A Scathing Indictment of Gender-Spiked Official Historical War Accounts cum a Tribute to Female Agency: An Examination of *The Stone Virgins* by Yvonne Vera

Mamadou Abdou Babou Ngom
English Department/Faculty of the Humanities,
Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakar,
Senegal (West Africa).

**Article History:** Submitted: 29/11/2019, Revised: 24/12/2019, Accepted: 28/12/2019, Published: 31/12/2019.

**Abstract:**

This research paper sets out to broach the issue of women’s all-out contribution to the nationalist struggles for emancipation from colonial bondage. Using Yvonne Vera’s *The Stone Virgins* as a stepping-stone, the article argues that the strenuous female agency at the time of the liberation wars get the short shrift in the historiography of the anti-colonial struggle as it is heavily weighted in favour of male prowess. *The Stone Virgins* is Yvonne Vera’s shot at rewriting history from a feminist vantage point by exposing the falsehood of the official war narratives through a glowing portrayal of the female ex-combatants without whose unflagging agency independence would never have come to fruition. Additionally, so the paper contends, the aftermath of the nationalist struggle has brought to light male double-dealing in that the anti-colonial war across the African continent, not least in Zimbabwe, was framed as a redemptive mission the end game of which was two-pronged—that is, freedom from race-based oppression and women’s emancipation from the strictures colonial and indigenous patriarchy.

**Keywords:** liberation, colonial, agency, women, memory.

Yvonne Vera (1964-2005) was a leading Zimbabwean novelist, critic, short story writer all into one. Notwithstanding her short life, she goes down in history as one of the most potent writers to have emerged from post-independence Zimbabwe. Vera’s fictional opus broaches taboo themes that resonate with feminists of any ilk and with men dedicated to the emancipation of women across the globe. Her jaw-dropping contribution to the contemporary literature of Africa and, by extension, to African women’s writing earned her a good many literary prizes both nationally and internationally, not the least of which are the Zimbabwean Publisher’s Literary Award, the Commonwealth Writer’s Prize (Africa Region,
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Best book), the Macmillan Writer’s Prize, Sweden’s ‘Voice of Africa’ award. A prolific writer whose stylistic hallmark is the lyrical edge to her prose, Yvonne Vera wrote five novels of paramount purport during her lifetime besides a body of anthologies and essays. Her fictional opus is made up of *Under the Tongue, Without a Name, Nehanda, Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins* on which this research paper is based.

If conventional wisdom is anything to go by, war is a wholly male-centered business. It is from the point of view of men that it is fought and recounted. Historical narratives of war foreground the paramountcy of masculine bravery as a key decider of the advent of freedom. This lopsidedly gender-informed reading of the dynamics of war locate, as it were, oppression and suffering only within the male body although women are not immune to the ravages of war. Far from it. Little wonder that collective female agency underscoring a no-nonsense multifarious pushback against injustice in any shape or form is oftentimes given short shrift. Analyzing the problem from a Western vantage point, Jean Elshtain makes the contention that the construction of woman as a peace-loving being as opposed to man who sees in war an opportunity to display his virility reflects a misguided patriarchal mindset:

> *We in the West are the heirs of a tradition that assumes an affinity between women and peace, between men and war, a tradition that consists of culturally constructed and transmitted myths and memories. Thus, in time of war, real men and women—locked in a dense symbiosis, perceived as beings who have complementary needs and exemplify gender-specific virtues—take on, in cultural memory and narrative, the personas of Just Warriors and Beautiful Souls.* (4)

It is of note to emphasize that this uber-twisted tunnel vision has a transcultural ring to it. It feeds into a poisonous patriarchal narrative that seeks to withstand any valour from women, thereby disparaging their mettle in war. Bravery is not by any stretch of the imagination a gendered stuff. Women die in combat alongside their male comrades in arm. Sexism ought not to be a yardstick for determining the real worth of men and women in war:

> *Man construed as violent, whether eagerly and inevitably or reluctantly and tragically; women as nonviolent, offering succor and compassion: these tropes on the social identities of men and women, past and present, do not denote what men and women are really in time of war, but function instead to re-create and secure women’s location as noncombatants and men’s as warriors.* (Elshtain 4)

Here, Elshtain takes aim at a gendered dichotomy that overrates men’s supposed innate predisposition to physical prowess, which belittles women, constrained to domestic chores. Yet the history of human kind is replete with instances of women who paid the
ultimate price as they sought to translate into action their consciousness about the crass immorality of bondage brought about by the trope of race. Witness Black African women’s gutsy but untold contribution to mediate the emancipation of the dark continent from the shackles of subjugation induced by centuries of race-based domination. In spite of the fact that men preponderated in nationalist movements and notwithstanding what that entailed in terms of strictures against women, the latter made no bones about joining hands with their male counterparts with a view to pushing back on colonial oppression (Kramarae and Spender 1619). The colonial struggles brought, indeed, the best in African women. One case in point is the war against white settler rule in Zimbabwe that culminated in the achievement of statehood back in 1980. Tania Lyons’s analysis of feisty Zimbabwean women freedom fighters during the war of liberation acts as a foil to skewed war accounts that purposely cast women in a negative light:

*The actions of women in Zimbabwe’s anti-colonial liberation struggle was crucial for the success of the guerrilla war. Women in rural villages provided food, clothing, and shelter to the guerrillas, often risking their lives to do so. Young women and men became chimwidos and mujibas (messengers and carriers), providing information on the whereabouts of Rhodesian soldiers to the guerrillas. By 1972, when the armed struggle against white minority rule was in full swing, women were being trained to fight; this was one of the most significant developments of the guerrilla war. (Qtd. in Allman et al, 305)*

What Zimbabwean female fighters brought to the table of the resistance against colonial enslavement was instrumental in bringing white minority rule leadership to heel. Not only did they have combat role but they also served such functions as pertained to care giving, laundry, food and such like. But the obnoxious cloak of misogynistic mindset hallmarked by a deep-dyed propensity to see the woman as “the other” incapable of any decisive agency, thereby undeserving of respect and attention, accounts for the scant attention paid to women’s action in nationalist struggles in the historical narratives of war, not least the Zimbabwe liberation struggle. This situation, in Elshtain’s book, obtains because of the construction of war through the lens of masculinity:

*Because women are exterior to war, men interior, men have long-been the great war-story tellers, legitimated in that role because they have “been there” or because they have greater entrée into what it “must be like.” The stories of women resistance fighters and soldiers have sometimes been told but have not attained the literary status of the great war novels by men. (212)*
The involvement of Zimbabwean women in the liberation struggle was driven, in no small measure, by a desire to throw off the shackles of the yoke of a two-pronged system of patriarchy: traditional and colonial. Actually, the Zimbabwean uphill fight against colonization was framed as a stepping-stone to calling time on the multifaceted bondage the Zimbabwean woman was faced with. Little wonder they took to the Second Chimurenga (“liberation struggle” in Shona) unhesitatingly. A former woman ex-combatant and erstwhile minister in post-independence Zimbabwe, TeuraiRopa confesses that Zimbabwean women had an axe to grind in their willed active involvement in the anti-colonial struggle:

*Participation in the struggle changed our way of thinking, our behaviour and self-conceptualization. In our culture combat is not for women. Only men used to go hunting. But in the struggle both men and women participated equally in the battlefield. Our participation in the struggle for liberation was also the participation for liberation for all women, within and without struggle. We, faced with similar disabilities, proved that these disabilities could be overcome and that our performance could be just as good as man’s ... We fought so that our voice could carry as good a weight as anybody else’s.* (Qtd. in Lyons 62)

The African women saw the political and military drive against colonial oppression as a scope to extricate themselves out of the quagmire created by the intersection of patriarchy and class. Although they were tasked with nonmilitary missions at the outset, their participation took on a different hue in the early seventies when they began to be trained for combat role (Lyons 113). That shift resulted from a sober appraisal of the potential for women’s capability to pack a punch in the battlefield. Robert Mugabe, Zimbabwe’s first post-independence president, weighs in on the end game of the nationalist struggle in a way that captures the awful reality of the African woman’s subservience. Identifying the war against racial oppressing as being interwoven with women’s experience of discriminatory practices of any ilk, he said that “*the national struggle ... especially at its highest level, when it became the armed national struggle, became as much a process towards the liberation of the nation as towards the emancipation of the woman*” (Qtd. in Ranchod-Nilssonand Tétreault 178). Strangely enough, the new dispensation in post-independence Zimbabwe turned out to be an anti-climax for the women ex-combatants. Their frustration is two-pronged. For starters, gender oppression did not disappear with the defeat of white settler colonial rule. Secondly, slanted gender-spiked historical narratives of the war undercut the huge contribution of the female freedom fighters in the Zimbabwe liberation struggle. There has been a concerted drive amongst celebrated Zimbabwean female writers to push back onlopsidedly gender-driven interpretations of Zimbabwean women’s involvement in the anti-
colonial struggle. Prominent among them is the late Yvonne Vera whose *The Stone Virgins* is a tribute to the women’s war credentials in addition to standing as a scathing indictment of the gender biases that abound in the accounts of the war.

