sup> ‘Women of Colour’ is a term used in this thesis in the context of Sandoval’s work. Admittedly a contentious term, it is used to describe all people who are not White and share the common experience of racism, colonialism and slavery. Sandoval uses it to refer to how women may build across race, gender, sexuality and class to collectively effect social change.

throughout history to escape the traditional expectations of marriage, heterosexuality and child bearing and the oppressiveness of modernity through the slavery, colonialism and segregation. Although Haraway likens the cyborg to the oppositional position of women of colour, Sandoval is cautious to point out the danger of homogenizing the experiences of women of colour and ignoring the diversity and specificity of women.

Sandoval's Third World cyborg is a useful figuration that can be applied to the colonial Zimbabwean context of Vera's fiction to theorize how women construct a political identity out of motherhood and redefine the meanings of motherhood. Sandoval views the spiritual resistance methods of Chicana women as an 'inner technology' built within people and handed down through the generations as psychic practice. In Vera's *Nehanda*, it might be said that the inner technologies of spiritual warfare enable the natives, under Nehanda's leadership, to resist the colonial technologies of the gun.

The Third World cyborg provides the appropriate context in which Hastings' cyborg mommy can be applied to colonial Africa. Vera's figurations of killing mothers, particularly Mazvita and Phephelaphi,<sup>251</sup> disrupt the colonial race to development by refusing to allow their children to live. Motherhood is figured as a contested identity as the ambiguous relation between maternal bodies and machines based on

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<sup>251</sup> Of *Without a Name* and *Butterfly Burning*, respectively.

female bodies as reproductive machines birthing male city builders in *Butterfly Burning* and male soldiers in *Without a Name*. The refusal to continue to participate in the colonial (re)production line by resorting to traditional abortive practices signifies a rejection of oppressive modernity while simultaneously inscribing the presence of women within the colonial narrative. The cyborg mommy in the context of Vera's fiction which draws heavily on Shona and Ndebele cosmology such as the legends of Nehanda and Jikinya in *Nehanda* and the reclaiming of women's spiritual power in *Under the Tongue* to depict women's strategies of resistance further complicate the image of motherhood.

Temporalities and boundaries between the maternal, machine and spirit are increasingly blurred and so mixed up that an absolute return to the pre-colonial via customary practices is impossible, while an outright negation of modern life in the colony would be unrealistic. Like the women of *Nervous Conditions*, the women characters in Vera's novels strategically negotiate their existence in the city because it is the key to their independence and freedom. For example, Tambu understands the value of education and the importance of remembering one's roots, while Zhizha in *Under the Tongue* is taught how to read by the older womenfolk to help her overcome the muteness caused by rape trauma. By locating Zhizha's literacy process in the world of Shona mythology and practices linking women to the land and the natural elements, Vera, like Dangarembga, appears to embrace strategic fusions as a way of figuring the colonized woman as a corrupter of the purity of colonial and nativist discourses. In

destabilizing these narratives, the writing conveys a different image of the colonized subject which rejects the divisive, fixed binaries of tradition/modernity and native/colonizer. In figuring the performances of *metissage*, Vera and Dangarembga's writing seems to acknowledge the simultaneously emancipatory, repressive and ambivalent nature of colonial life.

Characters like Phehpelaphi, Deliwe and Nyasha embody this frenzied and fractured nature because although abortion, prostitution and anorexia may be symbolic of the perils of colonialism for the individual, Phehpelaphi is free from the potential burdens of motherhood; Deliwe is economically self-sufficient, while Nyasha uses her body to challenge colonial authority. Interpreting this relation between the colonizer and colonized in terms of Hastings' cyborg mommy metaphor which recognises that the 'machine/body relationship is at once liberating and oppressing,' (2003: 1) Vera's taboo mothers, mothers-to-be and prostitutes, reveal how the paradox in the machine/body functions in terms of native and state relations. Although women's education, movement and employment in the city, the township and at the mission, is heavily regulated by the state, women find their freedom and resistance in these very urban spaces that are designed to keep them out.

The implications of these contemporaneous binding and unbinding relations for matri-centric African feminism are that if feminism is to adequately locate women as figures in the industry and economy of the

colony, there is a need to explore the woman-subject as a complex hybrid of biological, cultural and modern elements. If as Haraway suggests, "women of color' might be understood as a cyborg identity"<sup>252</sup> the re-figuring and disruption of the natural pregnancy and menstrual cycle through abortion and anorexia are simultaneously liberatory and defeatist acts. Liberatory because moral and religious discourses of the sanctity of bodily cycles are challenged by the women's extreme actions, which symbolize a refusal to be in service to exploitative capitalist systems built on race and gender division. However, it is also defeatist because aborting a foetus or starving oneself can be a damaging and painful experience. In these contexts, the cyborg can be taken to be an alternative figuration of African motherhood that provides ways of thinking and theorizing about motherhood in a more complex, less romanticized ways and more in line with social hardship and political resistance that colonized women face.

I propose, in discussing the figuration of the difficulties and triumphs of the maternal in Vera's fiction, to explore the multiple intersections between race, gender, class and colonialism at each of the different historical periods covered in the texts. My reading begins with *Nehanda* which is set at the moment of first encounter with British settlers colonial at the end of the 1800s. Drawing on Sandoval's theorization of the spiritual cyborg, I discuss how Nehanda disrupts biological/spiritual divide when she transforms into a spirit medium to lead a revolt against

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<sup>252</sup> Donna Haraway. 'A Cyborg Manifesto' in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, Amelia Jones (Ed.) London: Routledge, 2003. pp.475-497, p.487.

the settlers. Based on a different period of Zimbabwe's colonial history is, *Butterfly Burning*. My analysis of this 1940s novel considers the extent to which technology and modernity play an important role in the maintenance of social control and patriarchy. With *Under the Tongue* and *Without a Name* set in the 1970s war period, Vera examines the impact of war on women's bodies and family relations. These two texts re-figure the concept of woman-as-nation from a silenced 'quasi-eroticized object-member of a kinship network of children-citizens, lover-defenders'<sup>253</sup> into a speaking, named subject whose abused and disfigured body tells a different story of the nation, particularly of how women experience conflict and colonialism. These scarred bodies oppose official and cultural images of Zimbabwe and African femininity whose hegemonic stronghold on discourse denies the subjectivity and discursive rights of mutilated female figures.

On the historical timeline, Vera's figurations locate women as subjects with agency in the construction of the nation's history. These narratives present a challenge to dominant male-centred nationalist and colonialist narratives which present themselves as the sole authorial sources of history. In giving voice to women's stories, Vera thus pluralizes the voices constructing the discourses of the nation, rather than the narrative being the domain of patriarchs in positions of authority. The depiction of women as victims of violence, as a mothering collective, as matriarchs and battle

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<sup>253</sup> Krista Scott. 'Imagined Bodies, Imagined Communities Feminism, Nationalism, and Body Metaphors Introduction: The Body as Metaphor' *The Feminist eZine – The Female Body* <http://www.feministezine.com/feminist/modern/Imagined-Bodies-Imagined-Communities.html> 1999. [date accessed: 15 August 2010].

leaders provide a range of figurations that critically articulate the maternal body as political and historical praxis and forges a more holistic image of maternity capturing the complexity and diversity of Zimbabwean femininity. Such an empowered representation of woman-as-subject acknowledges and builds upon the past struggles of Black women for subjectivity.<sup>254</sup>

By raising culturally sensitive issues of motherhood, Vera's writing presents a challenge to dominant essentializing discourses and also to Afro-centric African feminist discourse that has an anthropological approach to maternity such that it tends to produce a fixed, glorified image of motherhood in Zimbabwean literature. This can be seen in much of the early fiction by Black Zimbabwean males where women were represented as one-dimensional characters in moralistic tones proscribing how a woman must and must not behave. For example, the vernacular writings of Ndabezinhle Sigogo<sup>255</sup> and Gilles Kuimba<sup>256</sup> portray women in a conservative light, nostalgic for the good old days where the virginal traditional woman was preferable to the experienced urban woman. George Kahari (1997) describes the female characters in early Shona romance novels as:

[having] a veneer of politeness and are usually tragic figures. They are more frequently victims rather than the agents of tragic situations.... When women do

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<sup>254</sup> See for example the struggles referred to by Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi in 'Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English' *Signs*, Vol. 11 No. 1(Autumn 1985) pp. 63 – 67.

<sup>255</sup> *Akulazulu Emhlabeni*, 1974, Gwelo (Gweru): Mambo Press in Association with Literature Bureau, 1974.

<sup>256</sup> *Rurimi Inyoka* 1976, Gwelo (Gweru): Mambo Press in Association with Literature Bureau, 1976.

appear as heroines, they never have the vitality and energy of the animal characters.<sup>257</sup>

Women were not cast as empowered figures even in the traditional novels where they could play the role of a ritual agent. Rather, as Kahari states, male writing tended to valorise the docile, submissive woman. The representation of mothers did not fare any better in the English novels with young sons as the protagonists where the mother was often a feared figure of authority. For example in Charles Mungoshi's (1983) short story 'Who will Stop the Dark?',<sup>258</sup> the mother is a tough authorial figure. The mother is implicated in the maiming of the boy's father and at points in the story she hurls verbal abuse at him. She is a figure of fear; with one stern look she can silence the boy. Similarly in *Harvest of Thorns* by Shimmer Chinodya (1989),<sup>259</sup> the mother, Shamiso is a devout, strict mother while the mother in Dambudzo Marechera's *House of Hunger*<sup>260</sup> is an archetypal figure of control. In the 1980s when women's writing became more established, the writing of Barbara Makalisa (1981), Sekai Nzenza (1988) and Dangarembga represented women as more complex characters who spoke out against the oppressive gender structures in society.

Following the trend set in the 1980s, Vera's work, published in the mid-1990s offered richly lyrical and evocative novels exploring the crimes and hardships of war and colonialism as experienced by women. Her dark

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<sup>257</sup> George Kahari. *The Rise of the Shona Novel*, Gweru: Mambo Press. 1997. p.84.

<sup>258</sup> Charles Mungoshi. *Some Kind of Wounds and other Short Stories*, Gweru: Mambo Press, 1983.

<sup>259</sup> Shimmer Chinodya, *Harvest of Thorns*, Harare: Baobab Books, 1989.

<sup>260</sup> Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1982.

tales of rape and ethnic violence intervene in the official discourses of the nationalist and colonial states which both promoted a romanticised image of their eras. For example, Edmund Chipamaunga's *A Fighter for Freedom* (1985) unequivocally praises the nationalist guerrillas and Charles Samupindi's (1992b) *Pawns*<sup>261</sup> declares, 'the hand of ZANU shall rule!' (23) Vera's novels of war and family crisis like *Under the Tongue* give voice to the harrowing experiences of women who dispute nationalist and colonial accounts of the past. My analysis considers how Vera's fractured narratives intervene and challenge official history. Through stories of family tragedy and political turmoil like *Under the Tongue*, Vera depicts how ordinary, flawed men and women experience the everyday. As Wilson-Tagoe argues, Vera's texts explore, 'gender as a historical category that interrogates the very foundations of social structures [,] it extends and changes the meaning of both gender and history.' (2002: 178)

Concerned with the relation between gender and history in Vera's novels of motherhood, I intend to show how the relationships between women and men change dependent on the prevailing political and social circumstances. Having stated that I intend to read the novels along a historical timeline, it is also worth noting, as a minor concern, how gender relations have changed through the years. Albeit a romanticized view of pre-colonial society, *Nehanda* depicts both male and female spirit leaders in Kaguvi (103-108) and Nehanda, a male traditional healer (49) as well as harmony between men and women (113), however by the 1940s when

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<sup>261</sup> Harare: Baobab Books, 1992b.

the nation is under colonial rule, the gender solidarity and spiritual complementarity<sup>262</sup> of male and female principles has significantly changed. *Butterfly Burning* portrays how colonial labour emasculates Fumbatha as he is caught in a generational cycle of poverty and struggles to provide as he thinks a man should for his woman (59), Phephelaphi, who has her own ideas about finding employment in order to support herself. In the 1970s relations between men and women are depicted as even more strained as both *Under the Tongue* and *Without a Name* document the sexual abuses women suffered at the hands of Black men with the liberation war rumbling in the background.

The temporal development of Black male-female relations shows how women went from independent agricultural producers to landless dependents on men who worked in the city. With people classed as waged instruments of economic production, this in turn had a negative impact on the treatment of women by men as seen, for example, in the relationship between Grandmother and Muroyiwa in *Under the Tongue* where Grandmother is financially dependent on her husband the basket weaver, and suffers through his abuse. However, the reordering of family positions when Muroyiwa dies and Runyararo goes to jail makes Grandmother the

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<sup>262</sup> Complimentarity is a term used to describe African models of society in which the roles of men and women are designed to balance and support each other. Exploring the idea of male-female collaboration as an African feminist concept, Carol Boyce Davies and Anne Adams Grave (1986) used the KiSwahili word, '*ngambika*' which means 'help me to balance/carry this load' in which they described the 'double allegiance' of African women to the feminist movement and the liberation movement. Since then several West African feminists such as Niara Sudrakasa (1986), Ogunyemi (1996), and Acholonu (1997) have incorporated this principle into their critical works on African women.

head of the family and chief breadwinner. Although the novel does not state how she looks after herself and Zhizha, it can be assumed from the linking of women to the land that she has access to farming. This symbolizes a reclaiming of women's economic independence that women had, generations before Grandmother and before colonialism.

In illustrating the historical development of gender relations, Vera's novels also map how women have resisted the various and interconnected forms of shared oppression. In all of her novels, the collective plays an important role in women's struggles. Similar to Dangarembga's writing, the figuration of the gendered collective through kinship and family bonds, finds historical resonance with how African women organised themselves in resistance to colonial and patriarchal subjugation, as Mama argues, 'African women have always defined and carried out their own struggles. African feminism dates far back in our collective past—although much of the story has yet to be researched and told.'<sup>263</sup>

The collective as the means to acquisition and negotiation of power, shifts the focus from social hierarchies and divisions between men and women, like in *Under the Tongue*, to the needs of the community and as a response to the disempowering effect of colonization. The reclaiming of the cultural role of mothers as caregivers and as authorial figures within cosmology as seen in *Under the Tongue* also signifies the changing power relations between citizen and state, woman and man, which like identity are not static and are shaped by circumstance.

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<sup>263</sup> 'Talking about Feminism in Africa' Interview with Elaine Salo, 2001.

In this chapter on motherhood, I attempt to show the multiplicity of meanings of motherhood embedded in the writing shaped by the effects of colonialism. Arguing that both the drastic and positive acts by the women characters are legitimate coping strategies, I consider both the pre-colonial role of motherhood and expand into the changing face of motherhood in the colonial era, question a fixed Afro-centric view of motherhood that is reflected in some forms of African feminism. For example, motherist Acholonu grounding her theory in pre-colonial anthropological history states that:

An Afrocentric feminist theory, therefore, must be anchored on the matrix of *motherhood* which is central to African metaphysics and has been the basis of the survival and unity of the black race through the ages. Whatever Africa's role may be in the global perspective, it could never be divorced from her quintessential position as the Mother Continent of humanity, nor is it coincidental that motherhood has remained the central focus of African art.... Africa's alternative to Western feminism is MOTHERISM and Motherism denotes motherhood (...). The Motherist is the man or woman committed to the survival of Mother Earth as a hologrammatic entity.<sup>264</sup>

Although Acholonu seeks to displace the centrality of Western discourse, she replaces it with a romanticised paradigm of African matriarchy that selectively celebrates the contributions of African women to humanity. Clearly, Acholonu does not consider the morally contentious acts of abortion and baby killing as part of mothering.

My reading of Vera's work attempts to bring a new approach to motherhood that considers its contradictions, triumphs and failings in its depiction of some of the difficult choices women have to make in order to survive life in colonial Zimbabwe. These complicated figures of

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<sup>264</sup> 1997, p. 3.

motherhood indicate a multiplicity of subject positions occupied by women and illustrates one of the central arguments of this thesis, that a Zimbabwean identity is not singular or static, the subject is always and already in a state of becoming.

In addition, by positioning the maternal figure as the source of life and fertility, Afro-centric African feminist theories like motherism, simultaneously positivizes the traditional roles of women but also inadvertently validate pre-colonial practices of African culture that are biased towards women that have in some cases been exacerbated by religion and/or colonialism such as arranged marriages of minors in Ethiopia and Nigeria.<sup>265</sup> The emphasis on celebrating African history and lack of an adequate critique on the complexity of African motherhood leads to what Mama describes as:

re-invent[ing] old, conservative, ethnographic claims about African societies through homogenizing, blanket notions which flatten the cultural and socio-political, ideological landscapes of African family life, while providing sophisticated sounding tropes for radical nationalists who occupy the African state and its patriarchal institutions.<sup>266</sup>

Rather than promoting a monolithic, centrist concept of Africa, Mama argues in favour of a wider, more critical historical approach that captures the dynamism and diversity of African female historiography. Voicing similar concerns to Mama, Desire Lewis (2004) considers Afro-centric theory in the contemporary post-independence era and argues that:

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<sup>265</sup> UNFPA Marriage Fact Sheets  
[http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2005/presskit/factsheets/facts\\_child\\_marriage.htm](http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2005/presskit/factsheets/facts_child_marriage.htm). [date accessed: 2 November 2010].

<sup>266</sup> Interview with Elaine Salo (2001).

the repercussions of privileging racial or national identity to the extent of ignoring structural inequalities between men and women in postcolonial African politics, it is disturbing that a celebrated “Africanicity” can muffle and displace crucial power relations and challenges for change in Africa.<sup>267</sup>

From Lewis’s position, it can be argued further that an anthropological perspective that fixes women in the past is anachronistic and out of sync with the contemporary challenges women face. Situating the maternal experiences of Zimbabwean women within a broader historical paradigm of Africa, acknowledges the impact of modernity and transition on gender relations and identity and accounts for the dismantling of hegemonies through radical acts by women in Vera’s fiction. Such an approach provides an understanding of African female subjectivity as pluralistic and always in process.

By exploring the impact of the intersecting historic forces of colonialism, nationalism and oppressive culture on the experience of motherhood in Zimbabwe presented in the writing, I intend to foreground the altering effect that the writing has on dominant African feminist maternal canon and presents new alternative, multiple ways of figuring motherhood. Vera’s simultaneous endorsement and rejection of the notion that ‘the canon of [African] motherhood is absolutely natural’<sup>268</sup> as argued by Oyewumi (2003), reveals the numerous flaws and cracks in the Afro-centric maternal metaphor. With these social dynamics in mind, my discussion will raise important questions on how to re-think the image of a

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<sup>267</sup> Desiree Lewis. ‘African Gender Research And Postcoloniality: Legacies And Challenges?’ in *African Gender Scholarship: Concepts, Methodologies and Paradigms*. Dakar: Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA). <http://codesria.org/IMG/pdf/LEWIS.pdf> 2004. p. 3. [date accessed 27 July 2009].

<sup>268</sup> Oyèrónké, Oyewumi. ‘Abiyamo: Theorizing African Motherhood,’ *Jenda: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies*: Issue 4, 2003. <http://www.jendajournal.com/issue4/oyewumi.html> [date accessed 6 April 2009].

more contemporary African motherhood, with an attuned sensitivity to complex ways in which economic, gender, familial, social, nationalist and racial politics are played out on the female body, as represented in the texts.

### ***Nehanda: Reinventing the Spirit Mother***

The first novel in my proposed historical timeline of mapping Zimbabwean women's experiences of motherhood and imperialism, through texts, is *Nehanda* which narrates the moment of cultural contact between Africans and Europeans. Set in the 1890s, *Nehanda* is a rewriting of the historic encounter between the Shona and prospective British settlers where the Shona successfully resist occupation by the British under the leadership of a young girl named Nehanda who represents the legendary spirit medium, Nehanda Charwe Nyakasikana. Together with spirit mediums, Chief Chaminuka and Sekuru Kaguvi, Nehanda led the First Chimurenga struggle against British colonial invasion in 1896-1897. Mbuya Nehanda was a *mhondoro* (spirit medium) believed to be the reincarnation of Nyamhika Nehanda (1430) who was the daughter of Mutota, one of the first Mutapa Chiefs of the Great Zimbabwe Empire which is the foundation of present-day Zimbabwe.<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>269</sup> David Lan. *Guns and Rain: Guerrillas and Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe*. London: James Currey, 1985.

What sets Vera's *Nehanda* apart from other fictional accounts of the spirit medium is that this novel imagines Nehanda's life from birth and it is the only one written by a woman, to date. Most Zimbabwean writing has focussed on her revolutionary role, but Vera begins her story with an older Nehanda then quickly switches back to her early years likening her spirit to the wind gathering dust. Vera writes, 'the child watched the wind come toward them.... She heard it call to her with its song which emanated from within her: the spirits presided over her birth.' (3) Among the Shona, as with many other African cultures it is believed that the infant has come from the spirit world with unique talents and gifts to offer to the community. The presence of the spirits and the premonitions her mother has, give a sense of expectation that Nehanda is a spiritually gifted child with a great message to deliver.

By contrast, the first-ever published Shona novel *Feso* (1956) by Solomon Mutswairo is a nativist narrative in which Nehanda is an older woman who is heralded as a liberator by the Nyai people. Similarly in later novels of the post-independence era, Nehanda is represented as an older figure in Charles Samupindi's (1992) novella, *Death Throes: The Trial of Mbuya Nehanda*<sup>270</sup> and in Chenjerai Hove's award winning novel *Bones* (1988)<sup>271</sup> While Samupindi's novella portrays Nehanda as an older woman, Hove's novel casts her as a spirit voice that laments the atrocities of the Second Chimurenga visited upon the villagers. *Bones* is the first

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<sup>270</sup> Charles Samupindi. *Death Throes: The Trial of Mbuya Nehanda*, Gweru: Mambo Press, 1992.

<sup>271</sup> Chenjerai Hove. *Bones*, Harare: Baobab Books, 1988.p.6, pp.72-82.

Zimbabwean novel to articulate the disproportionate impact of the war on women and Nehanda is portrayed as the mother of the nation who weeps for the bloodshed and the dispossessed women. Hove's Nehanda contrasts with Vera's depiction of the life of the female warrior, but both representations reinvoked the nationalist mythology of Nehanda as the nation's liberator and matriarch.

Vera's rewriting of Nehanda, gives a different version of the past and ends with the Shona victorious over the British. Wilson-Tagoe (2002) and Bull Christiansen have both described the literary revision of the anti-colonial struggle as reflective of feminist nationalism because female identity and nationalism reinforce each other in positive and constructive ways. *Nehanda* foregrounds the historic figure as matriarch of the Shona people, thus promotes affable gender relations, the importance of community and resistance as national narrative in order to construct Black patriotic history that challenges official colonial history as well as nationalist patriotic history.

Anne McClintock (1997) describes how the maternal is often represented as a valuable source of unmediated, direct memory as 'symbolic bearers of the nation', but mothers are simultaneously and ironically, 'kept in the past', located on the fringes of history, thus, 'denied any direct relation to

national [and historic] agency.<sup>272</sup> In response to the discursive dominance of patriarchal nationalism, Vera uses writing as a tool of resistance to privilege the speaking voice of the subaltern woman. She achieves this through her text which constructs women as the primary site of memory and tradition. The aesthetic strategies of reinventing cultural rituals and re-telling history from a matrilineal perspective refigures women/mothers as the primary sites of a people's memory, in opposition to official and written histories that privilege the accounts of patriarchal nationalists and White colonials. Reading the portrayal of motherhood in terms of the cyborg metaphor, further extends the novel's depiction of women as history's present-absent figures, but also as boundary breakers. Nehanda's transformation from girl to spiritual leader disrupts the boundaries of life/death and natural/supernatural, thereby probing the meanings of what being human means. If Haraway's cyborg is a metaphor revealing the 'leaky distinctions' between human-animal, then the permeability of the human-spirit boundary in the case of Nehanda in a struggle against colonialism, challenges the portrayal of African natives as sub-human in imperialist discourses on humanism and also shows the cultural and political roots of an oppositional consciousness characteristic of the Third World cyborg. Constructing an identity out of indigenous practices perceived as markers of difference, otherness and sub-humanness in imperial discourse, suggests an act of acquiring of political voice by women of colour, as Sandoval imagines the Third World cyborg to be.

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<sup>272</sup> Anne McClintock. "No Longer in a Future Heaven": Gender, Race and Nationalism' in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation and Postcolonial Perspectives*. Aamir Mufti, Anne McClintock & Ella Shohat (Eds.) Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. pp. 89-113, all quotes from p. 90.

Exploring the human-spirit dichotomy through tracing the protagonist's development from birth, Nehanda is portrayed as different and special. She does not cry instantly at birth, 'not ...for a day' (12) and her mother is concerned 'that her daughter had lost the gift on that perilous journey out of the womb.' (12) The constant invocation of the ancestral world and its connection to the living and the representation of the past as an essential dimension of the present, re-imagines the dichotomies of life/death, past/present as complementary rather than antithetical. In re-constructing a Shona worldview of reality, Vera gives voice to practices outlawed as pagan witchcraft in the colonial era. In figuring the interplay between the realms of the spiritual and the living, Vera does not romanticize the human-spirit bond, but also shows the frustrations and fears felt by those who have no control over the ancestors' choice of recipient for a special gift. On the day when the girls in the village prepare for marriage, Nehanda's mother is fearful of what will happen to her daughter. Thinking back through Nehanda's childhood, '[Mother] has not seen good dreams since her daughter was born...She does not like this day yet it should be the greatest day for her.' (46) She has constant visions of losing Nehanda, her only child. In Shona culture, Nehanda would be described as *zai regondo*, an eagle's egg, because an only child is considered precious and must be kept safe from harm. When her mother realises what is to become of her daughter, she journeys to her relatives' village:

carr[ying] words of silence so heavy she can no longer bear. She walks slowly... "My daughter is not my daughter" she tells her assembled relatives with tears streaming down her eyes. "My daughter is not my daughter." (48-49)

She is upset at losing her child to ancestors, as being a *mhondoro* means she will not have a normal womanhood like other girls and when she comes of age she takes on a spiritual role as mother of the clan.

Ndebele historian, Pathisa Nyathi (2001) explains that, '[a]t conception one is only a potential medium. The spirit is infused but only manifests itself later'<sup>273</sup> and when the time is right, the girl often suffers a 'possession-related illness.'<sup>274</sup> Nehanda does not fall sick but, when she comes of age the secret of her spiritual gift is discovered. In chapter twelve the girls of the village gather to commemorate the passage from girlhood into womanhood as they prepare for marriage, but Nehanda refuses to participate by maintaining silence and standing apart from the crowd. When the community asks why she behaves in this way, her mother answers:

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? Is it not enough? What is our power against the seasons, against the wishes of the departed? (47)

When Nehanda receives the gift of prophecy, she immediately becomes an old woman with her hair turning white and her skin becoming wrinkled, meaning that she will not be married or have children. A woman who becomes a spirit medium or *mhondoro* within Shona culture is normally an elderly woman who is past child-bearing age or a young woman who cannot have children.

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<sup>273</sup> Pathisa Nyathi. *Traditional Ceremonies of the AmaNdebele*, Gweru: Mambo Press. 2001. p.149.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*

Nehanda's instant transformation prevents all possibility of having children, but it is not, as Hunter argues, a rejection of motherhood. She contends that Vera's portrayal of Nehanda, 'destablise[s] the glorification of women solely as they are linked to fertility, whether their own bodies or of the land', it 'destabilises' 'the functioning of the institution of Shona-Zimbabwean motherhood.'<sup>275</sup> Hunter's critique fails to acknowledge that spirit mediums are established practitioners within Shona culture who act as intermediaries between the living, the ancestors and God. The cosmological role of women as spirits, ancestral mothers of the community, suggests a different, expanded definition of motherhood within Shona culture. The interplay between spiritual matriarchs and the living suggests motherhood is not only confined to the biological. The maternal as a cyborg figuration of human-spirit continuity, reclaims women as custodians of African cultural consciousness and seeks to restore the social importance of women after the disempowering, marginalizing effect of colonialism. Nehanda may be unable to mother in the physical sense, but her spiritual role transforms her into the communal matriarch and at the nationalist mythmaking level, she represents Mother Zimbabwe.

