

Voice of the Voiceless: A Reading of Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins* from the subaltern Perspective

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Abstract

Women's writing all over the world has always been regarded as the "marginal" writing. It is very difficult for the writer to speak about their status in society, and to create her own space in the patriarchal world over the ages. African women's writing is not an exception from this. It is the inscription of pain and suffering of the oppressed, marginalized and exploited groups since ages. African women's writings show the constant struggle against the dominant groups. Writers like Buchi Emechta, Flora Nwapwa, Mariama Ba, Ama Ata Aidoo, etc. have remained a source of inspiration for African Women's writing through the years. The present study tries to explore the condition of women characters in the novel. *The Stone Virgins* is written by Zimbabwean novelist Yvonne Vera. The novel tries to investigate the role of women in the nationalistic historical movement. The present paper is an attempt to critique the oppressed roles of women in the patriarchal, societal and historical frameworks. This paper examines the formation of black women's identity from the postcolonial theory of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and her notion of "Subaltern". This theory will analyze the marginalized, oppressed groups in the text, who are considered subordinate and are expected to remain silent. The paper will scrutinize the ways through which the dominant power exploits the women and destitute them from their true identity and self. The paper will also examine the double oppression that women faced during the postcolonial times of Zimbabwe. **Keywords** : Marginalization, Identity, Subaltern, Patriarchy, Gender, African, Subjugation, Hegemony, National liberation movement, History.

Introduction

"If speaking is still difficult to negotiate, then writing has created a free space for most women-much freer than speech". (Vera. 3)

In her *Preface to an Anthology of Contemporary African Women's Writing* titled *Opening Spaces*, Yvonne Vera critiques the role of women in the field of literary Studies. She emphasises on the fact that literature is the only medium for women to communicate her feelings. She discusses about the fact that literature provides a unique identity and background to the women writers who have been silenced in the hegemonic societal male

dominated structure since ages. There was a complete dearth of female writers in the history of African Literature. Thus, Vera gives importance to the mode of writing as a manifestation of articulating feelings, ideas and expressions. So, through this novel, she tries to articulate her opinions of the subjugated, voiceless female characters.

Yvonne Vera, is the Zimbabwean author who writes novels in the background of Post liberation war movements. All her novels depict the period of violation and trauma during the liberation struggle of Zimbabwe. Also her narratives provide a unique space to women in the field of literary studies. She is an acclaimed female novelist in the contemporary African Writing. She has *Nehanda*, *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins* to her credit. The last novel, *The Stone Virgins* (2002), was awarded the Macmillan Writers' Prize for Africa. She writes from the women's point of view describing their turmoils, sufferings and position in the society. All her texts are concerned with the discursive subaltern position of women characters. The present article focuses mainly on the subordinate, subjugated, inarticulate women in the novel, *The Stone Virgins*.

The Stone Virgins is set during the times of second Chimurenga struggle of Zimbabwe initiated by political leader named Robert Mugabe. The novel emphasises on the role of women characters in the liberation struggle and also in the domestic fronts. The story takes place in the cities of Matebeleland and Kezi of the 1980's respectively. The author portrays the traumatic atrocities that took place after the postcolonial liberation struggle. The narrator narrates the horrific violent incidents which took place during the post war period. The unique binary kind of relationships like murderer and victim, rapist and victim are analyzed to delineate the oppressive condition of women. We can see that Vera inscribed history to delineate the various atrocities carried out by the then political parties against women. The same kind of incident is narrated by the protagonist Nonceba, where the woman was asked to kill her two sons unless she killed her husband with the axe of soldiers. Thus, the narrator describes the stories of women who were subjugated in war. Again the different atrocious crimes during the liberation struggle are also portrayed by the author. As seen here:

The women want to take the day into their own arms and embrace it, but how? To embrace the land and earth, the horizon and triumph? To forget the hesitant moment, death, the years of deafness and struggle? The women want to take the time of resignation, of throbbing fears, and declare this to a vanished day, but how? And take the memory of departed sons, and bury it. But how? To end the unsure sunsets, the solitary loveliness of the hills? (Vera 51)