A novel with riveting gravistas, *The Stone Virgins* (which came out in 2002) is doubtless a treasure stove of information about black suffering in colonial Zimbabwe and a crass disenchantment with the country’s post-independence dispensation. The novel dissects itself into two parts—that is, the colonial era markedly characterized by a gory uphill struggle against the shackles of race-based oppression and the post-colonial period notoriously conspicuous by black-on-black violence and a failed leadership. Partly set in the Zimbabwean town of Bulawayo and partly in the village community of Kezi that lies “two hundred kilometers from the bustling porch of the Selborne Hotel, with parasols mingle with disgruntled miners, bankers, and day-to-day merchants” (Vera 16), the story is told from the point of view of two sisters, Thenjive and Nonceba. Beyond sisterhood, the latter have the commonality of having gone through the grisly gauntlet of rape and murder against a backdrop of internecine fighting. Over and above the war pitting colonial forces and liberation fighter, the uncertainty of the times is compounded by the pervasiveness of squalor, which shanghaies the destitute into scraping a living by commuting to Johannesburg every day. The Bulawayo-Kezi-Bulawayo bus is a lifeline to the village community whose resilience passes belief. The heartbeat of Kezi is the famous Thandabantu Store. A favourite haunt of guerrilla combatants who hide in the hills of Gulati, Thandabantu Store boasts “a large wide veranda where often people meet and sit and talk and wait for the bus to arrive or any other traffic to go by, to stop, to deliver a message, a parcel, a plow, a human presence” (24). Meantime, Thenjive finds a soul mate who follows her all the way home from Thandabantu Store. They enjoy a brief and intense love. Just then, a harrowing chapter in the history of Zimbabwe ends with the victory of the liberation fighters over colonial forces; but, lo and behold, another gruesome era sets in: the breakout of an internecine feud between the ex-freedom fighters. The killing spree that attends the ‘brotherly’ infighting beggars description. Thenjive is killed; her sister is raped and admitted to a hospital chock-a-block with patients suffering grievous physical and psychological wounds.
Yvonne Vera is steeped in the conscious of the role of the artist as a historical witness. This consciousness is all the more creditable since it impels her to venture into dangerous waters for the sole purpose of righting the wrongs of history. Official records of the liberation war have long swept under the rug, as it were, Zimbabwean women’s wholesome contribution to dismantling the shackles of decades-long colonial bondage. Yvonne Vera seeks through what Maria Pia Lara calls ‘emancipatory narrative’ (7) to reinstate the dignity of African women, not least Zimbabwean ones, and keep the memory of their multifaceted sacrifices in the collective conscience, by flagging up their war credentials. With a view to imparting the degree to which the women have gone through fire and water for the sake of freedom, Vera offers the reader a glimpse into the ordeals that punctuate people's everyday life against a background of colonial subjugation. The straits are so dire that men and women alike feel compelled to contrive efficient survival strategies. Johannesburg somewhat passes off as a lifeline for the downtrodden denizens of Bulawayo and the village of Kezi. The latter owe their survival thanks to “city laborers, black, who voyage back and forth between Bulawayo and Johannesburg and hold that city up like a beacon” (Vera 5). Accordingly, “when they return home, they are quick of step and quick of voice” (5). To be sure, it is a virtue of Vera’s broad-brush picture of the said laborers’ agency to keep body and soul together that she underscores the treacherousness attendant upon their source of livelihood:

They have been dipped deep in the gold mines, helmeted, torchlit, plummeted, digging for that precious gold which is not theirs. Not at all. They are not only black; they are outsiders. They make no claim. This is paid work. Egoli . . . they say and sigh . . . about Johannesburg. The way they pronounce the name of that city, say it, fold it over the tongue, tells you everything. (5)

The foregoing captures the scope of the exploitation of which the workers are at the receiving end. They are caught in the toils of a cutthroat capitalist system because of their consciousness about the paramountcy of ‘Work’ as a tool of safeguarding human dignity. According Marx, there is a community of interest between the laborer and Capital: “The laborer perishes if capital does not employ him. Capital perishes if it does not exploit labor, and in order to exploit it, it must buy it” (33). Notwithstanding this identity of interest, the laborer will, in Marx’s estimation, always play second fiddle to capital in the social pecking order.

The Stone Virgins registers Yvonne Vera’s bold proclivity to champion women’s causes and save the memory of their contribution to freedom from sinking in the rubbish bits of history. Her gutsy move to push back on what she calls in the novel “the illicit...
versions of the war” (73) betokens an awareness that women’s war credentials bear testimony. The historical distortions in the official accounts of the liberation wars across the African continent, not least in Zimbabwe, are gendered, so that women’s all-out involvement is given scant regard. In an interview, she explains the significance of picturing a snapshot of women’s everyday lives while stressing the centrality of the historical instant:

I hope that I am telling stories which are more than stories. I also want to capture a history, but history is in a moment. A woman is in the forest, she is alone, the ground is bare. What is her relationship to this landscape, and who is she in this moment? She’s endured all these other things, but at this moment, her mind is collapsing. How does she endure this moment? And not only this moment, but everything else she has gone through. I try and connect these two things, so that an individual is not isolated – though they are affected in isolation. I use the isolated individual to explore how they are connected to everything else. (Interview with Bryce 223)

Vera enacts her challenge to gender-spiked official narratives of the war by foregrounding the Zimbabwean women’s daring agency as female combatants. They have gone through fire and water alongside their male counterparts to bring an end to colonial oppression. In Vera’s estimation, the women soldiers are a by-word for gutsiness and self-possession. Little wonder they put Bulawayo men who hang around Thandabantu Store to shame:

They lean on pillars and cautiously look around and examine the air. They have read enough and know that these women are not mere pictures from the newspapers folded under their arms, papers announcing a landslide victory for the new prime minister, but beings they could greet with care and due respect. But they do not. These women have known the forest in rain and sun, survived its darkness and light, equally threatening. These women, alive now sitting on the edge of this smooth wall, are the most substantial evidence of survival there is, of courage, of struggle. (60)

Thandabantu is what twentieth-century sophisticated French historian, Pierre Nora, calls site of memory3. Upon getting off the Kezi-Bulawayo-Kezi bus, passengers make a point of going first to Thandabantu to “buy whatever it is they have forgotten to bring from Bulawayo, or whatever they identify, like, and carry, or can fit into their many parcels” (28). Only after that do they “disperse into the village, feeling fortified and ready to deal with whatever uncertainty they left behind-an unresolved matter, an anxiety of their own-no matter how long or brief the time away (28). The straitjacket of patriarchal strictures that
pigeonhole women as minions lend zing to their active contribution to the drive against colonial enslavement. More significantly, their historical agency is not a zero sum game; it is not tinged either with misguided parochialism in that its end game is the freedom of humanity as a whole. Hence reading women’s strenuous actions against the horrors of colonial bondage through feminist lens is ill-informed. Feminist theorist Sheila Rowbotham takes aim at those who boil feminism down to women’s issues:

*Feminism is sometimes confined to women’s struggles against gender relationships. In fact, however, women’s actions, both now and in the past, often have been against interconnected relations of inequality and have involved many aspects of resistance around daily life and culture that are not simply about gender.* (6)

To be sure, the universal dimension of women’s pushback actions is captured by their no-nonsense call to participate (despite the odds of patriarchy being stacked against them) in historical processes. Yvonne Vera encapsulates in the female combatants a deep-dyed belief in women’s capacity for unconditional love cum wholesome historical transformations. Actually, the enactment of a grueling agency during the liberation struggle epitomizes the women’s willingness to strike a blow for the universal value of freedom. Vera’s womanist narrator is fulsome in her praise of the female soldiers’ militant stand, and take pains to flag up their epoch-making participation in the emancipation of their country:

*These women, lively and impatient, have secured a freedom that makes their voices glow. They know everything there is to know about anything there is to know, and have tasted their own freedom mature, because it is truly theirs, this freedom. . . . They hold that freedom in their arms. With imaginations unencumbered, they will have children called Happiness, called Prosperity, called Fortune, called True Love, called More Blessing, called Joy, called ceasefire. Why not? The names will cascade like histories from their tongues . . . Beauty, Courage, and Freedom.* (54)

Women’s freedom is society’s freedom as a whole. An across the board female emancipation from strictures of any ilk translates into unfettered access to education, which positively rubs off on society. It is worth noting, though, that a tooth and nail successful fight for freedom does not automatically bring about happiness. Even then, ‘unfreedom’ is, from Friederich’s philosophical vantage point, a drag on humanity. If anything, the said eighteenth-century renowned German philosopher emphasizes that ‘freedom’ is an ideal whose attainment necessitates lank personal stamina. In *The Gay Science*, he writes that

*the free man can be good as well as evil, but the unfree man is a disgrace to nature and has no share in heavenly or earthly comfort; that everyone who wants to be free must become so through himself, and that freedom does not fall into anyone’s lap as a wondrous gift.* (99)
The foregoing gives more relief to the women soldiers’ war credentials. They have physically registered their utter rejection of a race-based oppression. Their agency is all of a piece with human nature from a philosophical standpoint: “Human nature is the true measure of human action” (Novak 6). Yvonne Vera’s elation at and recognition of Zimbabwean women’s multifaceted involvement in the liberation struggle shines through the comparison she draws between Kezi men who are wont to twiddle their thumbs at Thandabantu Store and the women combatants whose gutsy action contributed to effect change:

*The men who for years have been going to Thandabantu to watch the sun, to summarize the day and what they have just heard of the war in the bush, who are part of the quality of and the sound of it and therefore an essential aspect of a place named Kezi because Kezi starts and ends at Thandabantu Store, these Kezi men have moved without or amazement at their displacement, moved to the marula tree and brought their hand-carved stools with them, and from here they watch these women exude an elegance more spectacular than anything they have ever watched set or burn, their posture more genuine than their own feet on Kezi soil.* (59)

Yvonne Vera goes out of her way to debunk the gendered view that courage is a male preserve. She daringly treads on the dangerous ground of impugning men’s proclivity in official war discourses to overlook women’s multifaceted tasks on the front line. Her wholesome use of language to represent female contribution to African emancipation from the yoke of colonization is an endorsement of Ania Loomba’s submission that “literature is also an important means of appropriating, inverting or challenging means of representation and colonial ideologies” (63). Failure to offer a counter to the warped hegemonic versions of history respecting women’s involvement in liberation wars across the continent might eat into her credibility as a novelist. What Palestine-born late top-flight American literary pundit Edward Said calls ‘worldliness’ indicates the awareness that the social and political environment of the writer cannot be divorced from the content of his/her opus. The significance of art goes far deeper than mere aesthetic.