Although *Nehanda* is largely a nativist tale that reinvokes the importance of the spiritual, it is interesting to note that there are small slippages

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<sup>275</sup> Hunter, 2000, all quotes from p.230.

between the traditional and modern technologies of fighting. While Nehanda is the spiritual leader who warns the 'the tradition of the white man will destroy us' (81), she is also the army commander who distributes arms to her troops as, 'Nehanda speaks as she gives guns to the people.' (81) It seems contradictory that Nehanda instructs her people to rely on the spirits for guidance but at the same time encourages them to use the technologies of the White man to fight. Nehanda appears to be somewhat aware that in order to survive the future, people have to adapt to modernity. A similar awareness is shared by the women characters in Dangarembga and Vera's fiction, as the women negotiate the traditions of the past with the modern conveniences in order to cope with the colonial present. For Nehanda, the combined technologies of the spiritual and the modern in the battle against colonization can also be read as an example of Sandoval's Third World cyborg as the Shona people seem to adapt the 'skills required for survival under techno-human conditions'. (408) However, this interpretation can only be maintained up to a point because it is ambiguous to what extent Nehanda possesses the 'techno-human skills' to fight the settlers because Vera never fully explores the fusion of the modern and spiritual. The text explores other characteristics of Sandoval's cyborg which include figuring the spiritual as oppositional consciousness and inscribing women's historical presence into colonial discourses on the transformation of Zimbabwe from a communal, feudal<sup>276</sup> society to an industrial capitalist one.

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<sup>276</sup> See Brian Raftopoulos & Alois Mlambo. *Becoming Zimbabwe: A History From the Pre-colonial Period to 2008*, London: African Books Collective, 2009. pp. 14-15, p. 31.

By setting the story of *Nehanda* in a Shona society with pre-dominantly female characters, *Nehanda* re-appropriates the legend to give women a sense of agency as the present-absent figures of Zimbabwean history. The women in the text are imagined through the maternal metaphor as midwives, spirit mediums, diviners, traders, dreamers and storytellers as an attempt to reclaim and celebrate the power of women. Traditional stories are re-appropriated and modified as a way of inscribing a female-centred anti-colonial cultural consciousness into Zimbabwean discourse. The folktale of Jikinya is re-told by VaTete as the story of a young girl who was kidnapped by strangers to a faraway land. She was held captive in a cage and to escape she sang a song ‘taught to her by her mother’ which ‘put the men to sleep’ (15) and then she began to chew the skin off the sack to set herself free. Vambe suggests that, ‘the strangers in the story are the British colonizers and the young girl represents Zimbabwe in captivity.’<sup>277</sup> In figuring the nation as a woman, with agency and as a medium of folk consciousness, Vera re-centres the matrilineal as a crucial part of the cultural nationalist narrative, however Vambe suggests that there is a danger of romanticism in Vera’s narrative when he writes that:

the contradictions of Vera’s use of spirit possession in *Nehanda* to project an ethnic narrative of resistance under the guise of feminism is that she threatens to suppress and exclude other counter-memories of resistance...*Nehanda* does not address how to construct, theorize and depict post-colonial resistance as a political narrative with its own internal dynamics. (2002: 134)

Vambe’s criticism is valid, as Vera’s narrative of resistance tends to romanticise pre-colonial African life, and does not address possible differences between women produced by social status, potential tensions

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<sup>277</sup> 2002, p. 132.

between women and men because power seems to be exclusive to women, whereas the men in the text have marginal roles. For example, there is a minor character Mashoko, re-named Moses by the colonial settlers when he becomes Mr Browning's cook and servant then there is Sekuru Kaguvi the male spirit medium who first appears halfway through the novel. The narration of his early life is overshadowed by focus on the female world of aunts and mothers who attend to him when he is hurt. (60) Towards the end of the novel, he dies in a colonial jail, imprisoned for his role in the resistance and takes on the spirit of a lion.<sup>278</sup> This transformation symbolizes the bond between Shona people and the natural environment, which in cyborg discourse, can be considered as a post-gender human-spirit-animal boundary crossing. As the cyborg is a genderless metaphor which seeks to displace historically dominant Western perceptions with an alternative consciousness. The spirit mediums of *Nehanda* overturn Western scientific rationalism which form the basis of colonial myths of indigenous practices as witchcraft. During the First Chimurenga, Nehanda, Kaguvi and Chaminuka were branded witches and hung. Rejecting this version of history, Vera re-imagines these figures in symbiotic relation with the natural world and this leads to their triumph over settler dominance.

However, Vera's female-centred world which can be read as a displacement of patriarchal colonial and nationalist discourses is also

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<sup>278</sup> Spirit mediums are represented by the lion spirit and when a man is possessed by a spirit the given term is *Gumboreshumba* meaning lion's foot, hence Sekuru Kaguvi-Gumboreshumba is sometimes used as another name. See Ruramisa, Charumbira 'Nehanda and Gender Victimhood in the Central Mashonaland 1896-97 Rebellions: Revisiting the Evidence.' *History in Africa*, Vol. 35, 2008. pp. 103-131.

exclusionary, thus potentially problematic and contradictory. Vera projects an Afro-centric, nativist tale of matriarchy and female spirituality, and while her aim is to produce a creative text rather than a re-narration of historical facts, her deliberate emphasis on the role of women raises questions about Vera's representation of gender relations, an issue I will explore more fully in my analysis of *Under the Tongue*, below.

Through the act of writing, Vera, like other Black women writers are able to re-appropriate what colonialism and slavery have violently appropriated or discredited. Commenting on the importance of spiritual mythology in Black women's writing in a 1983 interview on *Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison states that:

we also accepted what I suppose could be called superstition and magic, which is another way of knowing things. But to blend those two together was enhancing not limiting. And some of those things were 'discredited knowledge' that Black people had; discredited only because Black people were discredited, therefore what they knew was 'discredited.' And also because the press toward upward social mobility would mean to get as far away as from that kind of knowledge as possible.<sup>279</sup>

Morrison rejects the marginalisation of Black systems of knowledge by Western hegemonies and sees writing as a way of remapping folk knowledge and spiritual practices of Black people in America. Using the literary technique of magical realism, explores the supernatural world with characters who can commune with the dead, move back and forth in time as shape-changers and women, such as Pilate who have the power of healing. Morrison uses this storytelling technique to explore the collective experience of slavery, the *longue durée*. Similarly drawing on traditional myths and practices, Vera's *Nehanda* depicts the supernatural as

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<sup>279</sup> Toni Morrison. 'Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,' in *Black Women Writers (1950-1980)*, Mari Evans, (Ed.), New York: Doubleday, 1983, p.342.

embedded within community consciousness and feminine identity. Constructing women as mediums, storytellers and prophetic dreamers affirms the positive relation between women and the supernatural, thereby displaces dominant settler images of Nehanda as a witch and of practitioners of traditional magic as heathens and witchdoctors.

Writing, as an act of mythmaking or conjuring, offers an opportunity for the figuration of motherhood to establish the links between women's lives, cultural knowledge and history. The reinscribing of cultural figurations positions women at the interstices of discourse and knowledge, thus, as a cognitive tool, figurations open up new ways of imagining the past and historicizing women. Vera does this via the matrilineal metaphor, situating motherhood within both the worlds of the living and the supernatural to give an expanded meaning to motherhood and female subjectivity in general.

As an act of historicizing women, writing fiction as meta-history offers the opportunity to rebuff claims that Africans are primitive savages in need of civilizing by Europeans as Wilbur Smith (2002) claims in his travel narrative, *The Sunbird*. Writing on the fall of the Great Zimbabwe empire, Smith references:

... a great civilisation, a nation which held dominion over an area the size of Europe, a people who built great cities of stone and sent their ships to trade to the limits of the known world. All that remained of them were a few poor relics we had so laboriously

gleaned. No other continent was so fickle in the succour it gave to men.... A cruel land, a savage and merciless land.<sup>280</sup>

Within the colonizer's mind, the settlement of Zimbabwe by the British is legitimized as a civilizing and restoration project, rather than an invasion by force. H. Rider Haggard's *Alan's Wife* ([1887] 2002) also legitimizes the European colonization on the basis that the land and natives were for the taking:

Nothing was to be seen except the site, the domes of the marble huts, and the waterfalls. I took possession of the huts. I cleared the patch of garden and planted the orange grove. I had only six natives then, but by degrees others joined me, now my tribe is a thousand strong.<sup>281</sup>

Having a 'tribe' of 'a thousand strong' natives and expanses of resource-rich savannah land in his control, Allan Quartermain, the protagonist, builds his mini-empire which in the larger framing of Haggard's serial on Allan Quartermain, suggest colonization is just conquest of a terrifying beautiful rich land. Although the natives of Mozambique, South Africa, and Zimbabwe – the lands through which the protagonist travels – have established kingdoms and settlements, the legitimacy of ownership is invoked when European explorers take over the land, therefore conquest is ultimate achievement marking imperial masculinity while the natives are the present-absent primitives.

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<sup>280</sup> Wilbur Smith, *The Sunbird*, London: Pan Books 1974, p. 231. The same passage is also quoted in Anthony Chennells. 'The Treatment of the Rhodesian War in Recent Rhodesian Novels' *Zambezia* (1977), 5 (Ii). 1996 pp. 115 – 116. p. 189.

<sup>281</sup> H. Rider Haggard. *Allan's Wife*, [1885] 2002 (online) <http://www.classicreader.com/book/1323/> [date accessed: 23 February 2011] qtd. Chapter VIII, p. 101.

With Haggard's fictional and historical works instrumental in construction of Rhodesian settler discourse,<sup>282</sup> it is clear that the process of rebuilding and enlightening the so-called savage natives was designed to write out pre-colonial oral history and replace it with a settler narrative of conquest, development and capitalist modernity. For Black women who were storytellers and keepers of memory, their presence within colonial discourse was doubly-displaced because of racial subjugation and its consequential oppressive effect on gender relations. As the present-absent channels of oral memory, the transference of the oral onto the page, blending together folk aesthetics with literary conventions offers a cultural retrieval of that which was denigrated and silenced. Foregrounding the symbolic importance of the matriarch of Zimbabwe through the fusion of oral and the written subverts the dominant order which misrepresented or refused to acknowledge the significance of Nehanda. The act of rewriting Nehanda is also a refusal to be denied a place within history and so Vera resorts to inventing history for a missing people, to borrow Deleuze and Guattari's phrase. In an interview Vera explains her position as a writer:

I write from the margins of my identity...I wrote my name down, then a few mistruths. I felt free. Then histories intruded...History is not something that we can hold underfoot, like a spider. (2002: 205)

By creating her own account of history, Vera collapses the distance between official narratives and her imagination as an individual, as a Shona woman and as belonging to a group of missing people. She re-writes history out of memory to include her own voice and, at a symbolic level, the voices of all missing Zimbabwean women. The image of the

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<sup>282</sup> See Anthony Chennels, 'The Treatment of the Rhodesian War in Recent Rhodesian Novels' *Zambezia*, 5 (ii), 1977, pp. 178-202.

matriarch in Vera's narrative therefore resonates with what Haraway theorizes of feminist figurations, '[b]oth imaginary and real, figures root people in stories and link them to their histories.'<sup>283</sup> If Vera as a custodian of history and writer of a feminist nationalist discourse, as argued at the beginning of this section, performs the act of reclamation and preservation of feminist historiography through writing, then the matrilineal figures of Nehanda are immortalized through text and spiritual practice, transmitting the expanded mythical and political subjectivity of African matriarchy to future generations.

### **A Motherless Butterfly**

Set in the late 1940s, *Butterfly Burning* maps the second chronological phase of Zimbabwe's transition from a rural to modern society in my reading of Vera's meta-historical series. Set in Vera's hometown of Bualwayo, this novel of the city's first Black township,<sup>284</sup> Makokoba, explores how a young woman, Phephelaphi negotiates her relationships with men, the colonial city and the state. My analysis of *Butterfly Burning* draws on Haraway and Sandoval's respective conceptions of the cyborg to explore firstly the re-mapping of the colonial space and secondly how African women experience motherhood and life in the period of industrial boom and unrest in colonial Zimbabwe. In discussing how African women are embedded in the colony's processes of technological and

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<sup>283</sup> 2004, p.1.

<sup>284</sup> Townships were segregated Black housing.

capitalist evolution, the cyborg is a useful figuration and when applied to the colonial Zimbabwean context of 1940s Bulawayo, helps theorize how women (re)create maternal identity as a fluid, historicized trajectory constantly re-shaping itself in radical ways that reject cultural proscriptions of enforced motherhood. On one level Phephelaphi's killing of herself and performing of a self-abortion symbolizes a refusal to produce labour for the colonial industry that can be read as a cyborg resistance and a rejection of systematic repression and the life motherhood would dictate to her as a poor, unemployed Black woman.

In *Butterfly Burning*, Vera re-maps the colonial space by centring the ghetto, not the industrial city, as the setting of the narrative. Makokoba was primarily built as hostels for single Black male industrial workers and on the weekends the men would commute to the rural areas to visit their families. African men were forced into the money economy under the Compulsory Labour Act of 1942 which required that all Black males above the age of sixteen were conscripted as labour on White-owned farms,<sup>285</sup> in the army or in industry. It is this situation which led to the construction of urban hostels for men.

In the colonial imagination, Makokoba is a simply an outlying Black settlement for the city's labourers, but the novel tries to capture the more complex vibrant and turbulent experiences of life in the township. Sidojiwe E2, the longest street in Makokoba, is 'fresh with all kinds of

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<sup>285</sup> Terence O. Ranger *Peasant Consciousness and Guerrilla War in Zimbabwe: A Comparative Study*, California: University of California Press, 1985. p. xii.

desperate wounds. Bulawayo ... has nothing to offer but surprise, being alive is only a consolation.' (3) Beyond being a municipal construction, designed to accommodate the city's labourers, the township is also an ambivalent life-force of its own whose pace is to the rhythm of kwela music and 'trains beating past.' (44) A fifty year old city and township, both Bulawayo and Makokoba are emerging urban centres which have, as Sarah Nuttall (2005) aptly states, 'histories of violence and desire'<sup>286</sup> engrained in the roads and buildings, shaping the character of the city. More than just a place of employment, Bulawayo also demands that its residents stand out from the crowds, otherwise accept 'being alive' as a 'consolation' prize.

In the contained space of Makokoba, over-crowded homes sprout everywhere and the colonial order exercises its control in the city through separatist laws that are practically spelt out in the city's sidewalks, 'the people walk in the city without encroaching on the pavements from which they are banned.' (4) While urban planning regulations polarize Black and White and hostel housing laws separate male and female, Makokoba seems an unregulated, free space and 'Sidojiwe E2 is flooded with Kwela music. The feet feeling free ....lovers mourn with joyful release.' (4) In contrast to the city, the township resists regulations on raced and gendered bodies, and is a convivial, thrilling place where people live freely. For its inhabitants, the township is a site of sexual, economic and cultural transactions with its music spots, shops, hairdressers, 'lovers' and

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<sup>286</sup> Sarah, Nuttall. 'Inside the City: Reassembling the Township in Yvonne Vera's Fiction' in *Versions of Zimbabwe*, Muponde & Primorac (Eds.), 2005. p. 181.

shebeens which all suggest Makokoba has the makings of a satellite city. With a life force of its own, '[Makokoba] inhabits the city, occupies its centre, becomes a city form.'<sup>287</sup> Nuttall seems to describe a three stage process of Makokoba's 'becoming-city'<sup>288</sup> as where the township becomes the epicentre of the colonial city, characterised by the rail links, *kwela* music, working class residents and buzz of energy. As the township grows with possibility and population, it evolves into a 'city form' outside of the colonial urban planning, outside of capitalism and outside of the State's regulation of Black and White bodies.

As a place where 'being alive' is the bare minimum, the township is a space of creation and infinite possibilities, a place of 'self-making'<sup>289</sup> where its residents can construct their subjectivities rather than be defined by the city or state's categorisation of African labourers. Central to the process of making of the self, is the body upon which people's relation to modernity is inscribed through the 'Tender Feet' they wear, 'Vanishing Ponds' they use on their faces or 'the candy cakes, Eat One Nows' they consume. (all p. 37) The production of Black urban subjectivities is always and already shaped by the processes of modernity and does not exist outside of it in spite of the efforts by colonial authorities to make Bulawayo, a city for White citizen-subjects. Through writing, Vera inscribes women's subjectivity into the city's modernity by as Primorac

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<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.* p. 183

<sup>288</sup> John S. Howard, 'Subjectivity and Space: Deleuze & Guattari's BwO in the New World Order' in *Deleuze and Guattari: New Mappings in Politics, Philosophy, and Culture*, John S. Howard, Eleanor Kaufman & Kevin Jon Heller. (Eds.) Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1998. p.122.

<sup>289</sup> Nuttall, 2005, p. 183.

points out, writing, 'between the inside and outside of a woman's body.'<sup>290</sup> In that middle '/' space between inside / outside, Vera writes into history, the Black gendered body as a symbol of taboo, desire and becoming-modern, marked by the modes of production of colonial capitalism. Situating her characters on the border of inside/outside the discourses of modernity, technology and capitalism attempts to reimagine the psychic relation between colonized / colonizer so that the colonized is not always and already dominated, but is always and already opposed to domination. Such an oppositional consciousness embodies the intersection of 'race, gender and capital',<sup>291</sup> the necessary variables for the production of a cyborg discourse of the colonized.

Further, in writing against linear time through the use of cyclical narrative style, Vera suggests that the temporal like the spatial is manipulable. Her novel has constant shifts between present and past memories, like the details of Phephelaphi's mother sprinkled in between moments of the protagonist's adult present, indicate that narrative time is fluid yet ambiguous as the novel weaves in and out of different lives without a distinct pattern. By contrast in *Under the Tongue*, the chapters alternate between characters voices so the reader has some sense of the shifts in time and life story from Zhizha and Mbuya. Appropriating Bakhtin's concept of the time-space chronotope to examine the spatio-temporality of Vera's novels, Primorac (2007) suggests that the writing is from the margins of history where '[the] fictional chronotopes interrogate historical

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<sup>290</sup> in Muponde and Taruvinga (2002) p. 103.

<sup>291</sup> Haraway, 1991, p. 181.

ones by inhabiting the cracks within them.' (156) By writing women into the interstitial moments of time and space, Vera suggests that her characters refuse to be controlled by the conventional constructs time and space. Instead the historically dispossessed women seek to repossess physical space and time by resorting to illegal activities such as running a brothel.

Vera (re)constructs maternal identity in the in-betweenness of colonial modernity focussing on the everyday experiences of the men and women of Makokoba, while the bigger historical concerns form the backdrop. The text is set in 1946, shortly after the Second World War and with the Constitutional Referendum to unite Rhodesia and South Africa having been defeated 20 years earlier in 1925,<sup>292</sup> the colonial government is firmly established in its rule. The mass African nationalist resistance of 1948,<sup>293</sup> a general strike affecting all urban areas of the country is markedly absent from the text which leads Ranger to conclude that *Butterfly Burning* is a 'light novel.' (198) I would argue that History (capital H) is treated with critical distance in *Butterfly Burning* and Vera is more interested in the everyday experience as history, recording the voices of present-absent Black women to subvert the (mainly) White-written master narratives of History. Addressing the question of women's

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<sup>292</sup> See Terence Ranger. *Bulawayo Burning*. London: James Currey Press, 2010.

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*

absence from History, Vera states that, '[t]he books I write try to undo the silent posture African women have endured over so many decades.'<sup>294</sup>

By telling the stories of women living in Makokoba, Vera opens up the masculine space of the township to allow for female presence and voice to exist. By pluralising the gender of the colonial township, Vera reveals an array of complex relations between men, the state and women in the role of the oldest professions, prostitutes and mothers. In this novel, the whore/mother image re-imagined from a female perspective which portrays women as survivors and as figures with social agency, challenges hyper-sexualized stereotypes of prostitutes as machines who willingly provide sexual services and of mothers as fertile robots who reproduce en masse. Providing the narrative behind the life choices women make, Vera's novels offer insight into the survival strategies as a result of the rise of industrialization. Occupying the lower rungs of the class and gender hierarchies of a patriarchal and colonial society, women are forced to be resourceful so as to empower themselves which they do this through using their own bodies as dual sites of commerce and colonial resistance. Prostitution as a marker of modernity because of its commercial nature, is a means of empowerment as women like Deliwe the shebeen owner and Gertrude, Phephelaphi's mother have the opportunity to escape from poverty and also resist the power-race lines defined by the state as Gertrude does not 'makes no distinction between white men and black men when it comes to pleasure and exchange.' (40) Defying the

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<sup>294</sup> Eugene Soros. *Yvonne Vera: Breaking the Silence* [Interview] Harare, Sept. 23, 2002 <http://www.worldpress.org/Africa/736.cfm> [date accessed: 24 October 2010].

regulatory signs of Whites only, No Blacks (6) marking the city's pavements and housing districts, the women of Makokoba reconstruct the city as a socio-sexual space marked out by desire and money thereby subverting colonial hierarchies and codes of behaviour, but these sexual relations also chillingly reveal women's sexual abuse by men such as Gertrude's murder and Deliwe's visits by the police.

In portraying the township as a place of lust where social boundaries are transgressed and redefined, Vera's *Butterfly Burning* presents an alternative view of Zimbabwean femininity and motherhood is shaped by how gender relations are played out on the body. Despite how morally perverse, the figure of the Black prostitute can be said to be, it is analogous to the cyborg. In her conception of the human-machine metaphor Haraway refers to the oppositional conscience of women of colour in challenging the dominant systems of White supremacy and male authority. With a similar impetus to blur social boundaries to produce new, empowered narratives of identity and social difference by women of colour and the cyborg, Haraway argues that there are, 'two overlapping groups of texts . . . constructions of women of colour and monstrous selves in feminist science fiction.' (1991: 174) Reviewing the development of writing by women of colour, Haraway suggests this body of literature is resistance writing:

The poetry and stories of US women of color are repeatedly about writing, about access to the power to signify; but this time that power must be neither phallic nor innocent. . . . Cyborg writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other. . . . Figuratively and literally, language politics pervade the struggles of women of color. (175)

Although a valid counter-argument can be made that writing by women of colour is not always or exclusively about resistance<sup>295</sup> nor are women of colour a homogenous group uniformly opposed to hegemonies, Haraway's analogy points to how the strategies of marginalised women within a capitalist, industrial economy might be considered as resistance figures. The women working in the sex industry and who aspire to work in the health industry, in Vera's novel, reveal the specific yet infinitely complex ways in which race and gender are implicated in the capitalist system and as a consequence, femininity and sexuality become fluid sites of subject production within the modern colonial state.

As an alternative to the essentialism of Afro-centric culture and feminist theory, the image of the prostitute and abortive mother as cyborgs in *Butterfly Burning* destabilises notions of normative motherhood. Rather, the text explores the collective and individual methods women resort to as affirmation of and resistance of the trappings of motherhood. Vera's construction of maternal temporality in this novel runs counter to the womanist and motherist paradigms of Oyewumi, Hudson-Weems and Acholonu, respectively, that position female ancestry as the source of a cyclic maternal identity. Indeed, Vera presents a problematic motherhood that revises the womanist project. Women are the absent markers of time

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<sup>295</sup> Johar Schueller Malini (2005) criticises Haraway's approach and argues that, 'the very assumption that texts by U.S. women of color are centrally *about* subverting Western myths suggests that minority texts are significant only insofar as they relate to the centre.' (79) Highlighting texts like Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* (1993), Schueller argues that texts by American women of colour are not essentially about subverting Western myths. From 'Analogy and (White) Feminist Theory: Thinking Race and the Color of the Cyborg Body.' *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 31(1): pp. 63-92.

in the colonial state, the balance of motherhood ruptured by colonialism and re-shaped beyond recognition by colonial modernity. Living, as the text underscores, 'within the cracks' (6) of time and space, women mother in other ways through informal adoption and abortion because they all yearn, as Phephelaphi does, '[to] claim a piece of time and make it glitter' (97) in this modern city.

Primorac describes the city as masculine space, a place where men like Phephelaphi's lover, Fumbatha, build the city, 'brick by brick' and 'felt the tension of effort over his back.' (20) Women in this urban masculinised colonial space come to the city in search of new lives and new futures, negotiating their identities through an awareness of their sexuality and the power of the erotic. Deliwe runs the shebeen from 'a small house on Sidojiwe E2 that [is a] hive of activity even in the small hours of the morning.' (50) It is a place patronised by men for beer and sexual services. Here, Zandile finds another market, apart from 'night parades' (35) where 'passion is purchased' (35) and she can earn a living. She leaves her daughter in the care of Gertrude who operates as a foster mother. Gertrude, a friend to Zandile becomes Phephelaphi's primary caregiver who recalls how Zandile, 'brought a baby strapped to her back to every possible appointment with every possible stranger. What kind of mother-love was that, what kind of frenzied city-love?' (35)

Collins<sup>296</sup> articulates the notion of ‘othermotherhood’ as ‘the sharing of mothering responsibilities – [which] traditionally have been central to Black motherhood’ (119), tracing its origins beyond slavery. This woman-centred tradition also includes fictive kin, women who informally adopt children. Othermotherhood in *Butterfly Burning* changes the boundaries of mothering, Gertrude becomes the protagonist’s mother, while her birthmother chooses to become a city woman. The figuring of fictive and blood kinship is a metaphor common to both Dangarembga and Vera’s writing that is used to illustrate the connective networks between women. Kinship becomes an allegory for women’s collective agency and a strategy used to adapt to the changing effect of imperialism on social and family relations. In the face of political and social transformation, femininity is performed along different lines, through being a spirit leader (Nehanda) or basket weaver (Runyararo), in resistance to the oppressiveness of industrial and patriarchal hegemonies. The women use an alternative kinship-based conception of motherhood in an effort to retrieve women’s rights to their bodies and to mothering. This is an attempt to create a meaningful form of group identity and a means of survival among women by extending relations, in response to an urban society whose hierarchies are based on race, class and gender.

For Haraway, kinship in identity politics is the continuous transgressing of boundaries to create new connections with others in solidarity as a rejection of stagnant categories of ‘us’ and ‘them’ so that they are ‘all in

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<sup>296</sup> Patricia Hill Collins. ‘Black Women and Motherhood’ *Black Feminist Thought*, New York: Routledge, 2000.

question ideologically.’ Othermothering and sisterhood between the prostitutes of *Butterfly Burning* in the era of the colony constructs women as collectively active subjects rather than passive figures relegated to economic dependence on men. The invocation of kinship ties reflects the different lived and corporeal relations between women who are connected through social and biological commonalities. The strategies of othermothering and shebeen sisterhood, loosely translates into Haraway's ‘disassembled and reassembled collective and personal self’<sup>297</sup> meaning that women reformulate themselves along the morally contradictory axes of prostitute and mother. In effect, the social and bodily realities of colonialism make it such that the paradox is the norm.

However, in transgressing boundaries and fracturing power lines, women are not always triumphant and sometimes fail to stand in solidarity as mothers abandon or kill their children. Abandonment is a recurring theme in Vera’s novels as Sihle, the mother in Vera’s 2002 novel, *The Stone Virgins* leaves her family. Martin Shaw (2003) describes the portrayal of motherhood in Vera’s novels as a ‘strange mothering’ (45) and in the case of *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins*, ‘[s]exuality takes mothers away from their daughters.’(46) Phephelaphi, shaped by this motherless past, staring at a future of poverty and is unable to birth an unwanted child into a world of racial oppression and iniquity, chooses to abort.

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<sup>297</sup> Donna Haraway. ‘A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,’ in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, New York: Routledge, 1991. pp.149-181.

The abortion signifies the body's resistance to colonization, a chaotic world where Black means poor and oppressed, and where women are forced to discover the commercial gains of their sexuality. There is a disconnection and rupturing of the female body and temporality, so that time collapses into death when the protagonist forcibly removes the life within her. Alone in an impenetrable environment of thorn trees and hard earth, she removes the life from her body:

Her fingers are slippery. Her skin burns. Time endures each rupture as a flower were blooming or a leaf being cleansed. The thorns and the red petals wait together. She is standing on shaky legs weaving a cradle out of thorn. Her fingers bleed as she breaks each small branch, each tiny shrub. The skin on her hands tears. She leaves the delicate blooms intact. She weaves a nest, a coarse cradle of thorn which she offers to the ground near her feet where a smooth agony flows. The cradle holds her flowing blood like a sieve....Arrows of light, not seeming to be from a single place but passing through her whole body, as though she is a transparent membrane coating the inside shell of an egg. (105)

There is something strangely organic and animalistic about Phephelaphi performing an abortion in the dry savannah bush of Plumtree district. The foetus is taken out of the mother's body using a thorn. The natural abortion is not grotesquely described. Instead Vera uses descriptors that suggest performing the abortion involves instinctual acts of mothering such as 'cradling' and 'weaving a nest.' Throughout Vera's novels there is the articulation of a fluid, mythical relationship between women and the land, as can be seen in *Nehanda* and *Under the Tongue*, so it does not seem out of place that Phephelaphi performs the abortive act in a semi-arid environment of acacia thorn trees and aloe plants. The land is a place where women can heal and restore themselves.