Gayatri Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak?* enunciates the role of subjugated, oppressed, disempowered and voiceless subjects in the subaltern studies. Thus, Vera analyses the role of women who are doubly objectified. The paper analyses Spivak's theory of subaltern that will help to understand the experiences of women who face double marginalization. The women are subjugated not only on domestic level but on the physical war fronts also. She denounces the twice marginalisation of her gendered female protagonists:

Often the ground decays, the plants dead from the stillness in the air. Mbelele has its own seasons. Closed, sound does not travel out of it. We were safe in that immobile air. We heard nothing outside our own suppressed voices; we were not heard. (Vera 100)

We can see the traumatic and highly subjugated women from this description. Her female characters face oppression, exploitation and subjugation at multiple levels. The above incident can be appraised by Spivak as thus:

Within the effaced itinerary, of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced[...]. in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female even more deeply in shadow. (Spivak 287)

Spivak here deploys to state that subaltern females need to come out of the passive roles and try to act actively to create their own voice and identity. She argues that women are silenced and kept passive throughout history. My study of the present paper shows the victimization of silenced women through Spivak's theory of subaltern. Hence to elaborate this, we can also see that Vera uses poetic language to analyze the condition of women in the post war Zimbabwe. It can be seen that Vera uses highly poetic style to critique the position of female subjugation during the traumatic war period. She has employed the rich language to make the inarticulate speak. Kostelac thus says in this regard:

Her texts are full of complex metaphorical configurations, and various elements of her aesthetic are refined to handle the complex questions of language, voice and subjectivity in increasingly subtle ways. (Kostelac 42)

In this context, Vera tries to demonstrate the position of women in political, social and historical levels. Vera seeks to find out the effects of liberation movement on the females. She amalgamates the emotional and physical traumatic experiences of female characters. The novel, *The Stone Virgins* depicts the lives of two women characters, Nonceba and Thenjiwe who are exploited dreadfully and brutally. The male character Sibaso is represented as the psycho killer who is responsible for silencing the two characters for the lifetime. He first kills Thenjiwe, and then rapes her. Not only that he rapes Thenjiwe's sister, Nonceba, but also cuts off her lips so as she remains voiceless throughout her lifetime. This heinous crime is depicted here as :

He turns steadily, with the movements of a hunter who kills not because he is hungry but because his stomach is full, therefore, he can hunt with grace...He thinks of scars inflicted before dying, betrayals before a war, after a war, during a war. Him, Sibaso. He considers the woman in his arms. He sees her dancing heels, her hands chaste dead bone, porous thin, painted on a rock. Her neck is leaning upon a raised arrow, her mind is pierced by the sun. She is a woman from very far, from long ago, from the naked caves in the hills of Gulati. She does not belong here. She bears the single solitude of a flame, the shape and form of a painted memory. He thrusts the body to the ground: a dead past. Nonceba falls. (Vera. 77-78)

The above passage reiterates the brutal atrocities carried out by the former soldier against the women. The image of Nonceba's lips being cut raises the question of the act of silencing of the women in the dominant groups. It proclaims the fact of the inability to articulate and establish a new identity of a female. Spivak identifies this as:

Can men theorise feminism, can whites theorise racism, can the bourgeois theorise revolution, and so on. It is only when the former groups theorise that the situation is politically intolerable. Therefore it is crucial that the members of these groups are kept vigilant about their assigned subject positions. (Spivak 253)

Spivak critiques the very hegemonic structure of the society. She questions the unequal roles of the gender in the societal context. She demonstrates the superiority of the traditional male dominated society in Zimbabwe. In this context, Nonceba, the protagonist is fully aware of the situation in which she becomes a survivor. She tries to convert her silenced, victimized condition to that of the fighter and survivor. She proclaims to regain her identity in the society of Zimbabwe. As Nonceba says: “I am waiting. I am alive, now” (Vera. 68). Vera establishes independent position of Nonceba in the novel. Vera uses the highly feminine language to understand the colonial, social and gendered oppression of the women characters in the novel. Thus, language becomes a powerful medium to delineate the subjugated position of women in the novel.