The informed casting of Vera’s protagonists speaks to her anti-patriarchal misogynistic bend. Actually, she has a consummate knack for weaving the double whammy of African women as second-rate soldiers in nationalist war struggles into their anti-climactic feeling over the post-liberation dispensation. This bespeaks the African resonance that *The Stone Virgins* entails unlike other novels by Vera: “Of all continents only Africa has known the crushed solitude of a dead spider. Charcoal perfect” (122). Even though Vera at times
emphasizes collective suffering in a move calculated to lend a continental dimension to her story, the fact remains that the agonizing psychological and physical pains in the backwash of colonial oppression and the betrayal of the idealism of the liberation war bulk large in her novelistic discourses. Not only did independence fail to live up to its promises of justice and gender equality but it also gave rise to an internecine war between the two factions that fought alongside each other to bring to heel white minority rule. If anything, barely two years into statehood was “the Korean-trained Fifth Brigade of the Zimbabwean National Army wreaking havoc in Matabeleland– whose inhabitants were now denounced as anti-government dissidents who had to be crushed at all costs– and killed an estimated 20,000 people” (Mlambo 2). Much as Vera does not explicitly broach the historical ins and outs of the aforementioned war in The Stone Virgins, she shies away from glossing it over completely. The internecine war took a heavy toll amongst women. The scope of its devastation in terms of human suffering lurks just beneath the surface of the novel. It is through the character of Sibaso, an erstwhile freedom fighter turned dissident that Yvonne Vera seeks to bring to light the horrors wrought by two years of fighting against a backdrop of bitter ethnic hate and rivalry between the Shona and the Ndebele. In a highly commendable narrative move, Vera gives the fictional floor, as it were, to Sibaso to bare his soul in chapters 7, 11, 15 and 16. Of note in his personal accounts are his sense of disenchantment with post-independence Zimbabwe and, more significantly, his shock disclosure that he lost his mammy at birth. Sibaso’s bafflement is the more excruciating since his fellow compatriots have gone through fire and water to dismantle decades of race-based oppression, with countless people paying the ultimate price. That the African leadership who rose to power in the aftermath of colonial rule revealed themselves to be incapable, nay unwilling, of making good on the promises of the liberation struggle rankles with him. Sibasolaments, “Independence, which took place only three years ago, has proved us a tenuous species, a continent that has succumbed to a violent wind, a country with land but no habitat. We are out of bounds in our own reality” (82). He registers his refusal to get embroiled in a course of action that is out of whack with his moral compass: “Independence is the compromise to which I could not belong. I am a man who is set free, Sibaso, one who remembers harm” (97). To give proof of his credentials as a fighter with gravistas, he says with a hint of regret, “The smallest of my fingers no longer bend” (97). Plainly, the likes of Sibaso have little to show for their sacrifices to the emancipation of their people from the shackles of bondage. It then comes as no shocker that the killer of Thendjive admits to “having a personal resolve against a personal harm” and takes it upon himself to “endure the
war anew” (141). Viewed from a philosophical lens, Sibaso’s hawkish posture stems from a
desire to stand on his dignity. He is beefy about the post-independence leadership as he feels
like they have trampled his honour and freedom by disdaining the sacrifices that he and his
fellow Zimbabweans of African extraction made to get shot of the injustice of colonial
oppression. Nineteenth-century sophisticated German thinker Arthur Schopenhahuer
identifies the principle of honour and human freedom as belonging together:

*The principle of honour stands in close connection with human freedom. It
is, as it were, an abuse of that freedom. Instead of using his freedom to fulfil
the moral Law, a man employs his power of voluntarily undergoing any
feeling of pain, of overcoming any momentary impression, in order that he
may assert his self-will, whatever be the object to which he directs it. As he
thereby shows that, unlike the lower animals, he has thoughts which go
beyond the welfare of his body and whatever makes for that welfare, it has
come about that the principle of honour is often confused with virtue. (115)*

The location of the liberation struggle and the misdeeds of post-independence
Zimbabwean as a site of suffering for women bears testimony. They have experienced first-
hand the harrowing strictures of a double whammy- that is, tradition and colonial-based
patriarchy. As it turns out, their all-out participation in the independence struggle was an
epitome of a desire to achieve freedom from subjugation. Ania Loomba posits that the
“intermixed of violence and patriarchy” in a colonial setting redounds to the advantage of
both the colonized man and the colonizing subject. In the normal scheme of things, these are
foes. Strangely enough, they are united in their common wish to strip the colonized woman of
a voice, thereby making her a “site” as opposed to a “subject” in debates germane to, say,
narratives of historical purport (222). Loomba goes on to write that:

*Women are not just a symbolic space but real targets* (italicized in the book;
so, it is I who underline) of colonialist and nationalist discourses. Their
subjection and the appropriation of their work is crucial of the workings of
the colony or the nation. Thus, despite their other difference, and despite
their contests over native women; colonial and indigenous patriarchies
often collaborated to ‘keep women in their place’. The specter of their real
independence haunted both colonialists and their opponents. (222)*

Loomba laments the anti-climactic sense gripping women after the nationalist
struggles. They perceive women as having been mere pawns in a wider male agenda. She
echoes some critics that

*even though the reform of women’s position seems to be a major concern
within nationalist (and colonialist discourses), and even though female
power, energy and sexuality haunt these discourses, women themselves, in
any real sense, seem to ‘disappear’ from these discussions about them.
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From colonial as well as nationalist records, we learn little about how they felt or responded, and until recently, there was little attempts to locate them as subjects within the colonial struggle. (221)

Yvonne Vera bucks that trend in a most courageous way. Writing from a dyed-in-the-wool feminist perspective, she taps into the function of literature as “a means to critically scrutinize and challenge dominant perspectives and ideas” (Loomba 82) in order to embark upon a process of exposing and debunking the falsehood of what, Jocelyn Alexander, McGregor and Terence Ranger, call “the master-narrative of official Zimbabwean nationalism” (Qtd. in Bull-Chriantiansen, 8). This line of narrative emphasizes what prominent British historian, Terence Ranger, terms “patriotic history”. Vera rewrites history to pay respects to her female compatriots, whose diverse contribution to the emergence of an independent Zimbabwe has been airbrushed from the official accounts of the liberation wars, i.e., 1896-7 and 1965-1980. The post-independence conflict between rival factions of the Second Chimurenga made a mockery of the female ex-combatants’ sacrifices to get Zimbabwe off the hook of colonial oppression. The killing of Thenjive and raping of her sister Nonceba is an obnoxious payback for the trials and tribulations that they underwent during the nationalist struggle. Meanwhile, a glimpse into the rapist-killer’s psyche foregrounds war as having the potential for turning a sane human being into a monster of the blackest dye. The narrator’s questions respecting Sibaso’s composure when committing a heinous crime are telling, “How did a man slice off a woman’s head while a bucket was carried above it? How did a man slice a woman’s throat and survive? (73). In a bid to highlight Sibaso’s callousness, the narrator recounts the offhandedly nefarious theatricality that attends his handling of Thenjive’s body:

*Then he holds the dead body up, this stranger, clutching that decapitated death like a rainbow. He holds Thenjive up. . . . The head is now dangling on Thenjive’s breasts, separated. . . . In that quickness, moments before that, Nonceba sees the right arm pull back and grab the body by the waist, a dancing motion so finely practiced, it is clear it not new to the performer. It is not the first death he has held in his arms, clutching at it, like a bird escaping. It is not the first death he has caused.* (74-5)

A few lines earlier, the torturing of Nonceba at the hands of the same Sibaso, depicted as “a predator, with the instincts of annihilation”, is described in gory detail:

*He carries the body spread on his back, an arm limp on each shoulder, his motion forceful, true with blood. . . . He turns steadily with the movements of a hunter who kills not because he is hungry but because the stomach is full, and therefore he can hunt with grace. . . . He thinks of scars inflicted before dying.*
betrayals before a war, after a war, during a war. Sibaso. He considers the woman in his arms.
He thrusts her body to the ground: a dead past.
Nonceba falls. She spins her head away from him. She falls over her arms, her hands trapped between her breasts. (76, 78)

The inhumanity of war coupled with post-liberation disenchantment has turned Sibaso into an unfeeling human being. Critic Wilson-Tagoe has a theory as to what makes Sibaso tick. She points out that the disillusioned erstwhile freedom fighter’s enactment of wanton physical as well as psychological violence upon the two sisters, stems from an ingrained attempt to register his anger at a continuum of historical woes:

Sibaso’s linear deterministic view sees his community as doomed by centuries of failures and betrayals. He sees his own progress from being an idealist of the struggle to its destroyed victim as one cycle in a continuum of political betrayals that date back centuries. In his mind the sacrifice of virgins several centuries ago is no different from the betrayals of the nationalist struggle and his own wanton killing and violation of Thenjive and Nonceba. (234)

A streak of unfulfilled expectations has marred Sibaso’s character. His woeful choice to take out his pent-up anticlimactic grievances on Thenjive and Nonceba points to a warped reading of history through gendered lens. That underlines Vera’s lofty drive to re-write history in a way that acknowledges what women brought to the party of the advent of freedom from colonial oppression, and post-independence nation building. Despite the stultifying lingering weight of a past heavily prejudiced against women, Yvonne Vera is sanguine about the future. She encapsulates in the relationship between Cephas and Nonceba steadfast resolve to move from a harrowing past to a future devoid of the skewed masculinist historiography of women’s involvement in the wars of liberation. On the heels of Thenjive’s gruesome murder and her kid sister’s rape and mutilation, Cephas becomes a shoulder to cry on for Nonceba. An archivist by trade, Cephas introduces himself to Nonceba as an old flame of Thenjive. He recounts to Nonceba with an air of gravity how he has known about Thenjive’s death, but she is chary. Indeed, Nonceba avers that her sister has never mentioned Cephas to her. Given the fact that they “had no secrets between [them]” and that they “were very close”, there was no reason why Thenjive would have been silent about the supposed relationship. Despite Cephas’ persuasive contention that “Perhaps she wanted to keep this to herself, or she might not have been ready to tell,” (154) Nonceba sticks to her guns, regarding Cephas as a stranger “who has just happened to follow his past here” (156). Nothing daunted, Cephas pleads with her to oblige him, “for the sake of Thenjive, allow me to offer my help” (157). Reacting to Cephas’s advice for her to shake the dust of Kezi off her
feet, Nonceba says that she is not prepared to do so, arguing that she ‘ha[s] no wish to leave Kezi. Nothing worse can happen to me now. Why should I run away? The war is everywhere. Is it not there in the city?’ (157). Cephas’s comeback is convincingly potent: “Worse things can happen if you continue to remain in Kezi, unprotected. I want you to come with me-to Bulawayo. It is not bad there. The war is mainly in the villages” (157). The post-independence internecine conflict between rival factions of the new leadership has struck the fear of God into people. Wall-to-wall suffering compounded by everyday occurrence of death has taken a heavy human toll. Not surprisingly, Kezi is likened to “a naked cemetery”, and that “to die here is to be abandoned to vultures and unknown graves” (159). This grim picture makes Nonceba buy into Cephas’s argument that her interest is better served in leaving Kezi for Bulawayo. Cephas and Nonceba have a commonality—they are victims of a gruesome past seared on their memory. Unlike Nonceba, Cephas is of the mind that they need to turn over a new leaf. Kezi being the site of so many painful memories cannot be the ground zero for a new beginning. From a Nietzschean philosophical standpoint, Cephas’s determination to draw a line under the past makes sense. The eighteenth-centuryuber-renowned German thinker posits forgetting as being a recipe for happiness. Enjoyment of the here and now is next to impossible if the past is hauntingly present. Nietzsche writes:

He who cannot think down on the threshold of the moment and forget all the past, who cannot stand balanced like a goddess of victory without growing dizzy and afraid, will never know what is happiness – worse he will never do anything to make others happy. . . . Forgetting is essential to action of any kind, just as not only light but darkness too is essential for the life of anything organic. . . . it is almost impossible to live without forgetting. Or, to express my theme even more simply: there is a degree of sleeplessness, or rumination, of historical sense, which is harmful and ultimately fatal to the living thing, whether this living thing be a man or a people or a culture.(67)