In the grass bush land, in the absence of forceps and medical drugs, the thorn becomes the surgeon's instrument as Phephelaphi performs an

abortion on herself. The thorn can be read as a symbol for reproductive abortion rights is also an anti-colonial symbol as well as the natural symbol of the modern-day coat hanger abortion. The hanger is curved and inserted far enough inside a woman's body to prick the foetal sac. Phephelaphi has constructed a similar curved and pricking device from the natural materials around her so that her improvisation forces a rethink of nature/technology, tradition/modernity as fixed, incontrovertible categories. Phephelaphi's abortion presents a different argument that nature prefigures technology and the invention of the surgeon's forceps or the dangerous coat hanger is a development from the natural process. It can thus be said that there is established a continuity between the practices of old and those of today. Lunga<sup>298</sup> has suggested that the use of fire and water images signifies a disconnection with the earth because she aborts her foetus in a dry impenetrable landscape with no ancestors. On the contrary, I would argue that Phephelaphi's abortion takes place in the Plumtree area that, like Bulawayo is naturally semi-arid, and her prayers to the ancestors suggest that she has their approval.

Further to this, abortion is not new to African culture as the aloe plant indigenous to semi-arid Plumtree area and can be used to induce miscarriages although, due to its poison content, use of this abortifacient can result in death.<sup>299</sup> There is also a well-documented history of abortion

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<sup>298</sup> 2002, pp. 200-201

<sup>299</sup> Gabriëlla Harriët Schmelzer and Ameenah Gurib-Fakim, Plant Resources of Tropical Africa (Program), *Medicinal Plants 1*, Wageningen, Netherlands: PROTA, 2008. p. 87.

techniques in Africa beginning from Egypt 1550 BC,<sup>300</sup> though oddly these histories do not form part of the Afro-centric maternal canon. Rather, the image of mothers who mother is seen as the image of African womanhood as asserted by Oyewumi:

mothers are the essential building block of social relationships, identities, and indeed society. Because mothers symbolize familial ties, unconditional love and loyalty...Motherhood is a lifelong commitment and one remains a child to one's mother regardless of one's age.<sup>301</sup>

Clearly, women like Phephelaphi and her birth mother, Gertrude who refuse to mother do not constitute part of Oyewumi's theorization of women. For Oyewumi it seems that women are inherently carers and reproducers, not abandoners or aborters. Her exclusion of women who reject motherhood, out of personal choice or circumstance and promotion of women as birthers, reinforces patriarchal expectations of women as natural child bearers. Oyewumi's matro-normative standpoint not only fails to account for the differences in experience between women but there is a deep dissonance between the romanticized position of some Afro-centric feminists and the place of abortifacient history of Africa as part of the broader struggle for women's rights.

Phephelaphi's abortion questions Oyewumi's claim that 'motherhood is absolutely natural.' Her pro-choice act undermines the argument that African women want to be mothers and also suggests that there are other options for women with unwanted pregnancies. There is also something

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<sup>300</sup> 'Ancient Abortion History': A look at the methods and perceived morality of abortion in the ancient world.(online) *Abort73.com*  
[http://www.abort73.com/abortion\\_facts/ancient\\_abortion\\_history](http://www.abort73.com/abortion_facts/ancient_abortion_history) last updated 23 April 2009 [date accessed: 9 September 2010].

<sup>301</sup> 2003, pp. 1-2.

empowering in Phephelaphi performing a surgical act on herself, removing another being from her body that resonates with Haraway's cyborg. For Phephelaphi the removal is an act of 'ordering the disorder' (108) while the cyborg is, 'a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self.'<sup>302</sup> The act of abortion is a dissembling and reassembling of the body in aborting the foetus that results in the body transforming into a post-pregnancy state, which the protagonist considers as relief.

When Phephelaphi discovers she is pregnant for a second, the dream of becoming one of Bulawayo's first Black nurses is shattered. She yearns for something other than the containment of Makokoba and nursing offered her this chance, but falling pregnant a second time means she may never escape the township. Death is the only way for her. Her unnatural death can be read as resistance of the unnatural state of colonialism; a systematic containment of people resisted in the heroine's tragedy. Her death, 'relieves her of the burden of becoming a mother' (124) giving her 'a lightness, floating like flame with flame.' (128) Drenched in flammable oil, she transforms into a bird in flight, rich yellow and red images of a pregnant butterfly. The scene though tragic, represents the fluidity and liminality of women's agency, preferring to die than to face the future of an impoverished colonized subject. Vera mystifies Phephelaphi's death creating new forms of resistance against the heroine's burdens of colonial

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<sup>302</sup> In 'Cyborg Manifesto', see footnote 64.

containment, love, poverty, career prospects and motherhood within the confines of the city. She writes:

[a] woman's solid flame, even if the ground underneath is already sliding, sliding away. And she is dying in her own storm and can hear the wind gather over her knees, and the finest flood threatening each terraced pain, each threshold, each slope and incline, and she is underneath that pain knowing that no matter when, no matter how she will eventually rise into her own song.  
(130)

Drowning her feelings of helplessness, entrapment and betrayal in flames, Phephelaphi rises like a phoenix ascending to her former glory as a fire spirit. The depiction of the burning pregnant Phephelaphi as a mythical creature complete with rich fire and water images is comparable to the phoenix legend. In Egyptian and Greek mythology<sup>303</sup> the phoenix is said to be a bird that cannot reproduce so when its lifespan ends, it burns to ash then recreates itself from its own ashes. When the new phoenix hatches, its cry is believed to be a beautiful song. Although the phoenix rebirths itself from its cremation and Phephelaphi liberates herself from the burdens of reproduction and escapes to the world of spirits, there are parallels in the remaking the self of through immolation. The reproductive or non-reproductive body is the site for the mythical bird and female character upon which scientific rationalism are subverted. Instead of turning into a burnt carcass or corpse symbolizing the finitude of life, the female body becomes a symbol of immortality in both the phoenix and Phephelaphi, with the former representing regeneration and continuity and the latter's immolation is a figuration of the transition to the eternal spirit world. These transitions from physical human being to spirit can also be read as symbolic of cyborg identities as the scientific models of

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<sup>303</sup> See Geraldine Pinch. *Handbook of Egyptian Mythology*, Santa Barbra, California: ABC-CLIO, 2002. p. 118.

reproductivity and life are challenged through myth. If the cyborg offers a '[new] myth of political identity' in the technological era, then perhaps myths from ancient civilizations and stories of the colonized subject can provide African feminist discourse with crucial historical insight into how the reproductive body has always contested site and the counter-narratives and experiences which provide an alternative to singularistic figurations of the animal or human female body.

Putting forward a different interpretation of *Butterfly Burning*, Primorac suggests that her death is a failure to cope with a life of struggle, but her 'selection of a means of dying is her last act of defiant choice.' (108) Indeed, Phephelaphi's act of self-immolation dramatizes her desire for self-determination to be free from the colonial stranglehold. In addition, it is also a last great act that contradicts the matro-normativity of Afrocentric feminism and shows that for butterflies like Phephelaphi, their life circumstances dictate that they cannot choose motherhood because it is a form of entrapment, whereas suicide, death and abortion represent the ultimate escape from poverty.

Hunter reads Phephelaphi's tragedy as indicative of, 'the physical and psychic suffering of all those Shona/Zimbabwean women upon whose bodies, men have exerted their desire for sexual gratification and for control of women.'<sup>304</sup> The suicide represents a double inscription of the female body struggling for autonomy and is counter-hegemonic to

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<sup>304</sup> Hunter, 2000, p. 238.

nationalist/colonialist configurations of motherhood. It also signifies the tensions linked to maternal subjectivity. Suicide as an oppositional politicized consciousness represents a potentially radical image like the cyborg metaphor of women liberating themselves from the trappings of colonial hegemony and patriarchal essentialism to construct a new, autonomous yet fractured subject capable of inscribing the agency and resistance strategies of women as legitimate. This view of suicide as indicative of a cyborg identity, offers to African feminist thought, an alternative way of thinking about unconventional forms of resistance in order to reconstruct and pluralise current discourses on gender and identity. In this way, radical and taboo acts are recognized as acts of political agency so that a Phephelaphi's suicide or even Nyasha's eating disorder co-exist as forms of protest alongside the spiritual methods of resistance of historical figures like Nehanda, in the construction of African femininity.

Like Nehanda, Phephelaphi is a cyborg as theorized by Sandoval, which occupies the border between the spiritual and the physical, maternity and matrophobia, life and death, oppression and resistance. Yet unlike Nehanda, Phephelaphi's attitude to mothering does not fit the Afro-centric maternal image. Driven by desperation, Phephelaphi aborts and commits suicide to escape her dire situation. She finds agency in death because it allows her to take control over her body and her fate rather than soldier on and endure life contained in Makokoba. She longs to be free and to make 'the movement forward' (60) so she re-orders time, by reverting back to

her roots. In Zimbabwean culture, as discussed above, life is extended into the afterlife so for Phephelaphi this is where she finds her freedom. Suicide is the ultimate subversion of colonial time and the social exclusion of modernity. To become a nurse, she would have to meet certain requirements but in death she does not have to qualify for a better life and in her richly poetic description of Phephelaphi's immolation Vera makes clear that the protagonist has more than taken 'time to make it glitter.' (97) She has taken on a spirit like form as she is engulfed in the flames like the phoenix. Vera also seems to suggest that while modernity is the human's mark of progress, the spirit world, like the land, cannot be marked by the same standards of progress and propriety but is shaped by the new relationship between the built and natural environment is played out in human beings. Despite the tragic choices that some of the women characters make, Vera's still manage to celebrate the women's connections to the ancestors. As seen in their strategies of overcoming oppression like suicide and spirit possession, the ancestral is built into their DNA as a form of cyborg resistance; half human, half spirit.

The experience of modernity in the colonial state was through discrimination. Despite the marginal presence of White characters in *Butterfly Burning* their presence is still felt in the signs dictating, 'WHITES ONLY' (6) and nursing jobs reserved for Europeans. The political, spatial and economic control of the city, like the country belongs to White settlers, who enjoy the fruits of industrialisation with access to the best jobs, houses in the suburbs and fertile farm land as the

grandmother in *Nervous Conditions* states. Framed within the African experience of colonial modernity, the shebeen is an ambiguous hybrid space symbolising modernity, cultural appropriation and political resistance. Originating in Ireland and Scotland an illicit pub where alcohol is sold without a licence,<sup>305</sup> the African shebeen is normally a home in the townships that has been turned into a watering hole that illegally sells alcohol in the township that is almost always run by women and they are called shebeen queens. Deliwe is such a queen and her shebeen is the melting pot of modernity as it is frequented by White policemen, builders, prostitutes and vegetable sellers. As a place of intercultural convergence, sexual exchange and moral decadence, the shebeen represents an alternative social space from the segregated city marking out Black and White spaces of movement. Illegally selling alcohol and allowing prostitutes, pimps and customers of all colours to conduct their business there, Deliwe's shebeen represents a place of moral decadence on the one hand, yet on the other hand, a vibrant place of interaction in defiance of the racial and economic apartheid of the colonial state.

The shebeen is also a place of transition and convergence because Bulawayo is an industrial and railway town connecting colonial Botswana and Rhodesia and South Africa and this is reflected in the shebeen's patrons who come from as far as the gold mines of Johannesburg in South Africa and maybe even the coal mines of Hwange in western Zimbabwe.

(3, 13) Although the major historical events remain in the periphery in

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<sup>305</sup> Peter Stalmaszczyk 'Celtic elements in English vocabulary: A Critical Reassessment' *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia* Vol 1, 1997, pp. 77-87.

Vera's novel, she centres on the lives of the ordinary people, the city labourers, sex workers, cross border traders, musicians and miners slipping their stories into the grand narrative of the nation to create a new, different history – a minor history as Deleuze and Guattari might describe it.<sup>306</sup>

As a historical construct, the shebeen emerged out of an attempt to control Black people's alcohol consumption in the cities. Amber and Crush (2003)<sup>307</sup> argue that the suppression by the government led to the emergence of alternative drinking spaces and as the modern industrial cities of Southern Africa developed, the shebeen became an established social space that Africans had created for themselves. Shebeens are thus an essential part of the everyday aesthetic of the township and its urban landscape reflective of the repressiveness of the state and the escapism it offers through *kwela*<sup>308</sup> music, alcohol and sex. All of the women of the novel have a relation to the shebeen. For Gertrude and Zandile, it is a place of business, but also the place where their friendship began. For Deliwe it is her place where she can make money and put her mark on Makokoba, whereas for Phephelaphi, it is a place of freedom where she

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<sup>306</sup> See earlier discussion in Chapter One, pp. 77-78, on invention histories for a missing people based on Deleuze and Guattari's *Kafka Toward a Minor Literature (Theory & History of Literature)*.

<sup>307</sup> Charles Amber and Jonathan Crush. *Liquor and Labor in South Africa* Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1993.

<sup>308</sup> *Kwela* music is Southern African genre of music made from the penny whistle originally begun in Malawi in the 1940s and transported to other parts of the region through migrant workers. *Kwela*, a Ndebele and Zulu word meaning climb or get up was used to refer to police raids of shebeens and drinking halls where people would be carted off into police vans called kwela-kwela. For use of the kwela aesthetic in Vera's novel see Lizzie, Attree. 'Language, kwela music and modernity in *Butterfly Burning*' in Muponde et. al (2002) pp. 63-79.

discovers her femininity but also a symbol of disconnection from her mother.

Unlike Vera's other novels, in *Butterfly Burning* not all of the women stand together in resistance against patriarchal or colonial oppression. The city is a dog-eat-dog world where only the fittest survive. Having been hardened by the years, Zandile is cynical of dreamers and tells Phephelaphi, 'Makokoba is unkind to women like you who pretend to be butterflies that can land on any blossom they choose.' (110) Although it can be argued that, as her othermother, Zandile gives Phephelaphi some tough love, Deliwe on the other hand, outright betrays Phephelaphi as she does not hesitate to sleep with Fumbatha when the opportunity arises. Fumbatha finds out about the pregnancy and abortion which sends him seeking comfort in the shebeen brew and Deliwe's bosom. Perhaps this betrayal can be explained in that Deliwe and Fumbatha have had a longstanding casual relationship and friendship that began before he was with Phephelaphi. Deliwe is his confidante, but this does not absolve either of them because this is part of what finally drives Phephelaphi to commit suicide.

In some ways, Deliwe is like Lucia of *Nervous Conditions* who slept with her sister's husband. Both women possess a fearlessness and defiance that no man, no law and no state can control. Of Deliwe, Vera writes:

Deliwe had once been locked up for a whole night in a police cell for selling alcohol and moreover in a dwelling. She threw her head back and laughed like a madwoman when she was told that this square shelter with its falling roof, its colourless weak walls, and nowhere to make love to a man, was a house. That was when the policeman slapped her. . . . She never explained that the deafness

in her right ear was caused by the beating she had received during her detention.  
(68)

Even though she has been beaten and jailed, Deliwe is unrepentant and continues her business. Deliwe devises a hilarious but effective strategy to scare off the police when they carry out early morning raids at the shebeen and every night she ‘goes to bed naked as the day she was born. She liked to see the surprise in the policeman’s eyes.’ (52) Grace Musila (2007) offers an interpretation:

In these instances, Deliwe’s naked body rips apart the cultural veil of shame associated with female nudity, and throws the policemen’s violation of her privacy right back at them, by deflecting the burden of shame and violation onto the policemen.<sup>309</sup>

Sleeping in the nude becomes a way of reclaiming control over the body and overturning the state’s control over how women use their bodies as well as the patriarchal myth that women are virtuous and modest. In the figuration of the naked shebeen queen, the corporeal body becomes a site of protest against the marginalisation and exploitation of the female body. Vera highlights the multiple uses of the body, as instrument of prostitution which is an illegal activity and considered a morally shameful act, therefore sexuality inadvertently becomes a site of protest and commerce. In the figuring of Deliwe and Zandile, the novel forces a critical rethinking of the occupational and colour lines of morality when prostitution is juxtaposed with the image of police beating a woman deaf and another image of a White policeman knifing a prostitute.

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<sup>309</sup> Grace Musila. ‘Embodying Experience and Agency in Yvonne Vera’s *Without a Name* and *Butterfly Burning*’ *Research In African Literatures*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (Summer 2007) pp. 50–63, p.56.

For the women collective, the ‘frenzied city life’ of Bulawayo is played out in the frenzied sisterhood of the women, so that femininity as an identity is simultaneously a symbol of unity and an irrelevant identity factor for the women. It is not a guarantee of loyalty or motherhood. In the shebeen, femininity is a commodity that can be bought and sold to enable women to survive. The fractured relationships and disjointed and re-joined/invented kinships represent the nature of relations in the city. They are ambiguous and transient. These relationships are derivatives and variables of the modern colonial condition where women transform their bodies into instruments of economy through sexuality or nursing to ‘live between the cracks.’ The transformation of bodies and the shebeen as the site of transience and resistance, to an extent, represent a figuring of the cyborg because it presents new material possibilities for women to have independent control over their bodies and go against the political regime. In this way, the Black gendered body becomes the site of construction for an oppositional consciousness, to use Sandoval's term, specific to African experiences of colonialism. Deliwe’s ownership over her own body and the shebeen, an illegal establishment represents a form of resistance against absurd laws.<sup>310</sup> Phephelaphi regains autonomy over her body and escape from the claustrophobic space of the township and the shebeen through suicide. Cyborgs are therefore the underclass, the marginalised African women of Makokoba whose fractured identities are constantly in construction as the city of Bulawayo is built ‘brick by brick’ and opportunities or offered to or created by women one day at a time. The

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<sup>310</sup> Eugene Soros. 'Yvonne Vera: Breaking the Silence', [Interview] *Worldpress.org*, 2002 (online).

cyborg as a metaphor of the metaphysical, of industry and capitalism, of moral difference and political resistance is an enriching way of understanding the specific and multiple ways in which women transgress and fissure moral, political, racial and economic boundaries to 'claim a piece of time and make it glitter' (97) or at least try to.

The contradictory and complex figurations of femininity in this novel deconstruct the traditional dichotomies male/female which confine women to a lower social ranking. In pushing forward a different figuration of femininity through the women of Makokoba, Vera makes it possible to imagine the cyborg figure within African modernity. In tracing the maternal lineages, strategies and resistances to mothering, I hope to have traced the different ways in which a sense of resistance is carved into the consciousness of women.

Locating women at the intersections of racial and gendered oppression in the development of the modern nation, they are radical figures of difference and it is the historicity of the women that is a key concern of this chapter and the thesis's development a nuanced reading of the plurality of femininity in order to suggest ways in which feminist paradigms of African womanhood can be broadened. I focus upon women standing at the margins of history, mapping new stories of the past and by creating new figures of narrative, Wilson-Tagoe rightly argues that women writers:

frequently contest conventional divisions between public and domestic spaces, they make even the most intimate details of domestic life political, and reveal

that gender ideologies are inextricably woven into the politics of culture, history and nationalism.<sup>311</sup>

### **A Killing Mother: *Without a Name***

Moving from the emergence of Black urban containment to resistance through war, *Without A Name* marks the third time phase of what I consider Vera's metahistorical construction of Zimbabwe's nation story. Set in 1977 at the height of the Second Chimurenga, *Without a Name* is a dystopian novel<sup>312</sup> about the war which tells the story of the orphaned Mazvita who is raped by a freedom fighter. As a result, Mazvita falls pregnant and unable to come to terms with the violation and faced with the prospect of destitution as an unemployed young Black woman in Harari, she strangles the baby. Similar to Phephelaphi, she acts out of desperation, for poverty drives both women to kill their children and abort the unborn.

While *Nehanda* retells the history of colonial resistance and *Butterfly Burning* refigures the colonial city from an African woman's perspective, *Without a Name* remaps the colonial space which displaces the colonizer's spatial dominance of territories. *Under the Tongue* retrieves ownership of the body and the land at a time when official colonial rule is about to end.

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<sup>311</sup> Nana Wilson-Tagoe. 'Representing culture and identity: African women writers and national cultures.' *Feminist Africa*, 2:1, 2003, pp. 1-11.

<sup>312</sup> Robert Muponde. 'The Sight of the Dead Body: Dystopia as Resistance in Vera's *Without a Name*' in Muponde & Taruvinga (Eds.), 2002. p. 117.

These different figurations of females as spiritual leaders, prostitutes, orphans and maids, locate women at various points of Zimbabwe's history and relay a complex narrative of gendered struggle. Shaped by the relation between women's bodies and identities in the construction of new female subjectivities, figurations of women's experiences of colonial African motherhood reveal the constructedness and artificiality of gender and identity categories. The cyborg images of anomalous mothering in *Butterfly Burning* and *Without a Name* displace the romanticised image of motherhood often celebrated in patri-nationalist discourses and seek to inscribe alternative forms of maternal selfhood that are grounded in body politic and lived experiences. Writing rape, murder and maternal kinship into Zimbabwe's war narrative, *Without a Name* brings to the fore the tenuous nature of male-female relations as well as changing power relations between men and women during times of conflict. While the abuses of male power remain largely unexplored or even censored<sup>313</sup> in nationalist historiography, *Without A Name* seeks to draw attention to the presence of women as agents and actors in the development of Zimbabwe's national discourse and African feminist discourses on femininity. Thinking of Mazvita as a nomadic figuration, a gendered identity moving across physical and ideological boundaries opens up to the possibility of theorizing about African bodies, gender and identity in a broader framework for African feminist discourse. Doing so transforms

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<sup>313</sup> *Flame* (1996) is a war movie directed by Ingrid Sinclair which focuses on the experiences of women freedom fighters during the Second Chimurenga. Although the project had been endorsed by the government, the director's cut of the movie was seized by the police because it contained brief scenes where female freedom fighters were being sexually abused by men. The film was described as pornographic and an inaccurate reflection of the war designed to undermine the government and the war veterans. After an international campaign, *Flame* was then released for the local and global market.

the categories of maternal identity from being governed by cultural taboo and selected historical narratives of legendary women to motherhood being shaped by the myriad of complex experiences of all historically oppressed women.

In *Without a Name*, Mazvita's story is an alternative narrative of native migration in defiance of laws regulating movement. She moves from her rural home Mhondoro to the tobacco farm near Kadoma to the city, 'Harari'(58) and back to Mhondoro again at a time when there is intense fighting between the Rhodesian forces and the nationalist liberation fighters and at a time when laws regulating the movement of African men are in full effect. While men were required to carry passes through Ordinance 19 of 1901, women did not have to carry passes until the late 1970s<sup>314</sup> because they were expected to remain in the rural areas and did not register in the colonial state's imagination. However, there were some women who already lived in the cities before the pass concessions. Due to growing concerns from both the African patriarchy labouring in the cities and mines and White settlers who owned industry and mines complaining about the influx of 'loose African women'<sup>315</sup> spreading venereal diseases, the 1946 Urban Areas Act was passed requiring unemployed African women and those visiting the city to submit to invasive physical

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<sup>314</sup> Teresa Barnes (2002) notes that while Black men were required to carry passes, Black women did not have passes which was a way of ensuring they remained out of the towns. In an attempt to allay international criticism of the racist regime of the then Prime Minister, Ian Smith made passes universal for all Africans in 1977. From: 'Virgin Territory? : Travel and Migration by African Women in Twentieth Century Southern Africa', in *Women in African Colonial Histories*, Susan Geiger, Jean Marie Allman & Nakanyike Musisi (Eds.), Trenton: Africa World Press, 2002, pp. 164–190.

<sup>315</sup> Lynette Jackson. 'When in the White Man's Town: Zimbabwean Women Remember Chibeura' in *Women in African Colonial Histories*, Geiger, Allman & Musisi Nakanyike (Ed.) 2002, pp. 191–218.

examinations by doctors. Commonly known as *chibeura*, women could be arbitrarily stopped at city border check points, inspected as part of employment requirements or examined when the police conducted spontaneous mass raids in urban townships or mining sites close to cities.<sup>316</sup>

Setting Mazvita's rural-urban-rural migration within this historical context of control and regulation, her movement is an act of defiance. Despite the war and draconian migration controls which render African women as mapped objects of the state, Mazvita maps her movement on her terms. Although each of her travels are necessitated by tragedy, like the razing of her village, her rape and the need to bury her dead child, she remains under the radar of the state. She does not come into contact with any officers of the state like the police, colonial soldiers or doctors as she moves from place to place and even travels around the city and to her rural home with a dead baby without being noticed. The ability to move about independently and unnoticed may signify the invisibility of poor African women in the state, but it also subversively symbolises a form of power. In a sense, Mazvita has free movement despite the minor status of African women and the various forms of state control, so it would not be out of place to suggest that *Without a Name* can be described as a novel of re-imagining women's autonomy and remapping the colonial space.

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<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.* p. 203.

In narrating a woman's experience of rape during the war, the novel challenges the myth put forward by proponents of patriotic history, such as Tafataona Mahoso (2010)<sup>317</sup> that the freedom fighters were always on the side of the people and fought for their freedom. In fact, there are numerous fictional and biographical accounts which question this claim, particularly *Mothers of the Revolution* by Irene Staunton (1990)<sup>318</sup> which reveals thirty oral testimonies by women whose sons went to fight, women who lived in the villages and towns during the war and women who took part in the war. These testimonies tell of the terrible things that happened during the war and how women were terrorized by the freedom fighters. Mazvita's rape is therefore not an exceptional case but it's telling makes it exceptional because it stands up to the fear invoked by nationalist fighters and the silencing acts by the nationalist government such as the press censorship laws<sup>319</sup> and the continuing the regulatory Rhodesia (then Zimbabwe) Literature Bureau which worked in conjunction with the Ministry of Education until the late 1980s, deciding whose work was published, largely to women's disadvantage.<sup>320</sup>

As a narrative of taboo, *Without a Name* also stands up to the injustice of enforced pregnancy as a result of rape and in my reading, I argue that Mazvita's killing of the baby symbolises a rejection of compulsory

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<sup>317</sup> Tafataona Mahoso. 'Leaders Articulate National, Pan-African interests against Imperialism', *The Sunday Mail*, 14 March 2010.

<sup>318</sup> Irene Staunton. *Mothers of the Revolution: Oral Testimony of Zimbabwean Women*, Harare: Baobab Books. 1990.

<sup>319</sup> Law and Order (Maintenance) Act, 1960.

<http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/acts/law-and-order-maintenance-act-1960-1> [date accessed: 15 March 2011].

<sup>320</sup> See Chapter One, pp.78-80 of this thesis.

motherhood. Although murder is a criminal act, it is also an attempt to take back her body and cleanse herself of the memory of rape. If she had been permitted to have control over her body she may not have fallen pregnant and during the war this was the fate of many young girls, both civilians and fighters. Speaking to Staunton in her testimony Margaret Viki recalls that:

Some of the girls had children by these freedom fighters. At first they seemed to be good young men, but later on a lot of girls became pregnant. There was nothing the parents could do because they were afraid. They couldn't even ask the *vakomana* [boys, soldiers] for fear of being killed. ... .. The father never, to my knowledge, came back to help or see the child or the woman. Both Zanlas and Zipras<sup>321</sup> were the same in this regard. (147)

Whereas girls were forced to give birth to the children because abortion and baby dumping were illegal, there was no way to make it compulsory for men to take responsibility for their offspring. The use of birth control was also strongly discouraged especially in the liberation movement. Although the nationalists preached equity between men and women, both ZANU and ZAPU nationalist forces were strongly against the use of Depo Povera, a birth control pill in the 1970s because it was deemed unnatural.<sup>322</sup> The use of contraceptives was outlawed and a punishable offence by the leadership in the operational bases and camps of the guerrillas so women often fell pregnant.<sup>323</sup> Despite its harmful effects on the body, Depo Povera was a form of birth control and voluntary motherhood. In the novel, contraception is not mentioned, but reading the novel against this historical backdrop shows quite clearly the extent to

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<sup>321</sup> The two liberation movements were ZANLA belonging to ZANU PF and ZIPRA belonging to smaller ZAPU party which mainly fought in the southern and western part of the country.

<sup>322</sup> Amy Kaler. 'Who Has Told You To Do This Thing?' Contraception as Subversion in Rhodesia 1970-1980.' *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 25:3 (Spring 2000) pp. 677-708.

<sup>323</sup> *Ibid.*

which women's subordination to patriarchy is exacerbated by war particularly in allowing men to control women's bodies and enforce motherhood through rape. Vera's novel offers glimpses into one woman's experience of sexual trauma. Her struggle to remember and misremember the event attempts to shed light on the collective suffering of women who experienced rape during that period. The figuration of rape breaks the silence imposed by patri-nationalist forces and intervenes in the patriotic tales of the nation to insert a narrative of trauma and resistance. By positioning women as the present-absent speaking voices of the war, texts like *Without a Name* actively demand an acknowledgement of the terrible situations women endured.

The depiction of Mazvita's migration from Mhondoro to Kadoma then to Harari in a bid to escape the war and erase the memory of rape can also be interpreted as a nomadic figuration. The nomad is a theoretical concept proposed by Rosi Braidotti which, for the purposes of my reading of *Without a Name* is used synonymously with the cyborg because a nomad is a metaphor for transgression and subversion like the cyborg figure. With the similar intent of theorizing how to disrupt boundaries that produce gender difference like Haraway and Sandoval, Braidotti conceives of the nomad as a political fiction that rejects fixity and uses the 'technique of strategic re-location in order to rescue what we need of the past in order to trace paths of transformation of our lives here and now.' (1994: 6)

The origin of this concept lies in Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the nomad of whom they write, 'the nomad has territory; [s/]he follows customary paths; [s/]he goes from one point to another; [s/]he is not ignorant of points.'<sup>324</sup> Braidotti also, 'links Deleuze's epistemological model with Donna Haraway, who works with the notion of the body as figuration and as a point of entry for thinking about new kinds of subjectivities.'<sup>325</sup> The nomad as a feminist figuration is an always and already transitory subject that moves across boundaries and disciplines, a nomad is always becoming and self-definition is a continuously occurring process. Nomadic consciousness is also used in critical discussions about the female condition of exile. Braidotti argues that the nomad takes up an epistemological position which stresses that the feelings of homelessness and non-belonging make it difficult to imagine women as a categorized, boxed figure. She states that '[for the exiled] s/he is usually beyond classification, a sort of classless unit.'<sup>326</sup> Although Braidotti stresses that the nomad is an ideological position that does not necessarily reflect the material, lived experience, Mazvita's ability to move through physical borders drawn by the state and to challenge traditional perceptions of motherhood as the natural consequence of intended or unintended pregnancy, I intend to argue that the construction of Mazvita's subjectivity can be considered within this paradigm. The nomad raises questions of place, location and displacement particularly with regards to how the female body is a functional symbol of hegemonic authority over

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<sup>324</sup> 1987 p. 380.

<sup>325</sup> Rosi Braidotti. *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.  
<http://www.stumptuous.com/comps/braidotti.html> [dates accessed: 29 October 2010].

<sup>326</sup> 1994, p. 22.

territory. For Braidotti, the analogy of the nomad moves represents resistance against territorial control as all spaces – ideological or physical – are open spaces for the nomad to move through.

In the political context of 1977 Zimbabwe, Mazvita's nomadic movement symbolizes a cartographic resistance against the administrative laws of territory and movement that limited African women's movements and the restriction of movement imposed by war. In terms of discourse of nationality and citizenship, Braidotti puts forward an argument for the nomad as a figure that deconstructs the traditional ideas of fixity and identity and she writes that:

Being a nomad, living in transition, does not mean that one cannot or is unwilling to create those necessarily stable and reassuring bases for identity that allow one to function in a community... Rather, nomadic consciousness consists in not taking any kind of identity as permanent. The nomad is only passing through; s/he makes those necessarily situated connections that can help her/him to survive, but s/he never takes on fully the limits of one national, fixed identity. The nomad has no passport – or has too many of them.<sup>327</sup>

For Mazvita, tragedy forces her to move and in light of the fact that she lacks the full rights of citizenship and full legal status, her narrative of transition can be considered in terms of nomadism. The characterization of Mazvita makes it possible to imagine the nomadic figure as a colonized subject located at the intersections of race, sex, class and gender. Within a hierarchical order where Black women are contained by law and lack of opportunity in the lowest economic class ensuring limited physical or social mobility, Mazvita's life choices can be viewed as destabilizing the fixed order. As a dispossessed woman without land rights or full human rights, movement becomes Mazvita's way of overcoming the limitations

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<sup>327</sup> 1994, p. 33.

imposed by culture and the state. Mazvita's narrative of rape and dispossession contradicts patri-nationalist glory stories of the war and colonialist narratives of African simplicity and subservience and seems to suggest that the accounts of the past do not exclusively belong to men in power. Through the act of writing and telling the stories of marginalised women, women become signifiers of the nation, revealing its history and its practices as narratives filled with contradiction and complexity. Gender and the body are appropriated as the central metaphors of the nation but in relaying the experience of woman-as-nation from the position of an oppressed citizen, the story of the nation becomes a paradoxical one of freedom and movement.

At a time of intense fighting, successful movement is considered nothing short of a miracle as the text states, 'It was a time of miracles. If you arrived at your destination still living, then you prayed desperately to continue to live. It was hard on those rural landscapes.' (76) When she moves between these places, '[t]ravelling was a suspension of all pretence to freedom. Travelling made living real. The road was cluttered with bodies.' The image of corpses strewn across the landscape or raped women does not form part of the mainstream framing of the national liberation struggle and patriotic history. War is often perceived as the glorious act of heroism by gallant sons of the soil.<sup>328</sup> Although the war was fought between the Rhodesian forces and nationalist fighters,

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<sup>328</sup> See narration in the documentary: *Winds of Change* Volume 1. Memories of Rhodesia Inc. (Year Unknown) You Tube Clip: From Rhodesia to Zimbabwe, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pJPsd41qnA4> (uploaded 19 September 2006) [date accessed: 8 November 2010].

civilians were caught up in the struggle and novels such as *Without a Name* and *The Book of Not* serve as a reminder that civilians are the forgotten casualties of war. No monuments are erected in their honour, no compensation paid out to families for those injured, raped or killed and no soldiers persecuted for crimes perpetrated such as the rape of Mazvita or the torture of Babamukuru that leaves him disabled. In the absence of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission like that of post-apartheid South Africa, writing functions as the only way to recovering and recording the stories of those dead.

In his reading of *Without a Name*, Muponde argues that, death is ‘suffused in the consciousness of every citizen’ (2002: 118) and the raped body of Mazvita becomes the discomfiting symbol of the war that everyone tries to forget, even Mazvita. She sees moving to the city as an escape from the fighting and the memory of the rape as she says to herself, ‘[i]t will be easier in Harari. You can forget anything in the city.’ (24) However the city does not hold a new life for her, only a reminder of the ‘multiple dispossessions’<sup>329</sup> from which she suffers: poor living conditions in a fast paced city, segregated by race, and the refusal by her new lover, Joel to father a child not his own.

Felicity Palmer (2006)<sup>330</sup> makes an interesting observation that Mazvita’s rapist simultaneously invokes and incestuously transgresses<sup>331</sup> the kinship

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<sup>329</sup> M. Samuelson, 2002, p. 194.

<sup>330</sup> Felicity Palmer. ‘Sex in the Post-Colonial City’ Desire, Kinship and Freedom in Yvonne Vera’s *Without a Name*’ in Stichproben. *Wiener Zeitschrift für kritische Afrikastudien* Nr. 11/2006, 6. Jg. pp. 27- 44.

relation between himself and Mazvita when the fighter says to her, ‘*Hanzvadzi* . . . he said. You are my sister . . . he whispered.’ (35) Although it is customary to refer to younger people as *hanzvadzi* meaning sibling, the soldier whom she accordingly calls *mukoma* (older brother) out of respect, exploits cultural kinship, his seniority, his maleness and his status as a freedom fighter revered by the rural people as a liberator. He is able to command her to perform certain acts for him such as demanding Mazvita ‘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.’ (34) Bound by culture Mazvita is unable to refuse, even to the extent that she cannot fight him off when he rapes her. By claiming kinship, Mukoma plays on the double meaning of the word *hanzvadzi*. As the term can also be used for romantic inference, he assumes that he has ownership over her body because he is a man and to some extent, because he is a fighter for the country’s freedom, he assumes that this translates into his deserving of sexual privileges. Historically, rape is not uncommon in war and all over the world the conquest of territory is paralleled with the conquest of women.

There is no legal consequence of Mazvita’s rape and all she remembers of the encounter is the word *huwa* meaning mushrooms. The word haunts her, reminding her of the dark place in the bush on the farm where she was raped while the other farm workers slept. Mazvita’s rape also

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<sup>331</sup> This is a paraphrasing of her words on p. 33.

symbolizes the change in relations between the genders created by the war and as landless, culturally and politically displaced people. Samuelson<sup>332</sup> suggests that because Mazvita cannot remember *mukoma's* face, there can be no judicial retribution for her and so she blames the land for everything. In one sense, her anger towards the land can be justified because she has lost her parents due to land struggle and now she has been sexually assaulted as part of the war for the land. To her, the guerrilla fighter and the land are inseparable and in her mind:

[s]he connected him only to the land. It was the land that had come toward her. He had grown from the land. She saw him grow from the land, from the mist from the river. The land had allowed the man to grow from itself into her body. (36)

The image of the land growing into a woman's body conjures up ideas of entrapment and the only way for Mazvita to set herself free is to move to where there is no land, the city. When Mazvita suggests moving to the city to get away from the conflict to Nyenyedzi, her boyfriend, at the time, he responds:

We have to wait here with the land, if we are to be loyal to it, and to those who have given it to us. The land does not belong to us. We keep the land for the departed. [...] The land is inescapable. [...] The land defines our unities. (39)

Nyenyedzi is the archetypal patriot who believes the liberation struggle is necessary whereas Mazvita feels disillusioned due to her negative experiences. He believes that 'without the land there is no day or night, there is no dream', (32) therefore anyone who turns their back on the land is ill-fated and a traitor. Using a rather extreme analogy Muponde, sees the land as having pronounced an 'irrevocable fatwa' (2002: 119) on Mazvita who leaves the farm for the city 'because it suited her to move forward.' (34) Muponde argues that Nyenyedzi has appointed himself

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<sup>332</sup> 2002, p. 95.

guardian of the land because he believes that blood will be shed in the name of the land and this is the ideology underpinning the Second Chimurenga and to an extent the land invasions which have been dubbed the Third Chimurenga by nationalist veterans who claim that Zimbabwe *ndeyeropa*, meaning the struggle for Zimbabwe's land is of blood.

Nyenyedzi does not deploy violent methods to acquire land nor does he join the guerrilla fighters because he believes that traditional prayer rituals will assist in the war with guns. Although Mazvita agrees with some of Nyenyedzi's views (34), her disconnection is a product of her experiences and each move is in response to a tragedy in her life. In the traditional sense nomadic movements are characteristic of Zimbabwe's history, from the Khoi San hunter gatherers, the Mbire people<sup>333</sup> crossing over into Zimbabwe from present-day Botswana to the migration of Ndebele peoples from South Africa fleeing war all have been movements largely driven by need – for water, new farming land, or escaping conflict so, Mazvita at this historical point in 1977, is part of a bigger tradition of movement.

Her nomadism becomes more poignant because of the circumstances in which she migrates. Further, her desire to go beyond the limitations proscribed by culture/land dichotomy and her refusal to be bound to places or actively support anti-colonial resistance rhetoric us/them,

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<sup>333</sup> The Shona were originally known as the Mbire and arrived in Zimbabwe between 1000 - 1500 A.D. See Chengetai, J.M Zvobgo, *A History of Zimbabwe, 1890-2000 and Postscript, Zimbabwe, 2001-2008* Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009.

active/passive is akin to those that Braidotti theorizes in her conception of the nomad, a non-belonging rootless mobile figure that ‘carries all her essentials with her.’ (4) The nomadic figuration as a conceptual tool proposes a way of escaping the biological essentialism that women are appreciated in terms of their bodies whereas men are valued in terms of their physical strength and intellectual power. Within this framing, Vera as well as Dangarembga, offer varied figurations of femininity which suggest a rethink of the relationship between the gendered body and the discursive body in African feminist thought is necessary. This thesis tries to show how the writing's foregrounding of the material realities characterising exactly how women experience their bodies and thereby address a range of feminist issues inadequately theorized within the majority of Afro-centric African feminist thought. To situate the portrayals of women within feminist thought, nomads and cyborgs are conceptual tools that aid in understanding the body-as-corporeal subject in texts where women act out their resistances through the body. For example, Mazvita like Phephelaphi does not want to be tied down to single motherhood and both are desperate to get out of the containment of colonialism whereas anorexic/bulimic Nyasha of *Nervous Conditions* refuses to be blind to the injustices of colonialism and rejects cultural proscriptions on the body and Nehanda expands the sense of the real and the maternal by becoming a spirit medium and a colonial resistance leader. Neither Vera nor Dangarembga see resistance waged through the body as always and already successful, but seem to suggest that these corporeal rebellions are a way of articulating women's experiences and

provide ways of rethinking about femininity in African discourse. This could be why there is no judgement on Phephelaphi, Runyararo or Mazvita for what they do.

Returning to the subject of Mazvita, when she moves to Harari, she lives with Joel with whom she has a casual sex-for-accommodation relationship. It is ironic that after her rape she is forced to prostitute herself in order to survive and she tries to pass off the pregnancy as his, but he refuses and says she was already pregnant at the time she came to live with him because he has no intentions of formalizing their relationship through marriage, and 'they lived as though they had no pasts or futures.' (59) Living in this way is an illusory form of freedom and Mazvita is no more free than when she lived in Mubaira because her pregnancy and poverty will not allow her to live like she has no past nor future. She has tried her hardest to expunge the rape ordeal from her mind but she is forced to remember the encounter through her pregnancy. When he is born, she refuses to name him:

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....She had no promises to offer this child.

Unwanted motherhood feels like a burden and doubly so because she is unemployed and without support because Joel has refused to raise another man's child. She cannot bring herself to love a child conceived out of rape but she also cannot bear the burden of committing murder. She refuses to accept that she strangles the child with Joel's tie. At one point she is amazed that she had 'managed a constricting knot from which the child

could not survive' (96) but another time, she removes the baby from her back and acts as though he were alive, cupping, 'her hands waited eagerly for her baby. She felt the baby fall in a lump into her hands. Mazvita tightened her eyes. The moment was rich, it filled her arms.' (90) This is confusing to the reader because it appears as though the baby is still alive, but he 'falls in a lump,' suggesting otherwise. She cannot accept his death as a murder committed by her so words like 'ritual' and 'ceremony' (96) are used to describe the strangulation. She purchases a white apron from an elderly woman and she carries the corpse around with her on her back as she goes to her new job as a maid. With the description of a woman's back as made to 'carry a baby on her back too. A woman's back is made for work. A woman's back is as strong as stone,' (53) the image can be read as symbolic of 'the burdens of womanhood' both Ma'Shingayi refers to in *Nervous Conditions* and Ogundipe-Leslie in her formulation of Stiwanism, as has been discussed in Chapter One. As a direct result of her poverty, orphan status and Blackness, Mazvita can only carry the burdens of womanhood, as represented in the dead baby, rather than the joys of motherhood<sup>334</sup> which would be symbolized by a live baby.

In terms of the nomadic metaphor, while Mazvita's movement to Harari represents the physical disruption of constructed boundaries and regulations, her act of infanticide disrupts established ideas of motherhood, gender and the body. She does not inhabit the extremes of

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<sup>334</sup> Although I refer to the positive experience of mothering, it might be read as an unintended ironic reference to *The Joys of Motherhood* by Buchi Emecheta (1980) in which despite the promises of mother, the protagonist is married off to an unsupportive and lazy man who expects her to fend for herself and the children.

motherhood/matrophobia but exists between these two. Hunter and Shaw have both read Mazvita's act as indicative of matrophobia, but I would argue that Mazvita refuses to mother a child born of rape as her way of standing up to the rapist even though at the same time she recognises that she has killed an innocent child to whom she still feels connected. She has carried him in her womb for nine months and severing that connection has proven difficult, so that she continues to carry him around in her apron, as a performance of a strange, anomalous mothering. The dual rejection and acceptance of mothering articulates a specific biosocial existence located at a very particular historical point, both materially and culturally. The acknowledgement that her circumstance drives her to commit infanticide does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that she is matrophobic as this suggests a fear of mothering rather than a resistance of the biological consequences of rape.

Mazvita's infanticide also presents a complicated question for African feminist thought which rightly critiques the sexual abuse of women such as STIWANISM, but at the same time other proponents of African feminism argue that it is 'hetero-sexual' 'pro-natal, pro-marital' (4) according to Gwendolyn Mikell (1997)<sup>335</sup> thereby ruling out single motherhood and those who can or cannot choose not to mother. The figuration of Mazvita presents an opportunity to question the structures of cultural hegemony that enforce normative motherhood yet fail to address the non-normative situations like children born from rape. The nomad,

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<sup>335</sup> Gwendolyn Mikell. *African Feminism: The Politics of Survival in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 1997.

like the cyborg is a metaphor for resisting fixity and disrupting stable binaries and Mazvita as a nomadic figure is not bound to one particular geographic location, neither is she bound to a traditional identity of motherhood as espoused by Mikell. Her maternal subjectivity is constructed on the basis of her geographic, economic and social condition and she attempts to move beyond the fixed gendered conception of motherhood and become the other. Braidotti argues that the nomad 'is usually beyond classification, a sort of classless unit.' (22) The nomad figure attempts to speak from beyond the categorical position constructed by race, gender, nationality or class and in breaking away from group identity presents a new image of self. It can be argued that Mazvita embodies this unclassifiable figure because of her ambiguous relation to motherhood, to the land and her cultural identity as a Shona woman because she refuses to be tied to the land but understands that it is also a place of retribution and salvation once she performs the burial of the child and this enables her to continue moving on.

She takes a bus journey back to Mubaira village in Mhondoro and this return trip home gives effect to the meanings of the place names, Mubaira meaning reward and Mhondoro meaning spirit medium. She gives back the unwanted child to the ancestors and in return 'new grass grows over the burnt grass.' (102) In asking for redemption from the ancestors, Mazvita start over again in '[an] embrace precious and permanent, a promise to growing life.' (75)

### ***Under The Tongue: Cathartic Mothering***

*Under the Tongue* is the fourth novel in Vera's literary historical timeline of Zimbabwe, set in 1979 in the Eastern Highlands in the rural and urban areas close to the border with Mozambique.<sup>336</sup> Placed along a temporal continuum, Vera's novels (including *The Stone Virgins*) chart the systematic development of a counter narrative of the particular and the everyday of women's lives as a signifier of the macro-historical issues shaping the nation. As oppositional discourses these narratives challenge the validity of singular narratives produced by the colonial and postcolonial nation. In each text Vera explores the cultural and political meanings of Black motherhood through women's eyes and in these narrated experiences emerges a new alternative, historicized consciousness of femininity that embraces both the tragic and the triumphant moments in women's lives as counter discourse.

*Under the Tongue* reveals the joys, strengths and pains of motherhood in its depiction of family experience in 1979 colonial Zimbabwe. It is the year before independence is officially declared and most of the fighting is over.<sup>337</sup> Similar to the novels set in 1946 and 1977, this is not a happy story but one that alternates between chapters of a family's sexual and verbal abuse of women. The odd numbered chapters describe the rape of young Zhizha by her father and how the maternal collective tries to help

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<sup>336</sup> Incidentally *Nervous Conditions* is also set in the same location.

<sup>337</sup> The Lancaster House Agreement signed by the leaders of ZANU (Robert Mugabe), ZAPU (Joshua Nkomo), representatives of the British government and representatives of the Rhodesian government Prime Minister Ian Smith and Bishop Abel Muzorewa agreed to a ceasefire among other things.

her overcome the mute trauma suffers as a consequence while the even numbered chapters recount the death of Grandmother's first son and the verbal abuse she endured thereafter from her husband who blames her for Tonderayi's death.

These interwoven narratives of women's silencing search for a language and speech to recover the repressed voices of women. In retrieving Zhizha's voice and breaking the restrictions on women's speaking within the family, the text constructs a new discourse for women that refigures the nature/culture, oral/written, private/public binaries that divide and privilege men over women. Men are seen as the producers of culture, carriers of the written word whereas women are culturally discouraged from going to school as seen in *Nervous Conditions*. In *Under the Tongue*, gender rather than seniority determines speaking rights as Grandmother is told 'a woman cannot speak' (44) and even her pleas to her husband are ignored, 'I have asked if my 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.' (*Ibid.*) Silenced by the male patriarchs who determine when women are allowed to speak, the women talk to each other instead. The conversations between Zhizha and Grandmother played out in the interwoven and alternating voices of the novel's chapters subvert the male dominance over dialogue and also shows how literacy enables women to become speaking subjects. Through speaking about her pain and learning to read and write, Zhizha finds her voice again. Further, the act of writing the text and putting the private, personal stories of women in the public realm blurs the

hierarchical differences created by patriarchy in the private/public binaries. Through writing, women can become storytellers of their own lives and regain their voices, as Vera argues, 'to write is to banish silence.'<sup>338</sup>

While Haraway's technological cyborg seeks to undo the nature/culture binary and embrace a joint kinship between humans and machines, the women of *Under the Tongue* attempt to undo the nature/culture, human/spirit as oppositional binaries by re-remembering the joint kinship of mother-grandmother-daughter through cultural practices that are connected to the land and ancestors such as praises to the land, river gods and ancestral spirits. Rainmaking rituals create a link between women, culture, the land and the ancestors and the distinct categories of nature/culture, public/private are deconstructed. Remembering the maternal legacy of mothers and grandmothers can be interpreted as the methodology of the oppressed in this novel. The cyborg/nomad figure is not based on the experience of living in the modern industrial world as might be said of *Butterfly Burning* or *Without a Name* which subvert the segregationist strategies of the master that mark African women as other. Instead, *Nehanda* and *Under the Tongue* articulate a methodology of the oppressed through figuring the human-spirit as a metaphor of resistance. *Under the Tongue* invokes the past into the present through displacing binaries oral/literacy and fusing the two to construct a collective feminine voice that confronts cultural silencing. Vera's women characters are able

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<sup>338</sup> Yvonne Vera. *The Prison of the Colonial Space: Narratives of Resistance*. Unpublished PhD thesis, Toronto: York University, 1995. p. 93.

to navigate the historically oppressive binaries and through their re-figuration of history's timeline, the texts could be described as mapping what Sandoval (2000) calls, 'a *history of oppositional consciousness*', which is 'a *topography* of consciousness in opposition..... charting psychic and material realities that occupy a particular cultural region.'<sup>339</sup>

In *Under the Tongue*, the figuration of psychic cyborg is not incongruous to the figuration of motherhood theorized by African womanists and feminists alike. Nah Dove (1998) gives an overview of Africana womanist beliefs concerning motherhood, African spirituality and resistance and writes that:

A concept [Africana Womanism] that has been shaped by the work of women such as Clenora Hudson-Weems, Ifi Amadiume, Mary E. Modupe Kolawole, and others. African womanism may be viewed as fundamental to the continuing development of Afrocentric theory. Africana womanism brings to the forefront the role of African mothers as leaders in the struggle to regain, reconstruct, and create a cultural integrity that espouses the ancient Maatic principles of reciprocity, balance, harmony, justice, truth, righteousness, order, and so forth.<sup>340</sup>

Dove's summary of perspectives shows that Africana womanism foregrounds the spiritual and cultural systems of resistance that have been handed down through the generations as oral tale or practice as essential to the construction of a matrilineal network. The transmission of resistive practices through memory and language as depicted through acts such as Grandmother putting a word and a memory in Zhizha's mouth or praying to the moon for her granddaughter's recovery, are examples of the kinds of the oppositional strategies deployed by the psychic cyborg. As

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<sup>339</sup> Chela Sandoval. *Methodology of the Oppressed*, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2000b. p. 53.

<sup>340</sup> Nah Dove. 'Africana Womanism: An Afrocentric Theory.' *Journal of Black Studies*, 28(5), 1998. pp. 515-539, qtd. p. 535.

discussed above, the inner technology of women of colour has been developed through centuries of oppression and the fighting strategies are encoded in the identities of women like the spiritual abilities African womanists, like Dove, believe are embedded in the images of Black motherhood. With this theoretical frame in mind as symbolic of Zhizha, Grandmother and Runyararo, I offer a close reading of the text to illustrate how women recover the bodies and voices and reconstruct the dualisms that rob them of a speaking voice. In analysing how women collectively heal from physical and spiritual trauma through memory and reinventing language, I hope to conclude my reading by arguing that in writing women's stories new discourses of the nation to emerge from the rubbles of war and family violence.

The generational link between the grandmother-mother-daughter as a figuration of catharsis that positions mothers as the primary curative sites enables a restoration of Zhizha's selfhood and healing from trauma. This way, women are imagined as figures of personal and cultural survival that experience both familial and national upheaval and triumph over both situations by drawing on the cultural practices of Shona women. Similar to *Nehanda* the cosmological subjectivity of women is a recurrent theme in this novel as well as that of collective subjectivity. In my reading I consider the impact of rape and post-rape survival within the Shona cultural framework and at the level of gender relations and national relations between women's bodies and the warring state. My analysis of Vera's cultural feminist reclamation project imagines an alternative

subjectivity of femininity and knowledge as coping strategies in a time of violation and conflict.

With the text centred on the memory of Zhizha's rape, the family's past skeletons and the present where Zhizha's mother and Grandmother restore her voice, this short, poetic novel has been described by critics as a gendered allegory of war. Wilson-Tagoe for example, suggests that the rape of Zhizha is, 'a negative symptom of a construction of masculinity embedded in the community particularly heightened by war',<sup>341</sup> In her reading, Samuelson thinks that, 'rape [is used] to signify invasion into the land occupied by the Shona, and the post-independence betrayal of Zimbabweans by a national government.'<sup>342</sup> Considering both of these perspectives, I will discuss the impact of colonialism and combat on gender relations as well as the contradictions of nationalist symbolism of the female body highlighted by the act of rape with the intent of illustrating a larger point, that feminist figurations are anti-colonial metaphors that articulate an alternative embodied, collective subjectivity of motherhood.

*Under the Tongue* is written in the first person narrative with Zhizha's voice weaving in and out of the personal lives of Grandmother and Mother, with the odd numbered chapters retelling the rape incident while the even numbered chapters give the family background. The interweaving of experiences, time and place represents a movement

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<sup>341</sup> 2003, p.174.

<sup>342</sup> 2002, p. 15.

between time, space and place that defies the spatio-temporal linearity of the conventional historical novel. In this novel, ‘history [h]as become dazed and circular’<sup>343</sup> because history is not constructed through facts, dates and place names, but through memory which is a ‘non-physical movement into the past against the flow of chronological time.’<sup>344</sup> The ability to recall places through the mind inscribes the presence of women into a place, contrary to official history which does not record the experiences of ordinary, colonized Black women. The continuous interweaving of memory with the present reorders, going back and forth between places allows women to mark themselves in both periods and the mythical dimension enables women to claim their presence in another realm that defies the linear order of time and the fixity of space.

Primorac in her reading of the spatio-temporal component of *Under the Tongue*, suggests that the absence of structured time and figuring of memory through Grandmother and Zhizha enables women to access ‘the most private space of all, the space inside a woman’s body.’<sup>345</sup> The use of personal voice and absence of direct speech as literary techniques underscores the intimate tone of the book as it explores Zhizha’s struggle to regain control over her body.

Searching for her voice, Zhizha says:

My tongue is heavy with sleep. I know a stone is buried in my mouth, carried under the tongue. My voice has forgotten me. Only Grandmother’s voice

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<sup>343</sup> Primorac 2007, p. 112.

<sup>344</sup> Primorac, 2007, p.157.

<sup>345</sup> *Ibid.*

remembers me. Her voice says that before I learnt to forget there was a river in my mouth. (1)

Traumatized after being raped by her father, Zhizha becomes mute and the loss of developmental skills such as the loss of language and speech are common psychological effects of rape in children.<sup>346</sup> As a result, child victims often regress into a state of helplessness, unable to perform the tasks they normally would. Although the text does not indicate any other changes in behaviour in Zhizha apart from muteness, her constant crying is a sign of trauma. Rape is a very distressing experience and its victims can suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder as recurring nightmares of the event. Describing recurrence in children, the Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) states that, '[victims experiences] recurrent and intrusive disturbing recollections of the event (in young children, repetitive play in which themes or aspects of the trauma are expressed).'<sup>347</sup> Zhizha's repetitive narrative of *Under the Tongue* suggests that she experiences frequent memories of the rape but it has had such a traumatic effect on her that she is unable to speak. Caught between haunting memories and silence, Zhizha has to transmit her feelings through her grandmother as 'only Grandmother's voice remembers me.' (1)

Zhizha's muteness symbolizes not only the traumatic sexual abuse, but also the silencing of women by a patriarchal culture. This gendered

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<sup>346</sup> See Manish Sharma. *When Fathers Rape: A Socio-Psycho-Legal-Global Study*, APH Publishing: New Delhi, 1996.

<sup>347</sup> *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (Third Edition - Revised) Diagnostic Criteria for 309.89 Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder <http://www.cirp.org/library/psych/ptsd/> [date accessed 1 October 2010].

muting is continually present in the book and both Grandmother and Runyararo also experience it. Runyararo's name means silence or a quiet peace in Shona, which is symbolic because her characterisation in the book is of a woman of few words and she continually pays deference to her husband as is expected of a dutiful wife. vaGomba, Grandmother's husband, also instils the rule of silence in his marriage and his wife pleads:

You have said that a woman cannot speak. I have asked if my 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 (44)

Appealing against marital suppression, Grandmother asks her husband for a chance to open up about the family's past ordeals like the death of her son Tonderayi, for which she is blamed and Muroyiwa's strange zombie-like behaviour throughout his childhood. The confrontations of the women characters, considered together, with the idea that women's storytelling is an act of speaking shows the power of the written word. It is an empowering alternative to the oral space which in this home is dominated by men who silence women sexually or verbally. Judging by the actions of the women, Vera seems to suggest other forms of communication are possible such as literacy, as Zhizha is taught to read by Runyararo and Grandmother. However, expression also takes the form of brutal action as Runyararo kills her husband when she discovers he raped their daughter. Runyararo does the unthinkable and commits a crime of passion. Crimes of passion can be defined as acts of abuse, especially murder against a spouse or other loved one attributed to a strong impulse, such as jealous

rage or heartbreak as opposed to a pre-meditated crime.<sup>348</sup> While Runyararo's crime may not have been out of jealous rage, the avenging of Zhizha's sexual assault can be seen as an act of passion and rage. Although there is no explicit description of the murder, Runyararo's passion crime raises difficult moral questions of whether or not killing is maternal instinct in response to a child's violation. If so, can murder be said to be a just exercise of female agency? Maternal instinct is a mother's impulse to love and protect her child dependent on genetic traits<sup>349</sup> and social behaviour. Thus it can be argued that killing in defence of a child is a pathologically instinctive act.

Rape as a paternal right in the private familial setting in *Under the Tongue* originates as a sexual, physical and seniority right exercised over the gendered female. Using Adrienne Rich's (1980) concept of 'male sex-right'<sup>350</sup> to discuss rape, Carol Pateman (1988) describes it as a negative behavioural characteristic of a patriarchal society as 'the vehicle through which men transform their natural right over women into the security of civil patriarchal right'<sup>351</sup> which translates to a sexual right over women's bodies. In Vera's novel, Muroyiwa exerts his paternal and sexual rights of dominance over Zhizha and in maternal self-defence, Runyararo kills. Although she is reprimanded by the civil justice system, Muroyiwa's act

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<sup>348</sup> Laurie Taylor. 'Comment: Provoked Reason in Men And Women: Heat-Of-Passion Manslaughter And Imperfect Self-Defense.' *UCLA Law Review* 33 (August 1986), pp. 1679-1735.

<sup>349</sup> Tara Pope-Parker. 'Maternal Instinct Is Wired Into the Brain' *New York Times*, <http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/03/07/maternal-instinct-is-wired-into-the-brain/> [date accessed: 20 October 2010].

<sup>350</sup> Adrienne Rich. 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence', *Signs*, Vol. 5, No. 4, Women: Sex and Sexuality (Summer, 1980), pp. 631-660.

<sup>351</sup> Carol Pateman. *The Sexual Contract*, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988. p. 6.

is still culturally silenced because to a certain extent, rape is accepted as a paternal right.

One of the superstitious beliefs in Zimbabwean society is that having sex with a child can cure an illness. Some traditional healers prescribe having sex with young girls or virgins if a man wants prosperity or to cure himself of Aids. During times of economic depression and political unrest, there has been a marked increase in sexual violence against minors and UNICEF statistics show that the number of reported cases of child rape went from 2192 to 3112 in 2006.<sup>352</sup> The negative impact of the political and financial crisis on domestic and familial relations, increases the likelihood of sexual abuse within a society where cultural practices permit the rape of children.

Susan Brownmiller (2000) suggests that rape is a foundation of patriarchy, thus, 'propagates gender inequality by subordinating women to men, and limiting women's social behaviour.'<sup>353</sup> While it is controversial to suggest that patriarchal society is built on male sexual violence rather than on male privilege, Brownmiller makes a valid point about the impunity towards male violence entrenched in the patriarchal values of a society as shown in the silencing of women in *Under the Tongue*. Runyararo's passion crime can also be read as a killing of the patriarchy and its oppressiveness as after Muroyiwa's death, only the women are left. Rape

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<sup>352</sup> 'Child rape up 42 percent in Zimbabwe' – UN, *New Zimbabwe*, 12 November 2009 (online) <http://www.newzimbabwe.com/pages/crime13.17817.html> [date accessed: 7 October 2010].

<sup>353</sup> Susan Brownmiller. *Against our Will: Men, Women and Rape*. New York: Fawcett, 1st Ballantine Books. p. 11.

as a mechanism of control over women, shapes gender relations where the female group lives subordinate to and in perpetual fear of male power. The figuration of rape in this novel demonstrates the transformative effect of sexual assault on the family structure and male-female relations. Rape is a tool of control and use of force rather than a desire for sexual pleasure and when placed in the context of the humiliation and subjugation of Vera's women characters, the paternal rape is an extension of male oppressiveness. The figuration of mariticide thus demonstrates a just response to male exploitation of physical strength and cultural seniority.

As social critique, *Under the Tongue* provides important commentary on everyday issues of power, autonomy and rights between women and men in an urban setting. In presenting a female rape victim and paternal rapist figure, Vera foregrounds gender and family as the operant categories of subjugation and also uses this family's history to draw attention to the strained relations between men and women spanning generations. With pre-colonial social structures erased, there is no recourse to traditional courts to punish Muroyiwa and his wife decides to the law into her own hands. This act of revenge, protects women's bodies is a feminist act in terms of Luce Irigaray and Margret Whitford's (1991) perspective on women and 'guard and keep our bodies and at the same time make them emerge from silence and subjugation.'<sup>354</sup> On a symbolic level, Runyararo's vengeance shows the female body's capacity to exert power, a body with agency and not only an object of domination. The figuring of

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<sup>354</sup> Luce Irigaray and Margaret Whitford. *The Irigaray Reader*, Wiley-Blackwell: Oxford, 1991. p. 42.

the corporeal as a killer represents an image of motherhood that runs counter to dominant Afro-centric feminist and patriarchal figurations of the maternal body as the source of life and fertility. This oppositional figure reorients the cultural image of femininity into a fractured, complex image of human vulnerability, aggression and agency. The representation of maternal vigilantism suggests the right to social justice and expression of anger is an expression of femininity and feminist subjectivity.

In addition, this impassioned retaliation can be seen as a re-figuring of gender roles of a colonial society posited between rural life and urban colonial modernity. In this novel Runyararo is a basket weaver, which is a low-income job. At home she is subjected to the daily patronizing abuse by Muroyiwa and she finally breaks her silence when she kills. The multiple, interlocking oppressions of imperialism relegating women to the margins of tradition have been exacerbated by the social hierarchy structure of colonial capitalism where women are at the bottom rung of the social ladder and men are emasculated.

Previously distinct female roles now become shared with men, but the social hierarchy is re-ordered with men as the preferable source of labour and women often relegated to the private domestic sphere. For a low-income earner like Runyararo, she has diminished economic control as compared to women in the pre-colonial economy<sup>355</sup> who owned and farmed the land. Under the colonial system, the roles become redefined

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<sup>355</sup> See page 12 of this Chapter for specific references.

and men have primary access to jobs and are assigned farming plots on native tribal trust lands whereas women are of secondary importance on land issues with no right of access while the fortunate few who work in the city, have low income jobs that pay less than men. Relations between men and women outside of financial struggles also included a battle for social power, in terms of behaviour.

Although Vera's novel does not offer reasons as to why Zhizha is raped, paternal rape as a cure could be a possible reason for Muroyiwa's actions. His name in Shona, means bewitched. In the novel, he is remembered by his mother as, 'retriev[ed] him from a calabash' (6) with a cobweb word in his mouth. The calabash and cobweb represent death as; a calabash is used to brew traditional beer for entertainment or sometimes as offerings to the dead or ancestral spirits. These associations with carnal things portray Muroyiwa as though he were the living dead or what might be described in Shona as *chidoma*. He is described as 'born into his father's blindness' (17) and his father, vaGomba never gets over his accident that caused the loss of his sight. Instead the incident consumes his father so much that it takes away all paternal affection. The text reads '[t]here was an intimacy of hostility between the root and vaGomba. Muroyiwa envied this intimate aggression' (149) but this feeling of jealousy develops into a desire to have something that he can be fixated with, like his father's secret. Muroyiwa thinks of his father's obsession with the accidents as an, 'attractive violence and mystery of something banished but permanent, the sound of death in a calabash.' (28) Even though he wants something, he

also hopes for a way to break the cycle and find release and growth from it; he wishes the root will grow into flowering plants and ‘the flowers would restore sight to his father.’ (28)

Desperate to rid himself of his bewitched condition, Muroyiwa turns to Zhizha who represents youth, innocence and purity. While it may be in the perpetrator’s mind that he is curing himself and feels his masculinity is reinforced through rape, Muroyiwa is in fact further emasculated and this leads to his downfall. On a spiritual level his fatality shows the gods did not approve; his wife kills him but in the mystic world of the text this leads to retrieval of a feminine power rather than her civil imprisonment. The women band together as a strong maternal force rooted in the earth, as the novel highlights, Zhizha finds her voice through Grandmother and her mother. The spiritual, earthly relation the women share ensures their survival and allows them to regain control over their lives and live with some measure of dignity and autonomy. The courageous and cathartic act of women retrieving their bodies has its historical trace in Zimbabwean history as explained by Patricia McFadden (2000):

For decades, Black women could not bring the crime of rape by Black men, and least of all white men, into any colonial court, not only because they were deemed illegally in those public spaces where rape was a criminal offence in ‘white’ terms, but also because the onus of proof that they had not invited such sexual violation was almost impossible to argue in such circumstances.<sup>356</sup>

The Black nationalist variation of patriarchy relocates the basis of men’s rights from the family to the political where paternity embodies the civil

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<sup>356</sup> Patricia McFadden. ‘Radically Speaking: The Significance of the Women’s Movement for Southern Africa.’ Paper presented in Vienna, Austria, October 2000. [http://www.wworld.org/programs/regions/africa/patricia\\_mcfadden3.htm](http://www.wworld.org/programs/regions/africa/patricia_mcfadden3.htm) [date accessed: 15 March 2008].

society and the state. Patriarchy in the African nation-state is based on a cultural precept of masculine right and the image of the nation as father.

Positive maternal power trumps abuse of patriarchy; but this is not to say that Vera constructs reductive, oppositional binaries between men and women, but rather shows how the women as collective minoritarian gendered subjectivities can overcome an oppressive majoritarian order. The novel articulates a mother-centred consciousness towards community well-being and social justice against gendered oppression which is a core theme of African feminist ideology. Concerned with women's social relation to the world; the novel foregrounds motherhood as an important communal network that speaks out against sexual violence and also rehabilitates the victimised.

When Runyararo is sent to prison, Grandmother becomes Zhizha's mother. The novel fluidly shifts between the three characters, weaving them together into a united collective that is separate but whole. Grandmother takes on the role of othermothering; othermothers are 'women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities; traditionally [they] have been central to the institution of Black motherhood.'<sup>357</sup> Collins goes on to state that in African-American culture other-mothering is a feature of contemporary life that 'has survived the transition from a slave economy to post-emancipation southern rural

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<sup>357</sup> Collins, 1991, p. 119.

agriculture' (1997: 122) As discussed in my reading of *Butterfly Burning*, the figuration of kinship is a collective strategy by women in order to survive the impact of colonialism, liberation struggles and the emergence of postcolonial African societies and nations. This is mainly because motherhood and the concept of the family in African life has been negotiated and reconstituted as social change has occurred. The African family structure, in its many forms, has the extended family network at its heart which is as closely knit as the immediate family kinship. The naming system of female relatives extends the term mother; for example Maiguru in *Nervous Conditions* is Tambu's aunt –in-law in English, but in Shona culture it is not out of turn for Tambu to call her mother as she does.

In *Under the Tongue*, the Grandmother becomes mother to Zhizha, 'I have my Grandmother she is my mother. My mother is far away, very far away in the mirror' (86), she says and when Runyararo returns, Zhizha feels estranged from her birth-mother who insists, 'We belong together. I gave birth to you.' (87) The intergenerational disconnection and reconnection through Grandmother, the arch mother figure can be read as personal experience seeping into the narrative as Vera herself was raised by her paternal grandmother when her mother went to teacher's college and when she returned from her studies, she requested for her daughter but the young Vera was unwilling to leave the Grandmother or 'othermother' she

had grown accustomed to.<sup>358</sup> Speaking of othermothering and single mothering as the norm in an interview, she recalls:

I come from that kind of background. My friends – I can point them out and take you to see...a mother, her daughter, a child. This is so normal ...the examples of women having to survive, because their men have left, either gone to the city or died, or just abandoned them...It's so common you that it is just accepted. (2004: 159)

Women as fictive kin and other-mothers when single mothers abandon or are forced to leave their children are a common feature in Vera's novels.

Martin Shaw makes the observation that:

Vera consistently returns to a concern with the mother-daughter connection or disconnection, loss of the mother, rejection or abandonment of the child, and denial of motherhood. Protagonists in Vera's poetic novels are defeated by maternity: as young women, they commit infanticide, perform a successful self-abortion, or trade the physical for a spiritual life. (46)

In the colonial and postcolonial city where females are violated, women work as sex-workers or abandon their families, familial and gender relations are constantly constructed and reconstructed in response to the social pressures faced by women. In *Under the Tongue*, Vera urges the reader to rethink and reconceptualise the meaning of the family when doubly re-shaped as a father's violation and a mother's revenge. The structure of the family is not always stable and it is re-produced as a matriarchal relational triangle in response to the circumstances which leave Zhizha parent-less. Further, the maternal act of othermothering reclaims the familial power of women within a capitalist, urban, European-invented system of colonial power where African patriarchy is reconstituted as a conquered institution with a domino-effect on social

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<sup>358</sup> Told to me in an informal conversation with Terence Ranger in June 2007, Britain Zimbabwe Society Research Day, St Anthony's College, Oxford. For further reading see Ericah Gwetai, *Petal thoughts: Yvonne Vera: A Biography*, Harare: Weaver Press, 2011.

relations between African men and women. In Vera's novel, women are relegated to the margins as through the silencing of women's voices and actions by Grandfather and even the blind vaGomba who refuses to open up to his wife.

According to Elaine Scarry (1985) pain has 'a resistance to language,'<sup>359</sup> it takes away the ability to express emotion. As a result of its silencing effect, Scarry makes the claim that pain is 'unsharable' (4) as the sufferer lacks the words to describe what they feel; crying and suppression are the only means available to the person. Vera's text explores the possibility of creating a language for pain or representing pain through the instruments of speaking; the voice, words and the tongue. These metaphors resonate throughout the text; the females put words in each other's mouths (1; 27), words that represent different aspects of their pain. For Zhizha, it is the unspeakable rape, for Grandmother it is Tonderayi, and when Zhizha utters this 'cobweb word,' it evokes forbidden memory in Grandmother, 'her lake of sorrow.' Zhizha has stirred some very deep emotions and if she answers Grandmother's repeated startled question 'what did you say?' she knows, '[Grandmother] will drop me to the ground and die.' (60)

The pain of losing a child and the inability to confront this trauma and speak of it makes it 'doubly-annihilating'<sup>360</sup> and the only way she can come to terms with it is through transmission and remembrance. The

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<sup>359</sup> Elaine, Scarry. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985. See pp.170–173. Samuelson (2002) makes use of Scarry's work in her reading of *Under the Tongue* in her essay 'A River in My Mouth' in Muponde and Taruvinga (Eds.), pp. 15–24.

<sup>360</sup> Scarry, p. 5.

family functions this kind of space as Grandmother tells Zhizha of her son (70) and Zhizha is able to empathise and ‘become’ her, ‘I am inside Grandmother. I am Grandmother.’ (2) The transmission of memory is one way of giving re-imagining herself through someone else. This is an enactment of *ubuntu* which is a humanistic principle that reconfigures the dialectic between self and other as person is a person only through another. Through the cognition of someone else there is a shared consciousness and this is what enables Zhizha to see herself through Grandmother, and the reverse for Grandmother. This is an orientation of self through another that can perhaps be explained in *ubuntu* philosophy<sup>361</sup> where the recognition of another enables a self-recognition that is articulated by the principle of *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*.<sup>362</sup> It demonstrates the collective as definitive of the individual. In a literal sense, Grandmother has to put Zhizha’s tongue back inside of her so she can speak, not only of her pain but so she can find herself again. The one female embodies the other and pain is passed around in a cyclic narrative which passes through one person to reveal their trauma. The release of one enables the other to tell their story and heal. Embodiment of each other is way of finding healing through voice and cognition; through mother and Grandmother, Zhizha is healed. Muchemwa states, ‘[p]ossession of speech is an indicator of presence and privilege; lack of it is a sign of want and absence’ (4) Trauma destroys the power to speak and also severs the connection between people and disfigures language because some words become unspeakable. Zhizha’s speech is reduced to

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<sup>361</sup> This is the same principle of *unhu* in the *The Book of Not* discussed on pp. 109-111, p. 114 of this thesis.

<sup>362</sup> A person is a person through other people.

whimpers and cries and it is only through Grandmother and mother teaching her to read vowels 'a e i o u' (80) and trademark names like 'Singer' and Dover (24, 25) out loud, does the young protagonist rediscover speech. Her reading and language skills develop to such a level that when she reads the newspaper headline 'Massacre' (42), she can grasp its meaning. Connecting this to her own pain she laments, 'What have I not suffered ... what have my eyes not seen ...' (43) Her ability to read and engage with a word like massacre, which symbolizes death on a horrific scale, shows that despite the fear the word conjures up within her, Zhizha has made progress in dealing with the rape, something she could not even speak about at the beginning of the novel.

Vera skilfully constructs a complex relation between public/patriarchal and private/female violence in the construction of gendered subjectivity. The narrative weaves in and out of the impossibility of language and speaking doubly-inflicted by trauma and an oppressive culture. By unearthing secrets of women condemned to silence, the novel strives to create a speaking community made by and for women. The shattering of language by pain, to paraphrase Scarry, is symptomatic of the family in crisis under the leadership of a dysfunctional patriarch but through the reconstruction of the family along matriarchal terms, femininity is healed and re-humanized.

In the (re)construction of language, there is also a reconstruction of narrative from oral into literary, that in the process of translation from

word to page still bears some traits of oral aesthetics, Shona mysticism, cyclism of narrative call and response between characters. Authorship in this fashion by a woman about woman-centred issues re-claims the power of a patriarchal orature as Muchemwa argues, ‘the language is sexist and women are denied the power of agency; they are perceived as passive recipients of men’s actions.’<sup>363</sup> In Vera’s writing there is a remaking of orature by reimagining the oral tradition through feminine agency in *Under the Tongue* where Grandmother is the custodian of family history and bearer of its secrets or in *Nehanda* where the legend is re-told from the heroine’s perspective.

In figuring the body and memory in the quest for a new language and speaking voice for women, Vera imagines motherhood in an expanded, psychic cyborg role that defies the limitations and silences of patriarchy to recover the mythic and discursive power of women as storytellers, healers, teachers and nurturers. In addition, inscribing the previously silenced collective histories of women through a shared language and a communal oraliteracy to address past traumas provides a cathartic discourse for women. Linking family experience to the larger historical events of 1979, Vera locates women within the national story, thereby creating a necessary conversation around the civilian experience of the liberation struggle in cautious anticipation of what a healed and independent Zimbabwe may look like. The figuration of women through narrative multiplies the histories of the emerging nation-state and inscribes women

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<sup>363</sup> 2002, p.5.

as the nation's memory keeper in whom the extraordinary stories of ordinary women are stored.

## **Conclusion**

In this Chapter I have outlined a historical timeline tracing the different images of Zimbabwean motherhood in traditional and colonial societies which position women as the central actors and agents of discourse. With the intent of illustrating how the embodiments of the maternal figure and women's resistances as legitimate critiques of the sex-gender-race relations in colonial and pre-colonial Zimbabwean society, this Chapter has tried to offer new feminist forms of selfhood by deploying cyborg and nomad as critical reading tools. Through these lenses, motherhood, like the rebel figurations of femininity in the previous Chapter, has been portrayed as an always and already, ambiguous, fluid, transgressive and historicised identity with the aim of destabilizing singular, fixed hegemonic conceptions of motherhood. The reimagining of maternity through the cyborg and nomad metaphors seeks to provide new myths of feminine subjectivity within African feminist discourse that represent the political and social realities of women.

Further to this, in the Zimbabwean context the representation of women located inside and outside of the nationalist populist imagination of history, seeks to legitimize the connection between women's bodies, land,

sovereignty and ancestry. Vera's *Nehanda* affirms the importance of women as historical figures and national matriarchs whereas *Butterfly Burning*, *Without a Name* and *Under the Tongue* highlight the unconventional methods of survival in modern, colonial Zimbabwe thereby challenging patriarchal and colonialist proscriptions on how African women should behave and speak.

Presenting women's cultural practices of kinship, spirit possession and story-telling in the public domain of national politics and history which is largely dominated by the institutions of patriarchy and colonialism loosens the stronghold of these hegemonies over discourse. Through texts like *Nehanda* and *Without a Name*, women are figured as the primary sources of people's history and memory thereby displacing the dichotomies of public/private, speaker/silent and masculine/feminine. In drawing on the metaphors of psychic resistance, cyborgs and nomads to show how the maternal body is figured in some of Vera's writing, I have tried to locate women's experience within a particular historical moment and use these different figurations of spirit possession, abortion and suicide, infanticide and rape catharsis to map a narrative of maternal genealogy of Zimbabwe. This alternative lineage of motherhood deviates from past African feminist discourses celebrating the strengths of motherhood and has attempted to provide an analysis of the lived bodily experiences of women that have been excluded from the African feminist/womanist maternal kaleidoscope. In analysing the personal and cultural struggles of women to survive outside of and in between structures of power governing modern society, I have consistently tried to

show how Vera challenges the gendered myths of motherhood through her novels that show how war damages gender relations and how modernity changes women's survival strategies. Vera's various maternal figures inscribe new and different subjectivities of women that open out the discursive space of African femininity. Vera's figurations render nationalist national history and the myths of motherhood, 'phantasmagorical and almost unrecognizable'<sup>364</sup> and resist proscribed meanings on reproduction, the body and motherhood by account of their personal and collective experiences of violence and poverty. What can be drawn from the Chapter in relation to the other figurations of femininity and sexuality explored in this thesis is that these various cyborg and nomadic figurations of motherhood reject categorisation and fixity preferring instead complicated and fractured images of the maternal, the family and the nation. In the next Chapter, I explore how sexuality is depicted in Vera and Dangarembga's writing and hope to show how the figuring of sexual difference reconstructs the dominant meanings of sexuality and femininity.

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<sup>364</sup> Liz Gunner and Neil ten Kortenaar. 'Introduction: Yvonne Vera's Fictions and the Voice of the Possible', *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 38, No. 2, (Summer 2007), pp. 1-8.. [date accessed: 5 November 2010].

## Chapter 3

# Cuddling Cousins and Woman Love: Figuring Sexual Ambivalence in the Colony

## Introduction

In the previous chapters I have tried to explore the multiple ways in which women construct and articulate their femininity in response to the challenging political, familial, economic and social conditions under which they live. Thus far I have examined how the experiences of womanhood and motherhood have resulted in specific characters resorting to some of the most unorthodox alternatives as means of survival under the harsh conditions of gendered and racial oppression. From the garrulous Lucia, to the troubled Mazvita and traumatized Zhizha, all of the women have negotiated tradition and modernity in order to assert themselves proving that the grounds of femininity are not fixed and unchangeable as biological or historical fact. Instead, femininity is the fluid site of dissent against all forms of hegemony enacted through the breaking of cultural taboos. In this final Chapter, I further explore how women construct and express their sexual desire, to argue that sexuality, like motherhood and the collective experience of womanhood, is contingent upon the negotiation of cultural and personal practices of a specific temporality and community.

Exploring the relations between women and girls in *Nervous Conditions*, *Under the Tongue* and *Butterfly Burning*, I hope to show how women continuously break the heterosexual codes of the colony and patriarchy in articulating an alternative sexuality that includes same-sex relations, bisexual yearning and homoerotic desire. I undertake a subversive reading

to show that these acts of desire and pleasure are complexly embedded in the everyday struggles of women. As Sylvia Tamale (2005)<sup>365</sup> argues:

sexuality is intricately linked to practically every aspect of our lives: to pleasure, power, politics and procreation, but also to disease, violence, war, language, social roles, religion, kinship structures, identity, creativity. (9)

In the colonial Zimbabwean context, the regulation and control of women's sexuality by patriarchy, the state and colonial capitalist system has been instrumental in ensuring the subjugation of women. My previous readings of *Without a Name*, *Butterfly Burning* and *Nervous Conditions* have shown how women's sexualities have been subject to these structures and systems of colonial and anticolonial hegemony. In *Without a Name* the orphaned Mazvita is raped by a guerrilla fighter and is forced to enter into a sexual arrangement in the city with Joel as barter for room and board, whereas in *Butterfly Burning* the unequal economic system forces women into prostitution and in *Nervous Conditions* resistance against cultural pressure to be a certain body size with 'child-bearing hips' (28) results in Nyasha starving herself into thinness. However, not all the depictions of women have stemmed from a negative situation or resulted in tragedy as the analyses of Lucia of *Nervous Conditions* in Chapter One and the shebeen queen, Deliwe in *Butterfly Burning* in Chapter Two show how some women use their sexual power to their advantage and defy the social behavioural codes of their worlds that expect women to be demure and reserved. In this Chapter, I intend to discuss how the various forms of alternative sexuality are subversively figured in the texts as resistance and self-expression, produce new multiple discourses of femininity that urge a

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<sup>365</sup> Sylvia Tamale. 'Eroticism, sensuality and "women's secrets" among the Baganda: A critical analysis' in *Feminist Africa 5: Sexual Cultures* Issue 5: November/December 2005, pp. 9-37.

rethink of monosexual definitions of African sexuality as well as heteronormative feminist and nationalist ideology in the African context.

While issues of sexuality in African culture are generally regarded as a private matter, the public shaming<sup>366</sup> of non-heterosexuals in modern African society seems to suggest that sexuality is only a confidential affair so long as it is compliant with the social mores of hetero-normative cultures. The self-named Stiwanist, Ogundipe-Leslie laments the treatment of sexuality in Africa(s) when she writes that, ‘unfortunately, lesbian and gay discourses have not yet received earnest attention in African thought.’<sup>367</sup> Of the mainstream brands of African feminism, Stiwanism is the only brand of African feminism that openly recognizes alternate sexualities discourse in Africa, whereas motherist Acholonu militantly denies the existence of alternate sexuality declaring it ‘strange’ to her sense of African identity.

Mikell in her brief description of African feminism claims it is, ‘distinctly heterosexual, pronatal and concerned with many ‘bread and butter issues.’<sup>368</sup> Despite having carried out research in countries like Kenya and Somalia where same-sex practices are part of the cultural history and

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<sup>366</sup> For example the arrests of the Malawian gay couple Steven Monjeza and Tiwonge Chimbalanga or the outing of Uganda’s lesbian and gay citizens in *Rolling Stone*. For Malawi see: ‘Malawi gay couple get maximum sentence of 14 years’, *BBC News*, 20 May 2010, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10130240> [date accessed: 26 March 2011]. For Uganda see: ‘Uganda’s Rolling Stone paper told to stop outing gays,’ *BBC News*, 1 November 2010, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-11666789> [date accessed: 26 March 2011].

<sup>367</sup> 1994, p. 217.

<sup>368</sup> In *African Feminism: the Politics of Survival in Sub-Saharan Africa*, 1997. p. 4

present-day practice among some tribes, Mikell's definition is rooted in statistical data that ignores the different types of sexualities among the Kikuyu, Nandi and Kamba tribes<sup>369</sup> of Kenya where women marriages are a cultural practice. She arrives at her definition through using empirical data that shows that the average fertility rate of African women is six children per woman (in 1997) and various other statistics on poverty and nutrition.<sup>370</sup> This is an insufficient definition, in the least. African feminism is a many-headed hydra that addresses the political, social and cultural experiences of women. As my Chapter highlights, sexuality is expressed in so many different ways that it cannot be limited to the heterosexual, neither can feminism be solely defined in terms of motherhood because it excludes a vast number of women, some of whose lived experiences may resonate strongly with those expressed in Vera and Dangarembga's writing.

African literary theorist, Julianna Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi (1997)<sup>371</sup> criticizes the exclusion of lesbian women from literary discourse and points out the irony in the discrimination of a minority by a larger group of African women who themselves have struggled for freedom and exercise that freedom to the detriment of others. Nfah-Abbenyi writes that:

this choice [of exclusion] continues to stigmatize and perpetuate prejudice against what one can conjecture to be "silenced" number of lesbian African women, who cannot speak openly about their sexuality and therefore cannot publicly and politically fight for their rights. Heterosexual women find

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<sup>369</sup> Ruth Morgan & Saskia Wieringa. *Tommy boys, Lesbian men, and Ancestral Wives: Female Same-sex Practices in Africa*, Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2005. p. 19, p. 26.

<sup>370</sup> 1997, pp. 7-8.

<sup>371</sup> Julianna Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi. *Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality, and Difference*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997.

themselves in an 'enviable' bargaining position, but *it is won at the expense of these silenced others.*<sup>372</sup>

In African literature, Boehmer rightly points out that Anglophone African writing has largely been 'silent on questions of gay selfhood and sexuality.'<sup>373</sup> Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977)<sup>374</sup> is one of the few novels where lesbian love forms part of the plot. Marija, the German housemate makes an advance at Sissie, the protagonist but the protagonist is caught off guard and rejects her saying a lesbian desire is an 'anathema' to what is accepted 'at home.' (66) Boehmer notes that by and large, the texts concerned with female homo-eroticism have been from Francophone writers, such as the works of Mariama Barry, Ken Bugul and Calixthe Beyala.<sup>375</sup> In Beyala's *Femme nue, Femme noire* (2003) (*Naked Woman Black Woman*<sup>376</sup>) explicitly explores female eroticism in its portrayal of Irene Fofó's who finds protection from public scandal in joining a sisterhood of witches where she enters a relationship with a wealthy heiress who exploits her innocence and then she meets a married woman, but their affair is soon discovered by the police. The heiress's betrayal of the protagonist can be read as a criticism of women in positions of influence who are complicit with state oppression of disempowered women. The act of reporting same-sex preference as a crime accessory

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<sup>372</sup> 1997, p. 29.

<sup>373</sup> Elleke Boehmer. 'Tropes of Yearning and Dissent: the Troping of Desire in Yvonne Vera and Tsisti Dangarembga' in *Body, Sexuality, and Gender: Versions and Subversions in African Literatures* Dirk Naguschewski (Ed.), Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2005. pp. 113-128.

<sup>374</sup> Ama Ata Aidoo. *Our Sister Killjoy*. Harlow, Essex: Drumbeat, 1977.

<sup>375</sup> Natahlie Etoke. 'Mariama Barry, Ken Bugul, Calixthe Beyala, and the Politics of Female Homoeroticism in Sub-Saharan Francophone African Literature' *Research in African Literatures* Volume 40, Number 2, Summer 2009, pp. 173-189.

<sup>376</sup> Trans. by Michel Alibin, 2003.

thus implicates the reporter as party to gender-based violence and harassment which is often the result of arrests for same-sex couples.

Like Vera, Beyala writes against the silencing of women's bodies. She uses eroticism as a metaphor to represent Cameroon's political struggle and this is described by Sybille Ngo Nyeck (2005) as, 'a collective movement of submissions and withdrawals; revolts and coups in which orgies rebel against the monopoly and other forms of privatization and abject domestication.'<sup>377</sup> For Beyala, like Dangarembga and Vera, recording the private experiences of women is a way of registering dissent against political conflict and authoritarianism and writing the body as a symbol of nation in conflict or in protest against the control of women's bodies constitutes a form of resistance writing.

In most of post-independent Africa, homosexuality is outlawed and carries a possible sentence of death in countries such as Malawi and Uganda. Despite the constitutional right to freedom of sexuality in South Africa, killings of lesbian women are on the rise in the country's poor townships while in neighbouring Zimbabwe, homosexuality carries a jail term and there is heavy censorship of gay activist groups. At the annual Zimbabwe International Book Fair in 1995, President Mugabe declared that the Gay and Lesbian Association were a 'white problem'<sup>378</sup> unwelcome to exhibit

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<sup>377</sup> Sybille Ngo Nyeck. (Homo)Eroticism and Calixthe Beyala, *Witness Mag*, 2005, (online) <http://www.scribd.com/doc/34742485/Homo-Eroticism-and-Calixthe-Beyala-By-Sybille-Ngo-Nyeck-On-Witness-Mag> [date accessed: 29 November 2010].

<sup>378</sup> International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission. 'Zimbabwe: Gay and Lesbian Group Barred from Book Fair; President Threatens Gay Group' 08 January,

their works at the fair. This being the first time the group had ever tried to participate in the Book Fair, they were turned down at the last minute in a strongly worded rejection letter from the organisers. In a speech delivered in Harare at the Book Fair opening, President Mugabe emphatically declared, ‘You can be gay in America and Europe, but you shall be sad people here!’<sup>379</sup> The denial of gay rights in Zimbabwe stems from commonly held views that the practice is unAfrican and it is believed that one can be cleansed of through acts such as corrective rape which ironically unman homosexual men and de-feminize lesbian women and marks them as social outcasts. Reading the works of Vera and Dangarembga against such a tense homophobic climate means the writing of women’s friendships is still a challenge to the political regime that has changed from White colonial hands to the hands of Black nationalist patriarchs who are still violently repressive of women’s freedoms.

Given this continental political suppression of non-heterosexual sexualities and the conservative religious and traditional cultures, sexuality in Africa still remains a largely marginalized topic. There is still far too little debate around it as Ogundipe-Leslie opines: ‘African feminists have argued that Africa[(s)] does not know enough about her own sexuality, while there is still too much silence and silencing.’<sup>380</sup> In much the same way feminists have fought against patriarchal cultures that silence women, fighting against patriarchal repression and advocating for

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1995. <http://www.iglhrc.org/cgi-bin/iowa/article/takeaction/resourcecenter/59.html> [date accessed 4 December 2010].

<sup>379</sup> MNet TV, *Carte Blanche*, South Africa.

<sup>380</sup> 1994, p. 214.

acceptance of all forms of sexuality is important. For African feminism to be a progressive movement there has to be engagement with the real world, that in which being lesbian, bi-sexual or trans-gender is a fact of contemporary African life. Denial of this reality implies that certain forms of African feminism, like motherism and Africana womanism are complicit with the homophobic prejudice that some women face. In this vein, reading Vera and Dangarembga's work through a same-sex lens is a way of trying to develop critical ideas and approaches that may be useful in understanding sexualities in Africa.

Opening up to a multiplicity of perspectives on sexual orientation is a means of resisting patriarchal possession of the female body and a retrieval of an alternative, self-defining voice on femininity. To this end, my analysis of *Butterfly Burning* further discusses the tensions between feminist theorists and also the dissonance between heteronormative feminism and creative writing in which I suggest that Phephelaphi's longing for Deliwe while she is in a relationship with Fumbatha, constitutes bisexual desire. Arguing that it is impossible for a monosexual African society to exist, below I briefly discuss some of the anthropological evidence on the different expressions of sexuality in African culture and the possible meanings of same sex sexuality in the African context.

With this foundation laid, I shall proceed to analyse the girls' friendship in *Nervous Conditions* as culturally-located acts of social deviance and

eroticism. Developing the idea of erotic desire as a hallmark of female sexuality, I explore the spiritual angle of women's sexuality in *Under the Tongue* in which I examine the process of retrieving Zhizha's body, sexuality and voice in a female-centred, spiritually-inclined world. Further examining mother-daughter relations in terms of sexuality as a means of self-identification colonialism, I read *Butterfly Burning* as a novel of homoerotic bisexual desire that has a political dimension to it. As with the other two texts, the articulation of alternative sexuality is a form of resistance against male and racial control over women's bodies. This Chapter builds upon previous adaptations of Haraway and Braidotti's concepts of figuration and the cyborg/nomad. For Haraway, sexuality as a figuration or as embodied in the cyborg signifies a post-gender world, and argues<sup>381</sup> that, '[t]he cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world' but in the context of these Zimbabwean texts, I synthesise Western and African perspectives on the multiplicity of sexualities in the hope of demonstrating how the texts figure a post-gender world where women's sexuality is not constructed by patriarchy. By mapping the different sexual orientations, the texts articulate a more progressive discourse on womanhood that challenges the ways in which heteronormativity enables the oppression of women. In figuring sexualities in an alternative light, the texts displace the male-female, White-Black hierarchy, so that femininity is constructed on women's terms in new ways that give social and political legitimacy to the non-heterosexual practices of African women and by extension, men.

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<sup>381</sup> See *Simians and Cyborgs*, 1991, p.150.

## Alternative Sexualities

Alternative sexuality is a term used to describe multiple forms of sexuality that are not strictly heterosexual.<sup>382</sup> This more open, pluralistic approach to sexuality is useful to my interpretive reading of non-heterosexual expressions in the texts, expressions that protest against patriarchy, like the intimate relationship between Nyasha and Tambu, and go beyond the borders of heterosexuality to produce a more fluid and variable sexuality that is located in-between the border of the binary opposites of heterosexuality and homosexuality.

Framing alternative sexuality as a culturally-located phrase, Stephen Murray and Will Roscoe (1998)<sup>383</sup> refer to anthropological studies in different parts of the continent to argue that in African society the term alternative sexuality refers to same-sex unions, ritual sex initiation practices, spirit possession episodes and homosexual love. However, they are clear to point out that the African model of sexuality is different from the Western one in that:

the dominant Western model of homosexuality . . . defines individuals solely on the basis of sexual object choice. In Africa, however, heterosexual marriage and procreation—but not necessarily heterosexual desire, orientation, or monogamy—are universal expectations. . . . In contrast to the homophobia Western homosexuals confront, the social pressure on Africans who desire same-sex relations is not concerned with their masculinity or femininity, their mental health, their sexual object preference and its causes, or the moral status

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<sup>382</sup> Chi Chi Undie & Kabwe Benaya. 'The State of Knowledge on Sexuality in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Synthesis of Literature' *JENda: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies* Issue 8, 2006.

<sup>383</sup> Stephen O. Murray & Will Roscoe. *Boy-Wives and Female-Husbands: Studies in African Homosexualities*, London: Palgrave MacMillan. 1998.

of their preference—but primarily with their production of children, especially eligible heirs, and the maintenance of a conventional image of married life.<sup>384</sup>

Despite the reality that same-sex or homosexual relations are a cultural feature of African life, sexuality is primarily modelled on reproductivity rather than questions of sexual preference and desire. This may explain, in part, why homosexuality is seen as abnormal and unAfrican. Although homosexuality as it exists as a contemporary, albeit suppressed subculture in Africa today is based on choice and inclination, the marginalisation of gay, lesbian and questioning people is still based on the ethos of reproductivity. The ability to marry someone of the opposite sex and have children becomes the measure of masculinity and femininity in African feminist discourses and cultural practices as discussed in the previous chapter. The position of same-sex relations, as opposed to homosexuality, is acknowledged as part of African practice, and scholars are careful to distinguish between the two citing misinterpretations by Western-based scholars of woman marriages, unions between two females. Nigerian scholar, Blankson Ikpe<sup>385</sup> (2004) argues that:

bonding between same sex as close friends should not be confused with homosexuality or lesbianism. Douglas seemed to have made that mistake when she assessed the oral evidence collected by Lorde from an Efik/Ibibio woman as a confession to lesbianism. (29-30)

While woman marriages can be described as evidence of non-heterosexual practices among African societies, Ikpe<sup>386</sup> argues that this does not translate into homosexuality and instead argues that Douglas' European

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<sup>384</sup> 1998, pp. 272-273.

<sup>385</sup> Blankson Ikpe, Eno. 'Human sexuality in Nigeria: A historical perspective. Understanding human sexuality' in *Nigeria Seminar Series*, 1, 9-38. Lagos: Africa Regional Sexuality Resource Centre, 2004.

<sup>386</sup> Blankson Ikpe states: 'To a European a confession of going hand in glove and acting as husband and wife is a clear indication of lesbianism' 2004, p. 30.

definition of homosexuality is inserted into the oral evidence gathered by Audre Lorde (1984).

African feminists, Oyewumi (2001) and Amadiume (1987) have criticised the misinterpretation of women friendships and marriages as symbolic of a 'culture of misrepresentation'<sup>387</sup> of interpreting Africa through a Western lens. Chi-Chi Udine and Kabwe Benaya (2005) discuss the anthropological work of Basotho women of Lesotho belonging to the Lovedu tribe who engaged in erotic relationships but were considered non-sexual because in 'this Lesotho context, 'sex' in the absence of a male organ is regarded as a misnomer.'<sup>388</sup> Undie and Benaya argue that these relationships are complimentary to heterosexual marriages than an opposition and that the discourse on alternative sexuality in Africa becomes subsumed in pitting same-sex relations in opposition to heterosexuality rather than as culturally complimentary expressions of sexuality. With this in mind, my reading of *Nervous Conditions*, intends to demonstrate that the manifestation of teenage sexual awakening and experimentation is a form of same-sex love that is not necessarily complimentary to heterosexuality, but sits in-between the boundaries of hetero and homosexuality. By situating alternative sexuality in the middle, it does away with the oppositional split, '/', between heterosexuality and homosexuality where one is the dominant norm and the other is treated as taboo.

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<sup>387</sup> Oyeronke Oyewumi. 'Ties that (un)bind: Feminism, sisterhood and other foreign relations.' *Jenda: A Journal of Culture and African Women's Studies*: 1,1,2001, (<http://www.jendajournal.com/vol1.1/oyewumi.html>) [date accessed 17 November 2010].

<sup>388</sup> Undie and Benaya, 2006, p. 21.

Drawing on the work of Haraway and Braidotti on the cyborg figuration as a signifier of sexual difference, I hope to show that the figuration of alternative sexuality in *Nervous Conditions* is a metaphorical construct that penetrates the seemingly impenetrable boundaries of hetero and homosexuality. Within feminist theory the concept of sexual difference explores the ways in which the body is sexually marked and unmarked in order to signify femininity by history, culture and instruments of the state, such as laws. When a body becomes unmarked, the culturally constructed characteristics of femininity and its sub-traits like class, race and ethnicity are erased and the power binaries between men and women, Black and White, poor and rich are deconstructed. In terms of sexuality the idea of femininity as a heteronormative construct is also challenged and the agency to construction a more nuanced image of femininity lies with the individual rather than dominant cultural institutions.

The plurality of sexuality represented in the figuration of alternative sexuality in the novels displaces the dominant idea of a naturalised, single sexuality which when seen in terms of the cyborg produces ‘potentially contradictory meanings’<sup>389</sup> of the embodied female subject. I intend to show how the process of becoming a woman as depicted in the girls’ friendship in *Nervous Conditions* explores the gap between homo and hetero thereby transcending the boundaries of nature/culture. As a signifier of transformation or a body *in media res*, the figuration of

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<sup>389</sup> Braidotti ‘Sexual Difference Theory’ in Jagger & Young, 2000. p. 298.

alternative sexuality offers a way of blending those practices and categories that naturalise sexual difference.<sup>390</sup>

### **Cuddling Cousins: *Nervous Conditions***

In my reading of *Nervous Conditions* I hope to explore how sex and sexuality are figured outside the heterosexual confines of marriage and reproduction. Such an exploration will attempt to situate women's sexuality in the context of modernity and the locale of the Christian mission headed by a Shona patriarch, taking note of how cultural and religious virtue shape how the girls express themselves. The politics of control over the body is a core issue in this text as can be seen in the fights between Nyasha and her father and Tambu and her family. In the first part of my analysis, I briefly discuss how each of the girls is controlled by her family, and how these mixed familial and cultural influences frame the girls' feelings towards sexuality. I develop on this to discuss the special friendship between the girls as a form of social deviance and erotic desire that goes against the subordinated roles women are expected to play in Shona society.

As discussed in Chapter One, Nyasha's constant rebellion against her authoritative, overly-religious father culminates in a fight over curfews and boys which is in essence a struggle over her body, morality and sexuality. Despite living under Babamukuru's puritanism, Nyasha has

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<sup>390</sup> See Cheris Kramare and Dale Splender (Eds.) *Routledge International Encyclopaedia of Women: Identity Politics to Publishing*, Vol. 1. London: Routledge, 2000. p. 285.

consistently rebelled and refused to conform to the image of a good Christian girl. When she first visited the homestead, upon return from England, Tambu recalls, ‘the tiny dress she wore, hardly enough of it to cover her thighs. She was self-conscious though, constantly clasping her hands behind her buttocks to prevent her dress from riding up.’ (37) Nyasha’s clothing is sometimes inappropriate, she brings *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* to the dinner table, and she flirts with boys at the dance and has little regard for how she is perceived in public. This leads to ‘Babamukuru condemning Nyasha to whoredom.’ (115) As a result of her behaviour, Nyasha is placed under house arrest and cannot go anywhere unless escorted by her brother Chido, or her parents. By restricting her movements, monitoring her wardrobe and scrutinizing her friendships with her male peers, Babamukuru becomes the controller of Nyasha’s body and her struggle to wrest power from him becomes a battle for control over one’s body. In terms of political symbolism, Babamukuru as head of the missionary and the family is an agent of imperialism of religion and cultural morality that perpetuates the inequality between men and women and the racist infantilising of women by the colonial state.<sup>391</sup> The combination of paternal protectionism and religious misogyny can also be read as the domestic sub-narrative that feeds into the dominant state narrative to contain and control Black women’s sexuality through laws such as *chibeura* and the banning on prostitution as seen in Vera’s *Butterfly Burning* and *Without a Name*.

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<sup>391</sup> See Chapter Two on *Butterfly Burning* and *Without a Name* which discuss the different methods deployed by the state to treat women as minors.

Similar to Nyasha, the body becomes the battleground for control over Tambu's destiny. Her parents encourage her to think of herself as a reproductive vessel rather than dream of success in life through education. When her brother Nhamo talks down to her he draws on the gender difference between them to emphasize why girls should not be educated and why boys like him deserve to be educated in relative comfort at Babamukuru's house where there is a maid to wait on him. When Nhamo steals Tambu's maize and gives it away, the brother and sister throw fists at each other, each exerting their physical strength over the other and for Tambu, this punch-up represents a fight against all the obstacles that have prevented her from being educated, her parents, her brother, the family's poverty and the subjugation of girls in the family. Before the fight is stopped by Mr Matimba it seems as though Tambu is winning as she recounts, 'I charged again, intending this time to kill' (23) and with Mr Matimba's help, Tambu does win over Nhamo and her parents pessimism as she raises enough money to pay a term's fees. Tambu's resistance against gender-biased subordination by waging battles using the body is an outright rejection of cultural expectation of a female who quietly carries 'the burden of womanhood.' (18) In the colonial imaginary, sexuality and gender are tools for the system of power by abrogating the human rights of colonized women and consolidating male domination enabled by tribal customs, through gender-biased customary laws. The colonial struggle for control between British patriarchal colonizers and colonized Africans over land and resources also include, a contest over the

ownership of women's bodies<sup>392</sup> with both systems of patriarchy categorising socially desirable and undesirable female sexualities depending on where a woman fell in the simplistic submissive/good and outspoken/bad binary.

The sexual sanctions on the female body relegate the expression of women's sexuality to the private sphere, behind closed doors, be it in women's friendships as anthropological research shows or in bedroom encounters where young girls like Nyasha and Tambu form affectionate relations with each other. The confinement of Nyasha leads to her developing a closer relationship with Tambu that the protagonist describes as, '[i]n fact more than friendship' (78) They are both adolescents at an age of sexual awakening and in the face of profoundly rigid familial proscriptions on how girls should behave in public, the private space allows for their curiosity to be explored. As Martin Shaw (2007)<sup>393</sup> rightly comments on father-daughter relations in Shona culture, 'fathers have little direct interaction with their daughters.'<sup>394</sup> It is not the norm for fathers to come their daughter's bedrooms, thus for Nyasha and Tambu it becomes the space in which they can experiment and explore.

To better understand Nyasha and Tambu's experimentation in terms of Black cultural practice, I make use of the African-Caribbean term

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<sup>392</sup> Amina Mire. 'In/Through The Bodies of Women: Rethinking Gender in African Politics' *Polis / R.C.S.P. / C.P.S.R.* Vol. 8, Numéro Spécial, 2001 pp. 1-18.

<sup>393</sup> Carolyn Martin Shaw. "'You had a daughter, but I am becoming a woman': Sexuality, Feminism and Postcoloniality in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* and *She No Longer Weeps*", *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (Winter 2007).

<sup>394</sup> *Ibid.* p. 10.

*macocotte* describing intimate girls' relationships. According to Antonia MacDonald-Smythe (2004)<sup>395</sup> *macocotte* is a kweyol word to describe intense friendships between adolescents who discover and experiment with sexuality. MacDonald-Smythe explains that the experience is part of custom, 'as a safe alternative to heterosexual friendships. *Macocotte* relationships provide the space for female sexual desire to be fostered and managed within Caribbean society.'<sup>396</sup> The custom of *macocotte* is practised because mothers fear their daughters falling pregnant at a young age and similarly in Shona culture it is the duty of maternal relations on the mother's side to instruct the daughter on how she must behave around boys (*kurairwa*). From an adolescent age, interaction between boys and girls is monitored and both boys and girls are instructed not to have too many friends of the opposite sex (*musatambe nevakhomana*). *Kurairwa* can include different kinds of practices such as breast-ironing, a series of talks on puberty and teaching girls how to have sex and the right ages to marry and engage in it. As part of *kurairwa* includes teaching girls how to have sex by older women demonstrating actions to younger girls but not actually engaging in sex, it would not be amiss to extend the teachings of *kurairwa* to appropriate the term *macocotte* as a way of naming the friendship in *Nervous Conditions*.

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<sup>395</sup> Antonia MacDonald Smythe. 'Macocotte – Female Friendship by Another Name: An Exploration of Same-Sex Friendships in *Buxton Spice* and *Annie John*' (Conference Paper) 23rd Annual West Indian Literature Conference, University of the West Indies, Mona Jamaica, 2004. Abstract Available at: <http://www.mona.uwi.edu/conferences/literatures/abstracts/smythe.htm> [date accessed 26 August 2010].

<sup>396</sup> Ibid.

Although the text does not explicitly refer to any sexual encounters between the girls, the cultural censorship on women's sexual expression and the development of a close bond between the double protagonists questions whether repression leads to curiosity and practices of *macocotte*. Andrade argues that 'curiosity is absent from Tambu's maturation'<sup>397</sup> because of the family attitudes towards her dancing which made her 'feel terribly self-conscious' and as a result of restrictions being placed on her while growing up, her libido is 'diffuse and unformed.'<sup>398</sup> While there is validity in her analysis of Tambu's sexual desire as immature and amorphous, Andrade's claim that 'curiosity is absent'<sup>399</sup> is not entirely true when Tambu and Nyasha's development is viewed in terms of same-sex relations. From a young age, Tambu has had a consistent fascination with Nyasha; Tambu remembers all of her early childhood encounters with Nyasha and it is through her memories that the reader knows about Nyasha's first visit to the homestead in a miniskirt and her struggle to speak Shona having just returned from England. Despite her quiet disapproval of her cousin's openness and confidence in her sexuality, her relationship with Nyasha becomes her 'first love-affair.' (78) In private moments free from parental surveillance, the two girls have intimate discussions and Tambu recalls:

The conversation that followed was a long, involved conversation, full of guileless openings up and intricate lettings out and lettings in. It was the sort of conversation that young girls have with their best friends, that lovers have under the novelty and uniqueness of their love, the kind of conversation that cousins have when they realize that they like each other in spite of not wanting to. You could say that my relationship with Nyasha was my first love-affair, the first time I grew to be fond of someone of whom I did not wholeheartedly approve. (78)

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<sup>397</sup> S. Andrade, 2002, p. 31.

<sup>398</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>399</sup> 2002, p. 32.

In this conversation, the boundaries between innocence and intimacy become blurred as the protagonist draws attention to the development of affection. The growth of these feelings, underscored by the the sexual overtones of ‘lettings and lettings in’ of the language underpin the process of discovery of self and other. When Tambu begins to see Nyasha as her affectionate other, it inscribes a new relation of sexuality between two females, a relation of ambiguity and experimentation that disrupts all notions of sexuality being fixed as heterosexual and intimacy as non-incestual. Alex Hughes and Kate Ince (1996) in the chapter, ‘Helene Cixous: An Erotics of the Feminine’<sup>400</sup> discuss the treatment of the female erotic in Cixous’s work and they make the point that there is ‘no essential division or difference between lesbian desire and other strong affective bonds between women.’<sup>401</sup> This broad comment on lesbian desire would include the implied *macocotte* relation between Nyasha and Tambu which the protagonist recalls in her memory as a rite from girlhood to adolescence because Nyasha is her first-love.

The transition from girlhood to adolescence takes place in the domestic context of patriarchal rule where the differential treatment between males and females causes Tambu to pose the question ‘what is a woman?’ (71) In terms of sexuality, the exploration of this question is essential in the development of Tambu’s identity, but she misses an opportunity to challenge her own self-restraint and sexual naivety, because she is too

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<sup>400</sup> In *French Erotic Fiction: Women's Desiring Writing, 1880-1990*, Alex Hughes and Katie Ince, Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1996.

<sup>401</sup> *Ibid.* p. 135.

young and conformist to consider exploring her sexual inclinations further, whereas Nyasha tragically has a nervous breakdown. The question ‘what is a woman’ in the context of this *macocotte* relation is left an open and unanswered question. For practical reasons Tambu cannot explore this further because she constantly reminds herself, she is a girl from the village who must know her place otherwise her ‘carefully laid out plan’ (76) of attaining a better life through education will abruptly come to an end. There is also power in the unsaid and unfulfilled as the nights of bed-sharing and endless conversation remain a powerful memory for the protagonist, a young woman who has not yet become, but has learned to fall in love, secretly.

Furthermore, as a secret relationship that takes place within the rigidly constructed boundaries of both family and self, the practice of *macocotte* in secret is the only viable way to explore the permissible and the forbidden. The implicit allusions to alternate sexuality in these scenes show how volatile the social constructs of deviance and normality are, because although women’s friendships exist within Shona culture, and implicit acknowledgment of *macocotte* within *kurairwa*, the behaviour is seen as immoral and unGodly. Interpreting Dangarembga’s depiction of Nyasha and Tambu’s relationship as acts of deviance within the suffocated environment of the mission, gives a more nuanced politicized meaning to the concept of alternative sexuality.

Erich Goode (1994)<sup>402</sup> defines deviance as ‘behaviour or characteristics that some people in a society find offensive and that generates - or would generate if discovered - in these people disapproval, punishment, condemnation of, or hostility toward, the actor or possessor.’<sup>403</sup> Deviance does not solely refer to the offence but also to the unconventional acts of social protest that may produce change in a society. Deviance is thus a social fact as Émile Durkheim<sup>404</sup> argued. Rebellion is normal in society and it can be an indicator of progress, to overturn oppressive or discriminatory norms. The material conditions of colonial and patriarchal bodily control produce deviance, as restrictions are imposed on the girls’ dress, curfew or education, they are met with an opposite force of resistance. This parallels Fanon’s observations on the violence of colonialism being met with an equal reactionary force as discussed in Chapter One on the struggle between Nyasha and her father. As the struggle is not only about enforcing discipline, but also about controlling sexuality, Dangarembga expands Fanon’s views on colonial violence to suggest that expression of sexuality is the opposite reaction to colonial and patriarchal control. Perhaps the text suggests even further that alternative sexuality located within Shona culture is an equal and opposite act of deviance to heteronormativity and Christian demureness.

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<sup>402</sup> Erich Goode. *Deviant Behavior* (7th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 1994.

<sup>403</sup> 1994, p. 29.

<sup>404</sup> Émile Durkheim. *The Rules of the Sociological Method* (1895) (1982):

A social fact is every way of acting, fixed or not, capable of exercising on the individual an external constraint; or again, every way of acting which is general throughout a given society, while at the same time existing in its own right independent of its individual manifestations.

From Émile Durkheim. *The Rules of Sociological Method* 8th edition, trans. Sarah A. Solovay and John M. Mueller, George E. G. Catlin (Ed.) (1938, 1964 edition), Toronto, ON: Collier-Macmillan, 1964. p. 13.

Reclaiming ownership over the body and sexuality through deviance is not only limited to alternative sexuality but also includes making use of the modern conveniences that enable females to have control over their bodies and reproductivity. Despite Maiguru's disapproval the girls start to use tampons as Tambu tells the reader:

Maiguru knew that tampons were offensive, that nice girls did not use them, she would be pleased enough to know we were not pregnant to be persuaded to provide them. (96)

Maiguru's views on tampons as an indicator of morality makes using them an act of dissent. Her attitude suggests that 'nice girls' (96) do not put things up their vaginas because it is taboo, since touching the vagina is perceived as some form of sexual arousal. There is also an implication that girls who are not nice use tampons and risk breaking their hymen through inserting a phallic device into the body. The combined traits of Christian conservatism and apprehensiveness towards new or modern ways in Maiguru, makes the use of tampons more thrilling for Nyasha. She justifies the breaking of taboo to Tambu by suggesting that sticking tampons inside oneself is better than falling pregnant and although initially loathe to use the 'offensive objects,' (95) Tambu eventually agrees. The image of girls with tampons routinely inserted into the body to absorb the flowing blood, can be said to represent the cyborg. Borne out of the conveniences of modernity and the processes of nature, the cyborg figure is represented in the girls with tampons inside of them. This artificial, temporary enhancement of the tampon to the body reshapes the female experience of menstruation because the process becomes even more of a social secret and a private act of defiance of the patriarchal world of *Nervous Conditions*.

While the tampon may allow for the girls to keep their bodily secret hidden, Nyasha's anorexia stops her cycle. Her under-eating and severe weight-loss transform her physique and internal bodily processes and, as I have previously argued, this represents a challenge to the social norm of the 'rounded' figure. In terms of sexuality, the non-menstruating anorexic figure stands in opposition to the 'burdens of womanhood' of enforced fertility and reproduction. Writing on the link between anorexia and women sexuality, Naomi Wolf (1991)<sup>405</sup> argues that eating disorders in women are sometimes the manifestation of social taboos on sex and sexuality. The body becomes a 'sacred place'<sup>406</sup> that must be preserved or contained, so the amount of food going into it is severely limited while sex and sexuality are forbidden ideas. For Nyasha, the exploration of her sexuality is not limited by her anorexia/bulimia but it is spurned by the restrictions on sexual expression placed on her by her father. Her binge-purge-starve cycle and suggested moments of intimacy with Tambu are in defiance of enforced heteronormativity and chastity imposed by Babamukuru and society at large. To a limited extent, Nyasha represents Haraway's post-gender cyborg which 'has no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labour, or other seductions to organic wholeness.'<sup>407</sup> In figuring the cyborg as post-gender; Haraway attempts to go beyond the traditional heteronormative boundaries of sexuality and gender that have been constructed and maintained by patriarchy. By

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<sup>405</sup> Naomi Wolf. *How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*, New York: Vintage, 1991.

<sup>406</sup> *Ibid.* p. 193.

<sup>407</sup> Haraway, 1991. p. 150.

shifting focus to other forms of sexuality and assistive technologies such as same-sex couples using IVF or in the case of *Nervous Conditions*, rebellious Nyasha reshaping her body through use of hygiene technologies like the tampon and the toothbrush and also through starvation, the post-gender cyborg offers the possibility of imagining new ways of being. In breaking social convention, and with the introduction of new technology, femininity, like gender is no longer defined on patriarchal grounds, and identity, sexuality and gender can all be reconstructed by individuals, thus subverting the stronghold of patriarchy on these discourses. The subversive figuration of Nyasha as a homoerotic, anorexic/bulimic girl, thus presents a potent challenge to patriarchally grounded definitions of femininity and sexuality because starving oneself, exploring same-sex love and being outspoken in a Christian home is the ultimate taboo and the refusal to abide by the rules in preference to constructing one's own constitutes to some extent, the manifestation of a post-patriarchal cyborg.

Although Nyasha may represent the post-patriarchal gendered cyborg, Tambu is a paradoxical figure. She evolves from being a sexually repressed child to desire to a state of uncertainty and ambiguity. Looking back on this period in her life she recalls:

in those days it was easy for me to leave tangled thoughts knotted, their loose ends hanging. I didn't want to explore the treacherous mazes that such thoughts lead into. I didn't want to reach the ends of those mazes, because there, I knew, I would find myself and I was afraid I would not recognize myself after having taken so many confusing directions. (78)

Tambu seems afraid of letting herself go because of the repressed environment she was raised in where good females are expected to be uneducated domesticated docile creatures. She is more comfortable with

lingering ambiguities and questions because, unlike her older cousin, open deviance is not an attitude in her character. She is still naive about the world and power relations between men and women as it is only the morning after Nyasha and Babamukuru's fight that she realises that the bias in favour of maleness over femaleness is a universal condition. (115-116) Tambu's full sexual and mental awakening never happens in this text, rather it is yet-to-be or becoming. Figuring sexuality as an unformed desire in Tambu, Dangarembga makes it possible to imagine the evolution of adolescent sexuality as making a subtle statement against patriarchal and class structures of power. Happy to share a bed with her 'thoroughbred cousin' (92) who she imitates at school so that 'everyone would see that we were a unit,' (92) Tambu's desires for assimilation and suggested affection can be read as an attempt to blur class distinctions through sexuality and integration. Aware of the challenges of balancing two cultures to make the most out of an educational opportunity, Tambu desires to be as politically conscious and outspoken as Nyasha depends on her ability to develop her own voice and become the narrator of her own story.

Located at the transition point between girlhood and sexuality, Tambu and Nyasha's narratives make an important contribution of adolescent experiences to cultural memory of the colony and the history of African women's sexuality as a challenge to colonial regulation of African women's sensuality for the right to bodily control. Standing in between hetero and homo opens up discussion for cultural attitudes that simultaneously encourage and restrict same-sex relations. It also pushes

the codes governing kinship, and family and kinship networks as cousins become lovers, something that is socially unacceptable. Engaging in *macocotte* crosses the boundaries of kinship and creates controversy concerning with whom sexual experimentation can be practised. According to Babamukuru, the only legitimate space of expressing sexual desires is through marriage and that is why he forces Tambu's parents to marry. This is Jeremiah's way of atoning to the Christian God for what is seen as adultery whereas the women are ordered to keep away from men. This is why Lucia's request to live and work at the mission is accepted. The girls' secret friendship clearly contravenes and subverts the power relations of the private as subject to public authority and the private becomes the arena for freedom of expression. In terms of citizen-state relations where heterosexuality is the only legally recognised sexual orientation for adults, the practice of *macocotte* by young girls represents youth deviance against state governance of the body as non-heterosexual acts were against the law and still continue to be illegal in the post-independent state.<sup>408</sup>

Reading *macocotte* in *Nervous Conditions* as a powerful symbolic practice of women's resistance against colonialism, racism and sexism locates women as agents of a body politic of resistance and the collective struggle for women's liberation. The explicit and subtle transgressions of social boundaries made by women's friendships disrupt the colonial

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<sup>408</sup> See Human Rights Watch, 'State-Sponsored Homophobia in Southern Africa Abuses and Culture of Intolerance Documented' <http://www.hrw.org/legacy/english/docs/2003/05/14/safric6049.htm> [date accessed: 20 February 2011].

narrative of ethics and morality which represents White settlers as the agents while denying any such moral agency to colonized, native peoples. Defying the double-denial of voice to women through colonialism and cultural sexism through acts such as performing *macocotte*, refusing to blindly accept colonial history and to conform to social expectations of African womanhood, the girls create a narrative of decolonization that in Fanon's<sup>409</sup> terms, are the by-product of 'productive crisis.' He states that:

The immobility to which the native is condemned can only be questioned if the native decides to put an end to the history of colonization - the history of pillage - and to bring into existence the history of decolonization. (51)

The engagement in *macocotte* symbolizes the taking back of African women's bodies and sexualities as a site of imperialism where colonizing men could practice their sexual fantasies on as well as perform acts of sexual violence and where colonizing missionaries could draw their examples of moral corruption and sin. Against all of these discourses negating Black femininity, the retrieval of sexuality through same-sex love is a powerful and revolutionary way of asserting a new pluralistic and self-defined sexuality and identity by young African women.

### **Women's Friendships in Vera's Fiction**

Further exploring subversive strategies of writing sexuality and the body, I discuss women's friendships in two of Vera's novels, *Butterfly Burning* and *Under the Tongue*. I consider how allusions to same-sex relations are expressed and the transfigurative impact they have on perceptions of the

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<sup>409</sup> *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington, New York: Grove Press, [1963], 1994.

colonized female body as a muted subject of the state rather than a discursive agent in the construction of her own femininity. I aim to discuss how subversive narratives of female sexuality and erotic agency locate the female body as a site of empowerment and resistance in unique ways. The term erotic agency comes from Lorde's definition of the erotic:

We tend to think of the erotic as an easy, tantalizing sexual arousal. I speak of the erotic as the deepest life force, a force which moves us toward living in a fundamental way.... The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling.<sup>410</sup>

In her essay, 'The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power' Lorde suggests that the sexual and instinctive power of women, the erotic, is understood narrowly when read solely in sexual terms. Lorde urges an understanding of the erotic as a signifier of cultural and political power. Her articulation of the female embodied subject imagines a relation between the body and the spiritual and material world in a way that resonates with Sandoval's Third World cyborg of women of color possessing inner spiritual technology as a hallmark of their femininity. For Lorde, writing the embodied subject is one way of shifting the unequal balance of power between the oppressor and the oppressed. Writing the oppressed body with insight into the multiple intersecting forces of oppression and the body's subtle and overt strategies of resistance is a process of re-constructing and restoring the power of the female. In the context of *Butterfly Burning* and *Under the Tongue*, the concept of the erotic is a conceptual tool with which to read how the body, situated at the intersections of the spiritual and biological articulates the power of

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<sup>410</sup> Audre Lorde. 'Uses of the Erotic: The erotic as Power.' *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1984. pp. 53-59.

women's friendships and same-sex love. Using the concept of the erotic, I propose to argue that women's friendships in *Under the Tongue* have a transformative role in re-shaping the family structure and kinship networks to position women as key actors in the family. Creating an essentially feminine world in this text, Vera reconstructs the female principle in Shona society thereby challenging patriarchal and colonial hegemonies that have stifled the erotic power of women through rape, chastisement and marital oppression. In *Butterfly Burning* the erotic provides a different lens through which the relations between the women of Makokoba can be understood. Drawing on Boehmer's (2005) reading of subversive same-sex sexuality in this text, I hope to show how the underlying narrative of women's sexual power challenges the heterosexual norms of respectability and man-woman as meted out by the colonial state. The intention of analysing these texts is to expose the extent to which the ideals of womanhood and heterosexuality produced by the power structures of patriarchy, capitalism, and colonial rule silence and suppress women's sexuality. Having framed African women's sexuality in this social context, I aim to illustrate how through the act of writing, Vera, like Dangarembga, refutes the constrictive definitions instead produces alternative, plural narratives on female sexuality.

### **Restoration of the Spiritual: *Under the Tongue***

Boehmer suggests that the titles of some of Vera's novels like *Under the Tongue*, *Without a Name*, *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins* can be read as signifying suppressed or internalised sexual desire. As these narratives thematize sexual violation, suppression of sexuality or sex-in-servitude, encoded in these titles is the silencing of women's desires or as Boehmer suggests, the encodings alludes to "the notorious expression, 'the love which dare not speak its name'" (121) In *Under the Tongue* women's feelings are the forbidden and unspoken and the tripartite relation between the women seeks to restore the spiritual and erotic dimensions of femininity. To illustrate, the mute heroine of the text loses both her voice and control of her body when she is raped. While in Chapter Two I focused on the restoration of Zhizha's voice through cathartic mothering, I would argue further and suggest that there is also retrieval of sexuality at work in the recovery of the feminine principle.

The process of restoring Zhizha's speech enacted by Grandmother and Runyararo is done through figuratively placing words in Zhizha's mouth and taking the pain away from her. The protagonist describes this:

She carries my pain in her mouth. I know Grandmother will heal me with her word, her word that is for remembering all that has visited her suffering, that has accompanied my growing...We are women. We belong together in an ancient caress of the earth. (11)

There is a sensual element to the lyrical language of this text that lends itself to an interpretive reading of the restoration of Zhizha's voice and sexuality as a retrieval of the spiritual, erotic self. In Shona cosmology, women's power is associated with the land, and there are many metaphors and oral tales linking women's fertility to the land and vice versa. Edward

Matenga (1997) refers to this as the 'Shona Fertility Complex'<sup>411</sup> in which the Shona deployed fertility metaphors to praise the ancestors of the land during rain prayer sessions. Figurines of women were made from iron to symbolize human and agricultural fertility and these female figurines, as well as some women, had body scarifications on them that represented female fecundity and erotic power. Matenga states that scarifications:

are only done on women, and are primarily seen as marks of beauty and, in both a visual and tactile sense, are highly erotic. Their execution was conceived as a rite of passage initiating girls into the prime age of courtship.<sup>412</sup>

The relationship of females to the land as part of the cosmological system is what *Under the Tongue* tries to recover. Rejecting the subjugating roles imposed on women by society that has led to men like Tachiveyi and Muroyiwa taking sexual advantage of their wives and daughters, the women of *Under the Tongue* form a generational sisterhood that draws on the spiritual or sacred energy of women.

In spiritualist discourse, sacred energy is an awakened sexuality that connects women to each other through an exploration of the creative and sensual powers women possess as the womb of humanity and the caretakers of the Earth. In *Under the Tongue* the healing powers of Grandmother are relied on to help Zhizha recover from trauma. Throughout the book Vera attempts to construct a matriarchal world that imagines continuity with an idyllic pre-patriarchal past before colonialism and the various pre-colonial Shona empires but to an almost Edenic time

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<sup>411</sup> Edward Matenga. 'Images of Fertility Complex: Iron Age From Zimbabwe', in W. J. Dewey & De Palmaer (Eds.) *Legacies of Stone: Zimbabwe Past and Present* Vol. 1, 1997, Tervuren: Royal Museum For Central Africa. pp. 58-59.

<sup>412</sup> qtd in Gerald Chikhozho Mazarire. 'The Politics of the Womb': Women, Politics and The Environment in Pre-Colonial Chivi, Southern Zimbabwe, c.1840 to 1900' *Zambezia* Vol. XXX (i) (2003), pp. 35-50. p. 41.

when women were mythmakers, healers, river deities and divine priestesses. As Vera (1999) states in her preface to the edited anthology, *Opening Spaces*,<sup>413</sup> ‘A woman writer must have an imagination that is plain stubborn, that can invent new gods and banish ineffectual ones.’ (1) Vera tries to banish the ineffectual gods in *Under the Tongue* by linking women to the natural elements and powers of the earth in bringing back a sense of order after the chaos and sexual disorder.

For Zhizha to regain her sexuality after the rape she:

cr[ies] for Grandmother and she spreads her voice around me in a promise of birth. Her voice rises from her arms like smoke, and I see the river which has watered our pain, which sings about all our belonging. A river is a mouth with which to begin. (22)

The river is a place of birth and re-birth, of sexuality and symbolizes femininity in cosmology and as Lan states the mouth of the river, ‘is female, it is the vagina, it is the source of biological life.’<sup>414</sup> Vera thus re-inscribes the sexual power of women by suggesting that the mouth of the river is synonymous with the mouth of the woman. The river is often likened to the women’s body parts, it’s swishing force is embodied in arms being extended to the sky, voices flowing through the water and as the thing which covers the pain of the women. To recover Zhizha’s sexuality, the river becomes a place of creative energy and erotic power that embodies the full power of *Dzivaguru*, the Shona goddess of the earth, bringer of rain clouds and deity of the rivers and streams. Among the Shona, the creator of all things is *Mwari* who can be both a female and male god and *Dzivaguru* is the female form of the Creator who gives

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<sup>413</sup> Yvonne Vera. (Ed.) ‘Preface’ *Opening Spaces: an Anthology of Contemporary African Women’s Writing*, London: Heinemann Publishers, 1999.

<sup>414</sup> *Guns and Rain: Guerrillas and Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe*, 1984. p. 103.

women their reproductive power and sexual energy. The water, the images in female world of *Under the Tongue* can be said to symbolise a remembering of *Dzivaguru* and the erotic power of women. The erotic is not only about discovering female sexual power, but also includes, ‘the sharing of joy whether physical, emotional or psychic.’ As a metaphor representing life, the erotic permeates every aspect of women’s lives and Lorde rejects the compartmentalization of sexuality ‘from other arenas of life, notably work, politics and spirituality.’<sup>415</sup> Lorde’s broad definition of the erotic is not limited to bedroom politics but extends to all areas suggesting that the gendered body and sexuality are continuously contested in the everyday spaces. For women to regain their power back from patriarchs and imperialists, the erotic must also be understood as a political concept. In the context of *Under the Tongue*, that the erotic as political is implicitly expressed in a text with the war as its historical backdrop and Runyararo’s killing of her husband and subsequent imprisonment as sub-plot is significant. The restoration of Zhizha’s voice is also an erotic-political act as she has to find a new non-patriarchal language with which to speak. This language can only be found through the women who teach her how to read and how to speak again. Recovering within this maternal environment where she is positioned as an agent in the life-cycle processes of the natural world allows Zhizha to re-construct herself as a liberated subject rather than a colonized, raped object.

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<sup>415</sup> 1984, p. 56.

The female life-cycle is also reconstructed through the figuring of the moon as a symbol of life and death rather than as solely the manifestation of a male god. In some Shona mythology<sup>416</sup> the moon, *Mwedzi* represents the first man created by God and the morning star, *Hwedza* is the female. Although *Under the Tongue* does not make reference to this story, the possessiveness over the right to communicate with the ancestors by men like vaGomba suggests that there is a perversion of mythology where, in this patriarchal setting, men become the dominant voices while women are marginalised, silent figures. By reclaiming the moon through the action of women throwing their voices to the sky, the women strive to regain the balance in Shona cosmology. To this end Zhizha says, ‘Grandmother will harvest the milk of the moon for Mother, for me, we wait.’ (9) Samuelson argues that the repeated references to women results in ‘the moon becom[ing] a feminized mnemonic symbol and the memory that it carries is one of the women’s suffering.’<sup>417</sup> Zhizha imagines the hazy image in the moon as ‘a woman...bearing a load on her head. She has travelled through the sky. She has seen all the pain of the world.’ (11)

Recasting the moon as a symbol of fertility and the women re-remembering their erotic power and love for each other resonates with Walker’s definition of the womanist as one who ‘loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually....Loves the moon. Loves the spirit.’<sup>418</sup> In the text, the love for other women is sensual and blurs the boundaries between

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<sup>416</sup> Mickias Musiyiwa. *The Significance of Myths and Legends in Children’s Literature in Contemporary Zimbabwe*. (Conference Paper) 31st IBBY Congress, Copenhagen, 2008. <http://www.ibby.org/index.php?id=913> [date accessed: 5 December 2010].

<sup>417</sup> Samuelson, 2002, p. 99.

<sup>418</sup> Walker. *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*, 1984 p. iv.

the different types of sexualities, similar to other womanist texts by Black women. The relationships of Vera's sensual, lyrical writing of three generations of women whose family history is scarred by gender, colonial and class oppression can be compared to Barbara Smith's (1979) comments on the women's relationships in Toni Morrison's *Sula*. (1973) Smith describes this book as a lesbian novel, 'not because Nel and Sula are lesbians - they decidedly are not - but because the novel provides a critique of heterosexual institutions.'<sup>419</sup> For Smith, the lesbian novel is one in which the passionate and intimate relationships between women help to overcome oppression. One critic argues that Morrison's novel 'maps a discourse of maternal intimacy'<sup>420</sup> in an attempt to recover the lost relationships of kinship and community, lost through the breakup of communities and families during the slave raids, deaths during the TransAtlantic journey and the separations of families when sent off to different plantations upon arrival in the New World. Similarly, Vera tries to recreate the lost maternal matriarch that has been disfigured by the structures of colonialism, patriarchy and modernity. Mapping the maternal body through narrative attempts to recover the missing images of women's desire. Laura Mulvey (1981) rightly argues that the 'lost memory of the mother's body is similar to other metaphors of a buried past or a lost history that contribute to the rhetoric of oppressed people.'<sup>421</sup>

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<sup>419</sup> Barbara Smith. 'Toward a Black Feminist Criticism', *Women's Studies International Quarterly* 2, No. 2, 1979, pp.183-194. p. 189.

<sup>420</sup> Author Unknown. 'Toni Morrison's *Sula* is a novel in the tradition of African-American literature.' (online)  
<http://www.ukessays.com/essays/english-literature/toni-morrisons-sula.php> [date accessed 22 December 2010].

<sup>421</sup> Laura Mulvey. 'Myth, Narrative and Historical Experience.' *Visual and Other Pleasures*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981. pp. 159-76. p. 167.

In both *Sula* and *Under the Tongue*, the re-ordering of social relations by women and an invocation of the spiritual power of femininity constitutes a discourse of resistance against heterosexual oppression.

In mounting a challenge to heteronormativity and social taboo, Vera also challenges the imprisoning effect of patriarchal language and the only way for Zhizha to wrest free from this male-dominant and enforced heteronormativity is through learning a new language constructed by women. As I have previously discussed, Zhizha's learning to read through her mother and her remembering through grandmother's memories enable her to bury her tragic experience of paternal rape and construct a new sexual identity within a matriarchal world. Martin Shaw (2002) suggests that mothers and daughters in Vera's world are, 'spellbound by their mother's sexuality and distant from their own.'<sup>422</sup> Zhizha has a strained relationship with Runyararo because she has not grown around her as her mother was sentenced to jail after having murdered her husband and now frequently commutes between the village, Umtali (Mutare) and Mozambique as a trader. A part of her is angry with her mother for having been absent during her formative years, but Zhizha also sees herself in her mother. It is through her mother's sexuality that she comes to know herself. Likening her mother's breasts to tomatoes Zhizha says, 'I do not want to remember my mother. I think of red broken tomatoes. I think of milk, white and bright, from my mother's breast. I think of ripe and red tomatoes.' (88) She is reminded of her mother's breasts because, to

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<sup>422</sup> Carolyn Martin Shaw. 'A Woman Speaks of Rivers: Generation and Sexuality in Yvonne Vera's Novels' in Muponde & Taruvinga (Eds.), 2002. p. 87.

remind Zhizha of her connection to her mother and to teach her of her own sexuality, Runyararo stands in front of the mirror and encourages Zhizha to look at her breasts by saying ‘look at these breasts from which I fed you.’ (*Ibid.*) As Martin Shaw suggests, the breasts are ‘a site of kinship to her daughter and of her sexuality’<sup>423</sup> forming the connection between mother, daughter and the moon which also possesses milk that Grandmother gathers, according to Zhizha. The ‘milky connection of kinship and separation’<sup>424</sup> is a psychic relation on matricentric intimacy that re-constructs the erotic in womanhood as a site of healing, memory and subject construction.

Vera’s subversive text serves to complicate the boundaries of homo and heterosexuality as they are not two distinct zones, as this text and anthropological evidence of same-sex sexuality and women’s friendships in Africa shows the crucial need for a re-definition of sexuality not as a purely sexual, lustful act but as an alternate dimension deepening and shifting its meaning in feminism(s)/womanism(s) discourses. Motherist Acholonu militantly denies the existence of alternate sexuality and rejects Alice Walker’s definition of womanism(s) arguing that it connotes that a ‘womanist is first and foremost a lesbian.’<sup>425</sup> From this she surmises that womanism is ‘a negative development, especially for those for whom lesbianism is taboo.’<sup>426</sup> Aside from ample evidence showing that same-sex and homosexual relationships are a part of African cultural practice, a text

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<sup>423</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>424</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>425</sup> 1995, p. 89.

<sup>426</sup> *Ibid.*

like *Under the Tongue* or others read in this Chapter, resonate with Walker's 'lesbian' definition of the womanist. All three novels explore a broader meaning of sexuality that gives effect to the matriarchal legacy and show how the erotic enables a re-establishment of the connection of women to the natural environment. Perhaps if Acholonu and scholars who ascribe to a similar school of thought were to approach the question of sexuality as an expression of African women's inner technologies and kinship relations then there would be some parallels in the kind of earthy, wholesome motherism that Acholonu proposes. The tripartite connection between Zhizha, Runyararo and Grandmother locates Zimbabwean women as the inventors of a non-patriarchal language and the restorative architects of feminine spirituality. From this perspective, the matriarchal canon opens out the definitions of sexuality and places femininity on a spectrum. Adrienne Rich (1981) calls this the, 'lesbian continuum'<sup>427</sup> that includes women's friendships and sisterly solidarity. In agreement with Rich, Eve K. Sedgwick defines 'queer theory' as:

the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically. (1994:8)<sup>428</sup>

This is so that queer is not limited to homosexual discourse, but encompasses a range of expressions of sexuality and identity to suggest a more fluid, pluralistic approach to the notion of identity. Both Vera's *Under the Tongue* and *Butterfly Burning* maintain a critique of the structures enforcing a fixed identity and in the documented experiences of

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<sup>427</sup> Adrienne Rich, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry*, New York: Norton Paperback, 1984. p. 97.

<sup>428</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. *Tendencies*, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1993. p. 8.

the women, sexuality is an open, erotic, spiritually rooted concept that challenges the cultural and political subordination of women. The texts produce complex alternative embodied discourses on women in the colony that cannot simply be discounted as unAfrican or taboo.

### **A Burning, Yearning Butterfly: *Butterfly Burning***

Similar to Zhizha who learns her sexuality through her mother, Phephelaphi also realises the sexual erotic through her mother and othermother figures. Having grown up accompanying her othermother Gertrude, on visits to male clients, it is no surprise that when she is murdered, Phephelaphi remembers her othermother as a sensual woman. Describing Phephelaphi's state of mind when burning the red dress that Gertrude has been murdered in, Vera writes:

That dress. A hugging sort of dress which pronounced the ooze and flow of all her energy. She needed nothing else but that dress for her neighbours heads to turn and curse and feel their privacy had been violated and their own attraction put to test , she made to trust cinders and birds to fly hedges and then a sparkling reckless warmth flowed from Gertrude's long endless arms, the curve of her shoulder seemed mightier than paradise. (65)

By imagining her othermother as a sexual creature, Phephelaphi admires the power of allure and desire in Gertrude and it is fundamental in the development of her own selfhood, although Phephelaphi dislikes prostitution, because it resulted in her abandonment as a child, is always made clear. When the protagonist finally meets her mother, similar sensual metaphors are used to describe her. Although Phephelaphi is unaware that Zandile is her mother, there is a slight degree of attraction to

her that is not necessarily sexual but rather in awe of her self-confidence and attractiveness. In the first sighting of Zandile by her daughter, she is described as accessorized ‘with earrings dangling down to her shoulders, her fingers glazed with nail polish and her lips coated with ambition.’ (33) The vibrant images of her birth-mother and othermother as seductive figures has the dual effect of exploding the one-dimensional myth of homogeneity that African mothers are genteel and submissive creatures and also establishes the place of sensual women within the discursive fabric of daily life in Makokoba. Further to this, the erotic power in other women can be read as an initiation of Phephelaphi into how to assert a frank sexuality through brightly coloured clothes and oozing with confidence and beauty to become the centre of attention. Ignoring Fumbatha’s advice not to go to the shebeen, Phephelaphi goes dressed like a butterfly coming out of it’s cocoon, ‘She is wearing a flaring white skirt underneath which is a stiff petticoat, which she has dipped in a bowl of warm water, thickened with sugar and then ironed it hot till it dried. A white butterfly, her waist a tight loop.’ (54)

Although Phephelaphi has rejected the gift of a family heirloom, a green skirt belonging to her mother, because it would represent the inheritance of a legacy of prostitution, she possesses a sensual self-awareness that proves she is her mother and othermother’s daughter. Like them, she finds herself strangely drawn to Deliwe’s shebeen where ‘she is intensely aware of being a woman’ (55) yet when she is in Fumbatha’s company she does

not feel the same way. Having frequented the shebeen on several occasions, a process of self-awakening begins to take place internally:

Finding herself that was it. Phephelaphi wanted to be somebody. Not once but twice, thrice, she visited Deliwe at her home and stood at her door and placed her arm over her stomach where she nursed a wailing hurt, gathering there like a spring because there was a longing there, burning. Fumbatha could never be the beginning or end of all her yearning, her longing for which she could not find a suitable name. (64)

Boehmer argues that Phephelaphi's yearning to find something else beyond Fumbatha is influenced by alluring freedom that Deliwe seems to possess and the atmosphere of kwela music in the shebeen that 'again unlocks a fluid powerful yearning, one that is both associated with the memory of her mother and continues to leave a powerful trace, a furrow, after she has come to terms with the memory.' (122) The protagonist's distrust of men means that Fumbatha can never give her total fulfilment as a woman. She must find it elsewhere and like the other women of Makokoba, 'independently of men.' (88)

Vera's narration of the matriarchal world in the changing city environment is an imaginative rethinking of sex, gender and sexuality relations in the era of colonial modernity. Women's friendships are not necessarily of a sexual nature, but affirm the erotic principle of the matriarchal world. Structuring the narrative along an erotic trajectory, Vera shows how a combination of modernism and woman-centred experience displaces the rigidities of gender and sexuality through the text's deployment of ambiguous language, a musical aesthetic, construction of blurred identities and the crossing of borders. The destabilising force of this narrative is further amplified by the fact that

prostitution, like same-sex or homosexuality was considered social deviance in colonial Zimbabwe. Reported convicted cases of sodomy made up 1.5% of criminal cases in the colony (1917-1923)<sup>429</sup> and although this is a small number in comparison to prostitution convictions, it is still evidence of homosexual practice as part of the colony's deviant social culture. Modern homosexuality was and still is an illegal act although there is a well-documented history of gay relations in the township hostels of Southern Africa where Black men, as Marc Epprecht (2008), explains:

[men took on] younger men or boys as servants and 'wives' for the duration of their employment contracts....These temporary male-male marriages often served to strengthen traditional marriage with women back in the rural areas. Boy wives allowed the men to avoid costly and potentially unhealthy relationships with female prostitutes in town.<sup>430</sup>

Given that Makokoba is one of Zimbabwe's oldest townships and first setup as residences for male industrial and mine workers, it is very likely that 'male-male marriages' were a part of urban ghetto life so it is not out of place to consider the secret longings and admiration of Deliwe, with whom 'the sun set and rose'<sup>431</sup> by Phephelaphi, as a signifier of urban same-sex relations. The protagonist becomes enamoured with the shebeen queen so much that Phephelaphi's fantasy image of them paired up hints at sexual innuendo, 'Deliwe was some kind of sun, and herself some kind of horizon.' (54) As the horizon, Phephelaphi imagines Deliwe sinking into her as the setting sun, which can be interpreted as Phephelaphi desiring something of a sexual nature transpiring between them after dark

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<sup>429</sup> Marc Epprecht. *Hungochani: The History of a Dissident Sexuality in Southern Africa*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 2004.

<sup>430</sup> Marc Epprecht. *Heterosexual Africa? The History of an Idea from the Age of Exploration to the Age of AIDS*, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2008. p. 8.

<sup>431</sup> Martin Shaw, 2002, p. 89.

at the shebeen. Beyond the fantasy, the protagonist's recognition of the sexual power in another woman in turn affirms the sexual power within herself. It would not be far fetched to suggest that the passages on Phephelaphi's infatuation with Deliwe allude to an unconscious awakening of a bisexual self in Phephelaphi.

From a Freudian perspective this would be seen as a normal development as Sigmund Freud (1983) writes that, 'we have come to know that all human beings are bisexual - and that their libido is distributed between objects of both sexes, either in a manifest or a latent form.'<sup>432</sup> For Freud, people are bisexual and remain so throughout their lives, but repress this side of them because we live in a predominantly monosexual world and sexuality is largely constructed along these lines. Reading Phephelaphi as an unconsciously bisexual subject challenges the dominant conventional monosexual modes of Black female subjectivity. In terms of the cyborg figuration, bisexuality dismantles the binary logic of heterosexual/homosexual, masculine/feminine and it 'unsettles ideas about priority, singularity, truthfulness, and identity'<sup>433</sup> according to Marjorie Garber (1995). In her appropriation of Haraway's cyborg to articulate a bisexuality theory she argues that, 'My cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work.'<sup>434</sup> This resonates with Haraway's cyborg despite Haraway's claim that the

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<sup>432</sup> Sigmund Freud. *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex*, trans. A.A Brill, Dover: Dover Publications, 1983.

<sup>433</sup> Marjorie Garber. *Vice Versa: Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995. p. 90.

<sup>434</sup> *Ibid.* p. 154.

cyborg has ‘no truck with bisexuality’ and has a radical vision of, ‘a world without gender.’<sup>435</sup> Garber’s bisexual cyborg is a site of identity contestation that can be best described with the adjectives fluid, flux and volatile because sexual orientation and identity are not stable concepts, but are contingent on history, cultural specificity, temporality and social and political environment. To consider Vera’s protagonist as a bisexual cyborg, however subversive this may be, argues for a recognition of the multiplicity of sexuality because discourse about sexuality and the body can never be limited to a singular sexual category. Both Vera and Dangarembga’s texts show that sexuality is an ambiguous identity that constantly challenges patriarchal and state hegemonies that enforce a singular narrative on sexuality as the only natural way of being. In the modern township of *Butterfly Burning*, sexuality as currency and as social relation is constantly being negotiated by willing men and prostituting women and challenges the state and church’s decrees that sex is strictly the preserve of the heterosexual conjugal couple. Further challenging the singular discourse on sexuality, a subversive reading of the figuration of Phephelaphi’s desire for Deliwe and her relationship with Fumbatha as the yearnings of bisexual cyborg radically imagines sexuality as a multiplicity. The binary opposition between heterosexual/homosexual, nature/culture are undone and no longer mutually exclusive to each other, rather bound up and expressed in the yearnings of a young woman who wants to ‘take a piece of time and make it glitter.’ Phephelaphi is thus

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<sup>435</sup> 1991, p. 9, p. 150.-

located in time as a deviant modern citizen, subverting state regulation of Black bodies and Black sexuality.

In terms of African feminist discourse and state politics, for Vera's protagonist to be conceived as bisexual is an anathema to motherism, womanism (Kolawole) and colonial Zimbabwean society as within all of these discursive environments it is unnatural and therefore unfeminine. In Kolawole's theorization of womanism she states that, 'to the majority of ordinary Africans, lesbianism is a nonexistent issue because it is a mode of self expression that is completely strange to their worldview.'<sup>436</sup> If understanding love between two women is 'completely strange' for Kolawole, alien to Acholonu's motherism, criminal under Rhodesian colonial law then how much more of a moral aberration would bisexuality be? As these Afro-centric theories disregard historical and contemporary proof that homosexuality, bisexuality and alternative sexuality are all a part of everyday African life at various historical points, they are out of sync with reality and perhaps it would be more worthwhile, for future research, to consider Vera and Dangarembga's texts as starting points for theorizing on the multiplicity of sexualities.

Tamale conducts a study of sexual practices of *ssenga* among the Bagandan people of Uganda, this study is useful to my reading of *Butterfly Burning* and also provides evidence for a broader framing of African sexualities as it provides anthropological evidence challenging

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<sup>436</sup> Mary M. Kolawole, *Womanism and African Consciousness*, 1997, Trenton NJ: Africa World Press. p.15.

conventional ideas of female sexuality, desire and identity. *Ssenga* is the cultural initiation of young girls usually by an older paternal aunt who instructs the young women on 'pre-menarche practices, pre-marriage preparation, erotic instruction and reproduction' (9) or in more recent urban times the variation of "commercial *Ssengas*" has emerged, whereby women avail themselves for hire by young women or their parents to perform the traditional roles of *Ssenga*.' (9) Tamale's study reveals the changing ways in which the erotic is embedded in the everyday practices of Bagandan women. In the traditional setting it is a means through which young females are initiated into sexual practices and in a more capitalist and (enforced) heteronormative society, *Ssenga* becomes an act of commerce, trading sexual pleasure in the private space that otherwise unemployed women occupy. In this urban context *Ssenga* becomes a site of kinship and capital upon which women can take control over their own bodies and sexual relations in response to the economic hardships of life in the colonial city of Kampala.<sup>437</sup> The gendering of capital in this way is arguably similar to the way in which prostitution becomes currency for the women of Makokoba in *Butterfly Burning*. Although the commercial aspect of same-sex relations is absent from *Butterfly Burning*, Phephelaphi's subversive yearning for Deliwe or Zandile is also a desire for tutelage, to learn how to become the liberated woman who can dance with wild abandon to *kwela* music, is comparable to how young Bagandans hire *Ssengas* to teach them the power of the erotic. Phephelaphi rejects a life of prostitution, but appears magnetically drawn

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<sup>437</sup> Tamale, 2006, p. 18.

to the shebeen where 'she is intensely aware of being a woman' (55) and has 'far flung desire. A yearning.' It is here, in Deliwe's establishment that Phephelaphi discovers her sensuality as a woman. The ambivalent desire she feels towards her birth and othermother as well as the lure of Deliwe's freedom and charm culminates in the shebeen while Fumbatha is out of mind and out sight at home. Described as a 'desiring subject' by Boehmer because she interprets the development of selfhood as imagined by women writers, as marked by 'passion for the female other,' (177) Phephelaphi's awakening celebrates a liberalized sexuality that by comparison, is what young Bagandan women pay their *Ssengas* to discover. Through the cultural institution of *Ssenga* and the representation of subversive desire through fiction, same-sex and bi-sexuality are a part of African women's identity and history. Symbolic of the experiences of modern subject, commercial *Ssenga* and Phephelaphi's ambivalent desire seem to suggest that gendered capital exists as part of African colonial modernity.

Beverley Skeggs (2004) argues that 'gender can be a form of cultural capital but only *if* it is symbolically *legitimated*<sup>438</sup> through class distinctions of femininity or historical symbols. In the African colonial contexts of Vera's novel and Uganda's commercial *Ssengas*, race is an additional variable. The intersection of race, class and gender is central in the construction of African women's sexuality as social capital which is then consumed by colonial masters and patriarchs alike, like the White

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<sup>438</sup> Lisa Adkins & Beverly Skeggs. *Feminism After Bourdieu*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004. pp. 23-24.

policeman who has the money to pay for sex and the power to murder Zandile without repercussion. Both of these acts position women's bodies as sites of social capital, albeit easily expendable. This leads me to argue that if in the heteronormative site, African women are symbols of capital, then in the context of same-sex relations, acts such as sexual tutelage or desire represent an attempt to reclaim Black female capital from colonial male domination. Colonial cultural taste for the Black body, as evidenced in discourses of Black women's hypersexuality,<sup>439</sup> is challenged in the representation of the Black body as a non-heterosexual body that is located in a predominantly Black female world. Therefore, reading Phephelaphi's latent desire as same-sex or bi-sexual is a reclaiming and pluralizing of African sexualities as capital. Such a nuanced view of gendered capital is sorely missing from African feminist discourses of sexual practices. As Amadiume's work shows<sup>440</sup> there have long existed a multiplicity of sexualities in Africa, but her and other scholars' (discussed above) refusal to acknowledge homosexuality as part of Africa's sexualities suggests that African women's sexuality is still prescribed by patriarchal codes of morality and heteronormative 'Africanness.' Framed within this dissonance, the practices of *ssenga* or Phephelaphi's represent same-sex sexuality as both empowering reclamations of women's social capital and sexual historicity, but also acts of transgression because it is unAfrican to be homosexual.

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<sup>439</sup> Sander L. Gilman. 'Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature,' *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 12, No. 1, "Race," Writing, and Difference (Autumn, 1985), pp. 204-242.

<sup>440</sup> Ifi Amadiume. *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in African Society*, London: Zed Books, 1987. pp. 44-45.

Radical Swazi feminist, Patricia McFadden (2001) indirectly challenges the monosexual bias of some African feminist scholars in a speech on shifting the political paradigms in Africa when she says:

The claim that sexual and reproductive rights are 'western' and 'un-African'. Of course we know that when women demand their rights they become inauthentic and un-African and that is exactly what we aim to do. We will subvert the archaic notions of what is African as we insist on becoming modern and free; and we will re-define and re-structure relationships of power and control, surveillance and exclusion as we claim our democratic rights to be citizens in the fullest ways.<sup>441</sup>

McFadden calls for more democratic and pluralistic concepts and practices that reflect the African humanity of *ubuntu*. This suggests that Afro-centric feminists opposed to certain forms of sexuality as unAfrican are in danger of being complicit with the colonial and post-independent state persecution of non-heterosexual Africans. To rethink sexual and body rights have to be thought of as human rights and it is essential for any forms of feminist discourse to be framed in these terms as feminism is primarily concerned with the experiences of women. Vera and Dangarembga's novels are consistently concerned with the multiple and complex constructions and deconstructions of femininity in the public and private sphere. The writing continuously frames feminism and femininity as the voice of dissent, and social deviance against colonial, patriarchal and nationalist attempts to subordinate and regulate women's sexuality and reproductive choices. In *Butterfly Burning* the struggle for sexuality is embedded in the struggle for human rights and recognition of citizenship. In my analysis I have tried to highlight how, through a subversive reading,

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<sup>441</sup> Patricia McFadden. 'Political Power: The Challenges of Sexuality, Patriarchy and Globalization in Africa.' Paper delivered at a seminar hosted by the Mauritius Women's Movement (MLF) and the Workers Education Association (LPT), Port Louis, Mauritius, February 2001. [http://www.wworld.org/programs/regions/africa/patricia\\_mcfadden2.htm](http://www.wworld.org/programs/regions/africa/patricia_mcfadden2.htm) [date accessed: 28 December 2010].

the texts articulate a pluralistic approach to sexuality and how a discourse of resistance through the body and sexuality, using the theoretical tools of the bisexual cyborg and the erotic illuminate this.

## **Conclusion**

In this Chapter, I have attempted to explore the different types of sexualities possibly embedded in the texts which, given the difficult contexts in which they are located, symbolize resistance to colonial and patriarchal control of women's bodies and sexualities. With this interpretive reading, I have tried to show the ways in which the figuration of sexuality as a stable, fixed concept is systematically challenged in the practice of *macocotte* and *ssenga*, the retrieval of sexuality and the body via a matriarchal discourse of intimacy and healing and the subversive articulation of bisexual desire. I argue that each of the selected texts seek to write against the *longue durée* of defeminising and dehumanizing of women's sexuality by the intersecting political, religious, economic, cultural, familial, racial and patriarchal forces and systems of power. In resistance against the totalising effect of oppression of these intersecting forces, the women characters are boundary crossers and taboo breakers of these texts rejecting the heteronormative mores that are patriarchally constructed and enable a monosexual system of males to dominate females. In addition, by imagining sexuality as a pluralised, ever-changing construct, blurring the distinctions between same-sex and heterosexual, bisexual and monosexual, the texts introduce a new perspective on the

fluidity of femininity and sexualities in African feminist discourse. Rejecting the conventional ways in which gender and sexuality are performatively produced and reproduced through cultural mores and learned behaviour, as definitive of African womanhood, my subversive reading of figurations of alternative sexuality connect the lived experience of women in the texts to past cultural practices of alterity in ways that some African feminist theory is unable to do. The linking of theory to reality by mapping the erotic as a metaphor legitimizing the embedding of expressions of sexuality as part of women's political subjectivity and historical agency enables women a discursive voice that displaces the hegemony of heteronormativity. In terms of the wider concerns of this thesis, the subversive figuration of sexualities locates femininity as an expression of dissent and transgression. Everyday acts which articulate unconventional forms of motherhood, femininity and sexuality make envisioning a plural, non-hierarchical post-patriarchal world possible, at least in theory.

Conclusion:

Closing Thoughts on Rebel Butterflies  
and Speaking Tongues

## **Closing Thoughts on Rebel Butterflies and Speaking Tongues**

When I began the serious work of writing up the thesis imagined in my head, I hoped to produce a theoretical collage depicting how Zimbabwean femininity was represented in these texts, as a pluralistic, fragmented and always, already changing image of quiet dissent and loud rebellion. To some extent, I believe that has been achieved as my theoretical framework creolises a range of different critical voices, from my personal lived experience, to the technological cyborg feminist, to the African feminist, all of whom have richly contributed to my reading of the multiple figurations of womanhood in the texts.

My analysis has highlighted some of the complimentary elements and contradictions between the creolised body of theory and the texts, with the aim of highlighting where, particularly mainstream African feminist theory, needs to be modified and developed to reflect the social realities of abortion, bisexuality, anorexia and prostitution represented in the texts. The writing frames the issues of femininity, motherhood and sexuality in a different light showcasing some of the morally deviant acts characterising society that mainstream colonial and nationalist discourses on Zimbabwean history have ignored or vilified in ways comparable to Babamukuru's 'condemning Nyasha to whoredom, making her a victim of her femaleness.' (118) Even some variations of African feminist theory have neglected or refused to engage with some of the articulations of femininity in the writing because they are uncomfortable subjects. As a

critic, one is inclined to caution that the job of making theory cannot be a process of marking boundaries, including and excluding, that which is taboo or strange to one's acultural and ahistorical view of sexuality or motherhood because placing such limitations on feminism risks the danger of paying lip-service to the very structures that oppress all women.

In placing these African theories alongside African texts I have not only attempted to systematically highlight some of the benefits and shortcomings of theory, I have also tried to adopt different theoretical tools which may be used to critique the textual representations of femininity and also add new, slightly radical ideas to feminist discourses on the constructions of African womanhood. I have drawn extensively on the concepts of figurations and cyborgs as the main concepts useful in my textual analysis of how boundaries are disrupted and narratives intervened in by women to displace the myth of a singular fixed story. As I have shown, these theoretical lenses have helped me to understand how the systems of modernity, technology and capitalism are so complexly enmeshed in the processes shaping how women respond to their various circumstances. Placing these ideas in conversation with branches of African feminist theory has been an experiment that has provided me with new ways of reading and thinking about the range of coping strategies women in the novels have deployed in fighting the oppressive control of political and cultural hegemonies. Haraway and Sandoval's theorizations of the cyborg have provided me with an enriching model of how

marginalised femininities may be thought of, as figures that complicate the socially-constructed categories of race, class, gender and sexuality as simultaneously intersecting variables of identity rather than distinct facets.

In more specific analyses of how women negotiate these categories in Chapter One, I have discussed the collective as a figuration to show how the kinship networks on *Nervous Conditions* enable women to survive their experiences, for example the woman-collective help pull Nyasha back from the brink which compliments the woman-centred approach of African feminist theories of womanism and motherism. By contrast anorexia in itself as a figuration overturns the motherist and womanist endorsed perceptions on women's body shape. These contradictory figurations of the collective and singular acts of women are key portrayals of the everyday experience of being at the interstices of political and cultural transition where a complex *metissage* of tradition and modernity is necessary to shake off the yoke of gendered oppression,<sup>442</sup> to use Emecheta's (1982) phrase.

The patterns of contradictory feminist figurations is a trend in the fiction, as those women characters that articulate a politics of negotiation and engagement affirm the behavioural practices that Nnameka (2004)<sup>443</sup> defines as characteristic of African feminism. Tambu's *metissage* and Maiguru's diplomacy in *Nervous Conditions* are two classic examples of

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<sup>442</sup> Adapted from the title of Buchi Emecheta's, *Double Yoke*. New York: George Braziller, 1982.

<sup>443</sup> 'Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, Practicing, and Pruning Africa's Way' *Signs* 29, No. 2 2003, pp. 357-385.

feminism as a strategic act. Opposite to this are the more radical figurations of women like Phephelaphi in *Butterfly Burning* and Mazvita in *Without a Name* both of whom resort to unconventional strategies to reject enforced reproductivity and motherhood. These women do not engage or negotiate with anyone but themselves, they negotiate their own circumstances unlike Tambu who chooses to strategically engage Babamukuru who holds the financial key to her success rather than voice her concerns at his shameful treatment of Nyasha. In isolation, Phephelaphi and Mazvita make their choices not to mother, preferring to escape the impending poverty in motherhood through committing suicide or murder.

Interestingly, the figuration of the collective also compliments African feminist paradigms of collectivity, matriarchy and wholeness articulated by Africana womanist, womanist and motherist theorists as discussed elsewhere in this thesis. The representation of the matriarchal collective in *Under the Tongue* and the depiction of othermothering in this text and *Butterfly Burning* all resonate with the theoretical positions that celebrate the history of matriarchs as the cornerstone of African feminism. However these patterns of harmony and dissonance are not set in stone because in the context of the collective, the paired friendship of Tambu and Nyasha fits within the African feminist matrix of communality, but in the context of intimacy and sexuality, the girls' friendship is antithetical to Afro-centric African feminist values.<sup>444</sup>

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<sup>444</sup> As discussed in Chapter 3.

These trends expose the collective, earthy, wholesome philosophy underpinning much of African feminist theory. As the majority of the theory has developed out of anthropological research on matriarchal systems and kinship networks or women's movements that are by nature collectivist in outlook, the theory only accounts for certain types of expressions of femininity. The individual non-conformist construct of femininity remains unaccounted for, as are the radical voices of womanhood and the more contemporary, transnational experiences that produce a hybrid mix of African identity.

Perhaps African feminism is missing a radical voice that focuses on the individual, and this body of writing offers insight into how that dissident figure of womanhood may be articulated. In theoretical terms, this could be Haraway's cyborg figure located within the African context. This thesis has tried to map the variety of cyborg figures represented in Vera and Dangarembga's writing. Although no definitive model has been proposed, the general characteristics of a cyborg within the African context would be of a figure that located within Africa's heterogeneous history, reflecting all expressions of femininity and resists categorisation, because that suggests fixity and singularity. A cyborg individual or collective that is always and already relational, fragmented and contradictory as exemplified in the portrayals of different rebellious women in the writing. Thought of in this way, femininity as an identity and feminism as a mode of thought and activism become interlinked sites

that can be questioned through writing. To an extent the texts reflect this by calling into question notions of identity and the ways in which dominant discourse have used them to locate the majority White or Black male identity in the world while relegating the voices of Black women to the margins of discourse. As counter-narratives the texts subvert these discourses and invent into being the missing discourses of women while simultaneously critiquing the inclusion and exclusion of female figurations within feminist theory. This thesis has explored these diverse counter-figurations of African motherhood, sexuality and femininity from a creolised theoretical standpoint that is critical of the rigid limitations of tradition, politics and feminism. While this critical study sought to juxtapose multiple perspectives on femininity in order to develop a critical conversation on the fluidity and multiplicity of female subjectivities; the greater task of theorising African cyborgs, figurations and nomads will be taken up in more detail in a future project.

One of the urgent concerns of further research arising from this project, would be in the area of sexuality. The rethinking of sexuality and the body as challenge to mainstream African feminism's and patriarchy's silence and or rejection of homosexuality. In the face of legislated hostility towards people of homosexual and bi-sexual orientation in some parts of Africa (including Zimbabwe), the recent brutal murder of gay activist, David Kato of Uganda<sup>445</sup> or the rise of incidences of corrective rape of

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<sup>445</sup> Xan Rice. 'Ugandan gay rights activist David Kato found murdered' *Guardian*, 27 January 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jan/27/ugandan-gay-rights-activist-murdered> [date accessed: 23 March 2011].

lesbians in South Africa,<sup>446</sup> rethinking African sexualities becomes an act of activism. Constructing ideas on the multiplicity of African women's sexualities would be a challenge to dominant heteronormative religious and cultural ideologies which either turn a blind eye to or endorse homophobia, despite historical evidence showing that pluralism of sexualities in Africa. A pluralized view of African feminist discourses of the body and sexuality would build upon the work of Tamale, McFadden and Lewis, but in dialogue with Haraway's technological metaphor to challenge the totalizing effect of scientific and cultural assumptions about the body and sexuality. Viewing sex, like gender, as a socially inscribed identity exposes the artificiality of sexual difference which is the root cause of cultural stigmatizing of non-heterosexuals as unAfrican as well as the origin of the gender myth that constructs women as different and inferior to men. The project of deconstructing sex-gender would also extend to the other aspects of womanhood; motherhood and the performance of femininity, which are of concern in this literary study.

Thinking about the contribution I intended to make to the development of Zimbabwean literary criticism, I have certainly extended, in my analysis, the range of themes previously covered in published criticism of Vera and Dangarembga's writing. I hope that this thesis will in the future, add to the relatively small body of insightful criticism on these two authors. In addition, another concern of this thesis was to show that these novels read like a long historical document capturing the everyday experiences of

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<sup>446</sup> Jonah Hull. 'The South African Scourge' *Al Jazeera English*, 20 February 2011, <http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/features/2011/02/2011220132839359974.html> [date accessed: 23 March 2011].

ordinary women whose histories have been suppressed, stolen or silenced. While the narrative of Nehanda has been appropriated by nationalist patriarchs to manufacture a patriotic history of Zimbabwe to justify a male-dominant narrative of the Chimurenga wars, writers like Vera re-appropriate the story of Nehanda to retell the tale from a woman's perspective. In reading the re-historicized Nehanda alongside the narratives of all the other women characters depicted in Dangarembga and Vera's writing, they fill in the timeline of Zimbabwe's social history reflecting the complex and difficult conditions shaping their narratives. The private resistances of women like Mazvita<sup>447</sup> who out of desperation strangles her baby and Maiguru<sup>448</sup> whose silent departure from her husband sends a strong message to him, sit alongside the more outspoken women like the garrulous Lucia<sup>449</sup> who disrupts a family hearing and the defiant shebeen queen Deliwe<sup>450</sup> who runs her night spot in spite of police raids and lockups reflect a diverse image of femininity.

These fractured narratives represent an alternative national history highlighting the transformative impact of colonial capitalism on gender, maternal identity and family dynamics. The radical acts of mothering, un-mothering and othermothering, practicing *macocotte* or exhibiting latent bisexual desire when viewed through the lenses of cyborgs, nomads and figurations break away from conventional models of femininity and motherhood and instead articulate more complicated yet fluid and

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<sup>447</sup> in *Without A Name* (Vera).

<sup>448</sup> in *Nervous Conditions* (Dangarembga).

<sup>449</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>450</sup> in *Butterfly Burning* (Vera).

pluralistic images. The writing expresses a willingness to challenge old assumptions and account for the complex identities of femininity and this thesis has drawn on a range of cognitive tools with which to make sense of these depictions and to offer a new, provocative way of imagining womanhood in Zimbabwean and African literary discourses.

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