Apart from language, Vera uses metaphorical images of female body to analyze the victimized, subjugated position of the women characters in the novel. Not only that, Vera also uses the image of female body to reclaim independence and expression of women characters in the novel. Thus, the female body becomes the metaphor to express female sexuality and desire which was denied during the liberation struggle of Zimbabwe. Vera describes this imagery through another protagonist named Thenjiwe for her lover Cephas in the following words:

These women are the freest women on earth[...]. They have no desire to be owned, hedged in, claimed, but to be appreciated, to be loved till an entire sun sets, to be adored like doves[...]. They want to know an absolute joy with men who carry that last look in their eyes. (Vera 54)

It has been observed that women feel independence by expressing their desire through female body. Thus, the female body becomes the manifestation of freedom and independence for women. Vera shows both the positive and negative images of the female body in the novel. Vera intertwines the image of the distorted female body with the historical incidents of the nation. Vera, here employs the metaphorical image of damaged female body who represents the terror of nationalistic discourse in terms of racism, and colonialism. It is presented here as:

The women who return from the bush arrive with a superior claim of their own. They define the world differently. They are fighters, simply, who pulled down every barrier and entered the bush, yes, like men. But then they were women and said so, and spoke so. They made admissions that resembled denials (Vera 56).

Women characters are portrayed equal in terms of gender, and military position by the author. The female soldiers take equal part in the liberation movement. Even though the women characters are perceived as having strong equivalence, they fail to achieve their own position in Zimbabwe's liberation war. They are identified as subalterns, who could have no recognition in the history of liberation movement. The female soldiers are silenced in the history of Zimbabwe.

Yvonne Vera explicitly uses the image of female body to depict the oppression of women during and post war period. She enhances the mutilated, voiceless position of women through the characters of Thenjiwe and Nonceba. They are not given any opportunity to speak in the society. They are permanently silenced by the sexual physical violence through the hands of one dissident liberationist soldier, Sibaso. For which, Nonceba says: “closed. Sound does not travel out[...]. We heard nothing outside our own suppressed voices; we were not heard” (Vera 100). Vera identifies this description analogous to Spivak's argument

stating: “there is no space from which the sexed subaltern can speak” (Spivak 307). Vera demonstrates the horrific events of 1980s of Zimbabwe, by which we witness the gendered, sexual subaltern. Both Thenjiwe and Nonceba fought for the freedom struggle. But unfortunately they become distorted and thwarted at the end, where Thenjiwe is heinously murdered and Nonceba is raped and mutilated. Thus, vera represents the damaged bodies of the female subaltern who are permanently silenced in the history of Zimbabwe.

The city of Bulawayo is also portrayed as a character in the novel. she personifies the buildings with the female body. The city becomes the witness of the female subjugation. Not only that, it becomes the manifestation of the colonial subjugation of the people of Zimbabwe also. Thus vera compares her female protagonists’s damaged bodies with the city’s landscape to show the horrified effects of the war. Thus, Vera records the incidents of the traumatic experiences of victimized women in the novel. Vera wants her characters to be free from subjugation, so she keeps Nonceba alive in the last part of the novel. Through Nonceba, she tries to restore the historical past. The author wants to give independent position to female characters, who are free from the any oppressive treatments. Thus, the novel ends on the hope of restoring their own unique position in Zimbabwe.

Conclusion:

Thus, the present paper has examined the role of female characters that are subjugated during the liberation struggle. The paper has examined the role and status of women from the point of language also. The narrative strategies employed by the author are also studied to understand the inferior roles of women in the Zimbabwean society. Through Spivak’s theory, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, I have tried to analyze the image of body as a metaphor for oppression and subjugation of female characters. The analysis has also shown the reclaiming of identity of one of the female characters. Thus, by showing Nonceba alive, Vera has tried to restore the equal position of woman in the country. Thus, the present paper is an attempt to investigate the inarticulate position of women in Zimbabwe.

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