Cephas manages to have Nonceba coming to Bulawayo, They live in a rented flat. They are united by a desire to ride above their traumatic experience to forge a new future. However, they wisely shirk discussing “their relationship, the limits of it”. Rather, they elect to “focus on the things that need to be done, the things they are definite about. Helping: a type of recue” (172). Life in Bulawayo gives Nonceba a new lease on life although she still bears the “visible scars” of a harrowing past that links her to Kezi. Cephas and Nonceba embark all guns blazing on a process of revival the success of which can only be mediated by an unwavering resolve not to turn the clock back. Each of them has somewhat an axe to grind in their new relationship, and, more significantly, their well-meaning decision to turn over a new leaf. With Nonceba, Cephas has found closure for the loss of Thenjive. Conversely,
Nonceba sees in Cephas a kind of knight in shining armour. Cephas appositely points out that
“All she has before her is death, not life” (159). Ultimately, Nonceba settles for the plumb job
that she lands herself and politely turns down the gig that Cephas has managed to secure for
her at a library. Cephas knows full well that he should walk on eggshells in terms of his
relationship with Nonceba so that he won’t go down the unconscionable path of incest. By his
own admission, the nature of his relationship with Nonceba is a far cry from that he had with
her sister:

He need not choose, nor even imagine what sort of love he prefers; the image
of one is safely in the other. He dares not question his continuity of emotions, of
love—a form of incest, loving two sisters. In this case, only a defiance of death,
perhaps. No. Certainly not incest. It is more accurate to consider it a kinship of
desire. (177)

From a theological perspective, the attachment that Cephas harbours for
Nonceba may qualify as Agape love. Sympathy and selflessness underpin it: “Agape is just
ordinary human affection and compassion, such as will flow freely if we become liberated
from self-concern and its attendant anxieties” (qtd. in Grant, 6). In Williams’ estimation, the
purport of Agape lies in the scope for renewal that it affords: “Agape is identification with the
neighbor and meeting his needs, but it is identification at the level of confession of our
betrayal of the divine image, and hope for the possibility of renewal through the grace of
suffering love” (Qtd. in Grant, 18). Cephas and Nonceba have their fair share of the raw deal
from life. Their acquaintanceship that occurs within the fellowship of victimhood bespeaks a
no-nonsense refusal to remain inconsolable before history as opposed to being full-blown
actors in the enactment of social and political transformations across the board. Cephas’s
submission that “A new nation needs to restore the past” (184) is measure of a mindset
geared towards a promising future.

In the final analysis, The Stones Virgins is a scathing indictment of a patriarchal
propensity towards a calculated disparagement of women’s wholesome agency during
nationalist struggles. The sense of anti-climactic feeling over the post-independence
dispensation gripping women ex-combatants is writ large. It is all the more excruciating and
unpalatable since the liberation war designed to throw off the yoke of colonial bondage and
construed, from a continental perspective, as a recipe for the full-blown emancipation of
women. The setting and time in The Stone Virgins resonate with the past and present of
Zimbabwe as a former British colony and as an independent nation. Yet there is no denying
that it has an African dimension. Yvonne Vera’s embrace of “emancipatory” narrative
A Scathing Indictment of Gender-Spiked Official Historical War Accounts cum a Tribute to Female Agency: An Examination of *The Stone Virgins* by Yvonne Vera

registers an understandable claim for recognition of the invaluable contribution of African women, not least the Zimbabwean ones, in the nationalist struggles. Hopefully, Vera’s bold attempt to give an outlet to stifled female narratives will go some way to redressing the gender-spiked accounts of the liberationist war.

Notes:

1. Chimwidos and mujibas are italicized in the text; so, it is who underline.

2. Zimbabwe’s ride to statehood was an easy one by any means. The country had lived under the yoke of colonial oppression for pretty nearly one hundred years. The Zimbabweans of African stock never took their subjugation lying down. Instead, there had been a concerted effort geared towards throwing off the shackles of the jackboot of race-based domination. Following the Unilateral Declaration of Independence of 1965 by Ian Smith-led Rhodesian Front, the Zimbabweans had to bite the bullet of considering armed struggle as the only cost-effective way out of their decades-long harrowing predicament. The drivers of the liberation war were the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) and the Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZANLA), ZANLA being the military wing of ZANU and ZIPRA that of ZAPU. The two nationalist groups joined forces in 1976 to set up The Patriotic Front (PF). The Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) was led by Robert Mugabe, the first prime minister of post-independence Zimbabwe who was cornered into resignation last year after thirty-seven years in power. As regards, the Zimbabwe People’s Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA), its commander was Joshua Nkomo. The 1980 poll held on the heel of the Lancaster House agreement set the seal on the freedom of Zimbabwe from colonial bondage and gave Robert Mugabe—who had polled 63% of the vote—full authority to be at the helm. It was against a background of bitter rivalry between ZANU and ZAPU and their military wings that the 1985 election took place. Yet again the outcome shored up Mugabe’s grip on power. In the aftermath of the elections, rivalries between the two factions came to a head with a spate of political harassment and violence tinged with ethnic undercurrents directed against the Ndebele ethnic group. In its frantic drive to crack down on what they saw as anti-government dissidents, the Fifth Brigade of the Zimbabwe national army mowed down upwards of 20,000 people in Matabeleland.

3. In a potent article entitled “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire”, Pierre Nora is at pains to lay out the reasoned arguments that account for the difference between ‘memory’ and ‘history’. From the get go, Nora bemoans the “conquest” and “eradication” of memory by history with adverse consequences. The notions of memory and history cannot be seriously lumped together. Speaking of memory, it “is life borned by living societies founded in its name.” The historian goes on to write that memory “remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived.” As regards history, it “is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer” (8). In other words, memory is a hyphen between the past and the present whereas history is an intellectual practice dedicated to representing the past. There are differences that Pierre Nora spots in his article that help get a better sense of the two concepts which, on the face of it, seem synonymous while in actual fact they are oppositional, so to speak. There is aura of symbolism that goes with memory; “Memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, in gestures, images, and objects”. On the other hand, history “binds itself strictly to temporal continuities, to progression and to relations between things” (9). A key element that factors into an understanding of memory is that it “installs remembrance within the sacred” (9). Pierre emphasizes that the emergence of lieux de mémoire as a bulwark against the threat posed to memory by history: “…if history did not besiege memory, deforming and transforming it, penetrating and petrifying it, there would be no lieux de mémoire” (12). Speaking of the fundamental purpose of a lieu de mémoire, Nora foregrounds its pushback dimension, saying that it “is to stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things, to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial...all of this to capture a maximum of meaning in the fewest of signs” (19). It is worth noting, though, that the intention to remember is crucial to getting a handle on the difference between lieu de mémoire and lieu d’histoire. Indeed, three words—material, symbolic and functional—give memory its true meaning: “Even an apparently pure material site, like an archive, becomes a lieu de mémoire only if the imagination invests it with a symbolic aura. A purely functional site, like a classroom manual, a testament, or a veterans’ reunion belongs to the category only inasmuch as it is the object of a ritual. And the observance of a commemorative minute of silence, an extreme example, a strictly symbolic action, serves as a concentrated appeal to memory by literally breaking a temporal continuity” (19). In the world of *The Stone Virgins*, Thandabantu Store qualifies as a lieu de mémoire or site of memory in English. It stands as a port of call for fighters both male and female during the
liberation war. Passengers arriving from Bulawayo by the Kezi-Bulawao-Kezi bus would drop by Thandabantu store, do their purchases before dispersing into the village bus. Thandabantu is always a bustling place whose significance during the freedom war bears testimony. The storekeeper of Thandabantu is a household name who makes it point of staying above the fray: “The storekeeper, Mahlathini, keeps his hands on the till and never looks up; he laughs but never looks up; he agrees, disagrees, and never lifts his eyebrows. [. . .] He does not want to remember who said what, and when. He does not want to know who heard him say what, and when” (131). Thandabantu became overnight a lieu de mémoire big time with the post-liberation war pitting ZANU – PF against ZAPU. In a killing spree, fighters from the government swooped down on Thandabantu, “walked in and raised AK-47 rifles” and “shot them without preamble” (132). Thandabantu is thus razed to the ground. The most gruesome and unexpected killing is that of Mahlathini. The gory details of the storekeeper’s murder suggest that there are undercurrents of revenge in his being targeted: “They tied him up. Then they let the burning emulsion down. On him. The soldiers focused on this one activity with for and intensity, their faces expressionless as they sliced plastic after plastic, as they let the liquid flame drop, as they set the place alight. . . . Those who witnessed the goings-on at Thandabantu on this night said Mahlathini howled like a helpless animal” (134). If anything, soldiers “accused Mahlathini of offering a meeting place where anything could be spoken, planned, and allowed to happen” (132). Yet, when you think about it, “Mahlathini was not important. . . He was only a storekeeper whom they could skin alive and discard” (133). The status of Thandabantu Store as a site of memory is warranted owing to the symbolism that it embodies during the liberation struggle: “Part of the old Thabdabantuverenda is still here, solid and undisturbed; enduring, too, is the thick, flat, low, low wall built around the veranda, linking pillar to pillar. . . . Here female soldiers once reclined during the cease-fire; they spread curiosity and awe throughout the population of Kezi, spitting onto the ground, rubbing the smoke of fires from their eyes, bending their hips to pull to a comfortable tightness the loose shoelaces on their boots” (129). As folks walk past the razed Thandabantu Store, they cannot help but stop to remember its historical significance.

4The concept of “worldliness” is Edward Said’s brainchild. He broaches it in his renowned seminal work, The World, the Text and the Critic published in 1983. The late American critic of Palestinian extraction ties the concept of “worldliness” to the writer’s role in society. Said is cast in the mould of those intellectuals who strongly believe that the writer must not write in a vacuum. If anything, there is always a chunk of the writer’s personal experiences or worldview in his/her opus. The text’s worldliness refers to the material conditions in which it occurs. Edward Said writes that, “The point is that texts have ways of existing that even in their most rarefied form are always enmeshed in circumstance, time, place, and society—in short they are in the world, hence worldly” (35). In Said’s estimation, no intellectual worth their salt can overlook the political realities of their country. The connection between the subject matter and the political realities is so significant as to enable the writer to “speak truth to power” (35). In other words, the staple diet of the circumstantial reality ought to feed into the intellectual’s thematic wellspring. Only if it speaks to the concerns of society can art be redemptive. Yvonne Vera’s bold move to grapple with the issue of the patriarchal straitjacket that hampers a full rendition of women’s involvement in the liberation struggles across the African continent, denotes a faith in the “disclosive potentialities” of public narratives “for transformations” (Lara 4).

Works Cited:


