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## Subalternity Revisited: *unhu/ubuntu*/Existentialist Intersubjectivity and Ancestral Silence in Yvonne Vera's *Nehanda*

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This paper theoretically rereads pre-colonial Shonas' subalternity in Yvonne Vera's *Nehanda* (1993) in the context of a critique of postcolonial theory and the rise of African studies. It argues that contrary to conventional theories of subalternity, in Vera's novel however, subalternity does not only arise from racial or class difference. Instead, as this article demonstrates, subalternity read via Zimbabwean episteme, is also seen emanating from the Shona people's tradition of *unhu*, which is akin to and best illuminated by the Sartrean concept of 'intersubjectivity'. I further argue that the silence of the Shona's ancestral spirits, which Shona tradition terms: *kufuratirwa nevadzimu* and is analogous to the existentialist notion of 'abandonment', intensifies the Shonas' subalternity. The paper thus both introduces and develops African-centred viewpoints that widen the lens and complexity of what constitutes subalternity amongst the Shona re-presented in *Nehanda*.

### Critique of postcolonial theory and the rise of African studies

Since the publication of Edward's Said's *Orientalism*, the term postcolonial has acquired much currency. Today, Said's *Orientalism* (1978) is regarded the foundational text to what is now known as 'postcolonial studies'. In his seminal text, Said "single-handedly inaugurates a new era of academic inquiry: colonial discourse theory/colonial discourse analysis [...] – the variety of textual forms in which the West produced and codified knowledge about non-metropolitan areas and cultures, especially those under colonial control. (Williams & Chrisman, 1994:5) From that time on, post-colonialism has continued to be a "vexed theoretical term" (Zeleza, 2006:91), much debated and contentious field of study.

This is firstly because, since Said, postcolonial theory's, "arguments [have, and] are most forcefully driven by diasporic intellectuals as literary critics. But their inspiration comes perhaps more from nicely subtle readings of fashionable European theorists, Foucault or de Man and Derrida or Bakhtin and Lacan than it does from the jewel in the crown, or current local knowledge of the cultural politics of everyday life in postcolonial hinterlands" (Werbner, 1996:6). The result has been such that: "postcolonial theory has become increasingly conflated with diasporic writers, identities, and representation" (Zeleza, 2006:102) from the many dimensions of the diaspora as they relate to postcolonial studies. This is to the extent that, Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1994), for instance, "complains that postcolonial theory discuss 'the production of the Third World Woman' in ways that create 'a singular monolithic subject' (qtd in Wehrs, 2003:761), when in essence, by virtue of their different identities and experiences, this is not so.

Secondly, as a theorization of postcoloniality, postcolonial theory has proved problematic, especially to those academics that are knowledgeable of the culture and the everyday of their people. This is because, while it uses postcoloniality as its resource, its theorizations of it have not attempted to emanate from the analysis of postcolonial experiences, traditions and cultures. In light of this irony, over the years it has been argued "that the intellectual history of postcolonial theory is marked by a dialectic between Marxism...and poststructuralism/postmodernism [such that] in its current mood postcolonial theory principally addresses the needs of the Western academy" (Gandhi, 1998: viii-ix) In which regard Gayatri C. Spivak has complained that: "We are always *after* the empire of reason, our claims always short of

adequate.” (Spivak, 1990b:288) Consequently, postcolonial theory as an approach to reading non-Western literature “remains wedded to ways of conceiving the relation of the non-West to the West, and of conceiving human motivation and political agency more generally, [...as] ‘jump started’ by Western material and conceptual colonial violence.” (Wehrs, 2003:762) Yet, in essence, and as Vera’s fiction demonstrates, there are complex understandings to the African, which predate Western and first forms of anti-colonial intellectual history.

It is therefore, insofar as, “postcolonial theory’s distinctive academic genre, [...] displays a ‘lack of curiosity about the ‘truth’ [about non-Western history and cultural practices]” (Wehrs, 2001:6 qtd in Wehrs, 2003:761) that more ‘curious’ research and studies have over the last forty years, emerged. Partly in response to the criticism against postcolonial studies highlighted above, since the beginning of the 1980s, “a revolution in scholarship has redressed centuries of neglect and misrepresentation” (Wehrs, 2003: 762) in the form of African studies. Comprising of an interdisciplinary paradigm, African studies primarily concerns itself with the study of African societies, their history, anthropology, politics, economies, religions and languages. In this regard, “A key focus of the discipline is to interrogate epistemological approaches, theories and methods in traditional disciplines using a critical lens that inserts African-centred ways of knowing and references”(Wikipedia, 2013) as they exist in sub-Saharan Africa.

African studies’ foremost luminaries, who are known as “Africanists”, include the likes and works of John L. Comaroff; Simon A. Roberts (1981); Maurice Bloch (1986); Chidi Maduka (1988); Abiola Irele; M.E Combs-Schilling (1992); Peter Rigby (1989); Amaechi Akwaya (2000), Donald R. Wehrs (2001) and Olakunle George (2007). To Africanists, “postcolonialism is regarded as too theoretical and too occupied with textuality and discourse to have anything meaningful to contribute to the study of the continent” (Abrahamsen, 2003:190) whose literary tradition has been, and is largely inspired by and re-presents its people’s pre- and postcolonial experiences, cultures and traditions.

Over the last forty years therefore, African Studies and Africanists have sought to, amongst others, “correct the accepted interpretation [...and] understanding of the non-Western actor as a “reactor” – an understanding lending itself to ‘progressive’ sentimentality as well as to racist denigration” (Wehrs, 2003:762). In this regard, the African Studies project resonates with my paper which seeks to reread and illuminate subalternity via the deployment of a critical lens that interweaves Zimbabwean-centred ways of knowing, tradition, culture and references, with some pertinent concepts of Sartrean existentialism which best animate aspects of subalternity in the novel. In this respect, I, to some extent, align myself, and this paper, with the African studies initiative. In particular, African New Criticism which takes into consideration both the textual and contextual aspects of African societies by capturing “the spirit of [the] African milieu and therefore desseminat[ing] African cultural value.”(Bamgbose, 2013:4) The paper is therefore interdisciplinary in its approach to the novel of one of Zimbabwe’s most prominent writers.

### **Rereading and illuminating subalternity in Vera’s *Nehanda***

It has been observed that literary criticism of Zimbabwe’s literature, to which Yvonne Vera’s fiction belongs, has often had to contend with often, “constraining or constricting interpretations or readings” (Muponde & Primorac, 2005: xviii). Further, the Zimbabwean critic Maurice Vambe “challenges the sociological approach in the two influential ‘social histories’ of Zimbabwean literature (Veit-Wild and Chiwome), which he reproaches for being too deterministic and thereby foreclosing pluralistic or ambivalent readings of literary

works.” (Veit-Wild, 2006:195-196) Hence the title of Vambe’s chapter: “The poverty of theory in the study of Zimbabwean Literature” (Vambe, 2005:89-100). It is in view of criticisms surrounding postcolonial theory, the rise of African studies and perceptions surrounding both the interpretation and study of literature from Zimbabwe, that I seek to contribute towards theoretical interpretations or readings of the country’s and indeed the continent’s postcolonial literary works. Rereading in this essay is therefore understood to mean, “the making and revising of assumptions, [...] the coming to and abandoning of conclusions, [...] the specifying of causes, the solving of puzzles” (Fish, 1999:158–9) which Vera’s *Nehanda* as an African and Zimbabwean novel, invites.

Born on 19 September 1964 in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, Yvonne Vera is best known for her internationally acclaimed fiction that re-presents a variety of black Zimbabweans and different moments of the country’s history. She died on 7<sup>th</sup> April 2005 in Toronto, Canada. Vera “[was] Shona, [but spoke] both Ndebele and Shona, and as such she is in a position to view the Zimbabwean cultural heritage with a broad perspective.” (Bull-Christiansen, 2004:18) Indeed, as *Nehanda* testifies, in the novel Vera displays her intimate knowledge and understanding of her people through her depiction of their traditions and pre-colonial experiences during the late nineteenth century. In particular, the novel portrays the Shona’s relations with their ancestral cosmos, the land and the white strangers who come and occupy some of it. On a historical and mythological level, it fictionalises the life stories of the titular heroine, Nehanda, and the man, Kaguvi, both of whom were Zimbabwe’s pre-colonial mythical spirit mediums during the country’s first uprising against white occupation. In a non-linear narrative, Vera relates the birth and spirit possession of Nehanda. How, when the white occupiers subalternize her people, Nehanda becomes possessed by the spirit of her ancestors and instructs the people to fight the occupiers. This is until the ancestral spirits abandon her and fall silent. The Shona people are defeated and Kaguvi imprisoned. He is later hanged. Although historically, Nehanda was hanged together with Kaguvi, Vera pointedly does not re-present this in the novel, such that the spirit of Nehanda lives forever.

As my synopsis of Vera’s *Nehanda* testifies, Zimbabwean society has since pre-colonial times, been shaped from below. In some of their fiction, Zimbabwean writers such as Stanley Nyamfukudza and Chenjerai Hove are thematically concerned and similarly grapple with the problem of how to render such subaltern consciousness in literature. The expression ‘subaltern’ has over the years been associated with Indian subaltern studies where it was influenced by the work of Antonio Gramsci (1971), the Subaltern Studies Group (1982) and Gayatri C. Spivak (1988), to generally refer to a subordinate status, a “subject disinherited by governing epistemes and unable to access hegemonic power structures” (Kostelac, 2006:65). It is such a subaltern that I see inhabiting the pages of Vera’s fiction. However, what I see as differentiating them from other subalterns is the cause of their subalternity.

To Gramsci (1881-1937), the Italian Marxist thinker and originator of the term ‘subaltern’, the subaltern classes were essentially, “any ‘low rank’ person or group of people in a particular society suffering under hegemonic domination of a ruling elite class that denies them the basic rights of participation in the making of local history and culture as active individuals of the same nation.” (Louia, 2012:5) In the context of Gramsci’s Italy, this could have been in reference to the peasantry and those workers who at the time were under the tyranny of the fascist Benito Mussolini.

Gramsci’s *Selections from The Prison Notebooks* (1971) was published at a time when India was in the thralls of a “historiographical contest over the representation of the culture and



politics of the people.” (Prakash, 1994: 1477) His ideas about the subaltern appealed and were subsequently drawn from his writings by the Subaltern Studies collective. In the Subaltern Studies collective’s writings, the term ‘subaltern’ as derived from Gramsci (1971), is employed to “refer to subordination in terms of class, caste, gender, race, language, and culture and was used to signify the centrality of dominant/dominated relationships in history” (Prakash, 10). Over the years, the group’s project has become known as one of rewriting Indian “‘history-from-below’” (Sabin, 2008:179). Subsequent to the Subaltern Studies group’s work, “One of the effects of that collectives’ writings, [has been] the discernment and analysis of subalternity outside South Asia [...] in places as remote from each other (and as far from the Indian experience of British imperialism) as Algeria and Afghanistan, [...] Morocco, Zimbabwe and Zanzibar. (Morris, 10)

Just as the Subaltern Studies group were influenced by Gramsci’s work, it is Spivak’s response to the collective’s work, which spurred on her own notions of subalternity. In 1987, Spivak criticised the ‘Subaltern Studies’ project for its failure to attend sufficiently to questions of gender. Subsequently, she turned her attention specifically to “the crucial instrumentality of woman as symbolic object of exchange” (Spivak, 1987: 217) Consequently, Spivak’s most recognised intervention in the theorization of subalternity is her seminal essay: *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1985/1988) initially delivered as a lecture in 1985 and then published in 1988.

In a critique of political and cultural theorists such as Karl Marx, Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, Spivak grapples with who constitutes the subaltern and argues that: “the colonised subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogeneous” (Spivak, 1994: 79). This is because to her: “The same class or element which was dominant in one area [...] could be among the dominated in another. This could and did create many ambiguities and attitudes and alliances” (Spivak, 79-80). As such, she proposes that the subaltern constitute those: “At the other end of the scale, those most separated from possibility of an alliance among ‘women, prisoners, conscripted soldiers, hospital patients, and homosexuals’” (Spivak, 84). To Spivak, these “are the females of the urban subproletariats. Of the urban proletariat, Spivak concentrates on women, for it is: “The woman [who] is doubly in shadow” (Spivak, *ibid*). Since the late 1980s therefore, “Spivak’s particular intervention within the theorization of subalternity revolves around the question of gender.” (Morris, 10) This is to the extent that subalternity has become synonymous with women.

Over the years, Spivak has further defined the subaltern as, “everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism [...] Now who would say that is just the oppressed?” (Spivak quoted in Landry & Maclean, 1996: 46) Subsequently, to her, “the very definition of the subaltern entails immobility, whereby the cultural space of subalternity is cut off from the lines of mobility producing the class and gender differentiated colonial subject” (Spivak, 2002:13). In Spivak’s rethinking, expansion and shifting definitions of the subaltern, she also points out that, “by being postcolonial or the member of an ethnic minority” (Spivak, 1999: 310), one is not necessarily subaltern.

As Spivak reflectively writes, “one needs to be vigilant against simple notions of identity [...] I am deeply suspicious of any determinist or positivist definition of identity” (Spivak, 1990a: 38). Today, “The term ‘subaltern’ now appears with growing frequency in studies on Africa, Latin America, and subalternist analysis has become a recognizable mode of critical scholarship in history, literature, and anthropology.” (Prakash, 1476) In spite of this, “what has been less explored is the extent to which the subaltern may have played a constructive

rather than a reflexive role in colonial and domestic imperial discourse and subjectivity” (Williams and Chrisman, 16) It is also partly in this regard, that I here explore and interrogate subalternity in Vera’s *Nehanda* so as to determine how it is constituted and who constitute the ‘subaltern’. Contrary to conventional theories of subalternity however, I do so from the perspective of African New Criticism, by concentrating on the trajectory of subalternity as it emanates from *Nehanda*’s pre-colonial Shonas’ relationships amongst themselves, their ancestors and with the white occupiers.

Morris correctly highlights that, “Subalternity is less an identity than what we might call a predicament [...] For in Spivak’s definition, it is the structured place from which the capacity to predicate is radically obstructed.” (8) In this respect, to me, in *Nehanda*, pre-colonial Shonas’ traditional understanding and practice of relationships, amongst others, instigate subalternity. Nowhere is this most evident than on the occasion of *Nehanda*’s birth that serves to demonstrate the Shona’s spiritual and societal relations.

For the women gathered for *Nehanda*’s birth, it is comforting that “[t]he spirits are there, hover[ing] over the birth unseen” (Vera *Nehanda* 12). Despite this, however, in the presence of their ancestors, it soon becomes evident that mere mortals paradoxically feel both support and yet powerlessness. This is especially as, presence, be it spiritual or human, leads to both security and ‘othering.’ Hence, in spite of the ancestors manifesting themselves in ordinary forms, such is their omnipotence that the women “knew that the birth of the child, for whom they all waited, was something that they did not have the power to control.” (Vera *Nehanda* 2) Poignantly, we learn that this is such that “no matter how powerful and ambitious a mortal might be, the departed were in control. They determined who came into the world, and who did not.” (Vera *Nehanda* 6) The ancestral spirits are, however, not the only potent ‘gatekeepers’ to the portal of human existence.

Presiding over the birth of *Nehanda* is a woman, a trader and a widow, who sits freely, “[h]er knees parted [with] no qualms about sitting on a stool like a man” (6). The presence of the midwife, *Vatete*, is as imposing and equally as othering that of the ancestral spirits. *Vatete* in Shona relations is the sister to a Shona woman’s husband and is traditionally considered a patriarch, or ‘he-woman’. Authoritatively therefore, *Vatete* is the expectant woman’s ‘husband’, as it were, who is presiding over the birth of ‘his’ child. *Vatete* thus represents a manifestation of the subaltern subject-position in that albeit a woman, in the absence of a male, she becomes what Ifi (1987) would describe as a “female husband”. Accordingly, we learn how: “She [*Vatete*] was the most important of the human presences in the room” (Vera *Nehanda* 5).

Moreover, next only to the spirits in seniority and the designate mid-wife, we find out that, “*Vatete* was highly respected. When she failed to deliver a child safely into the world, it was understood that the spirits had intervened in the occurrence” (Vera *Nehanda* 5). As an extension of the ancestors, *Vatete* exemplifies what *Sofola* from a feminist perspective identifies as both sexes’ ability to culturally, “access power, even though each has a distinctive role to play in the life of the community” (1998:53). In consequence, although biologically female, such women as *Vatete* are socially and by virtue of their societal and familial positions of influence, subalternizing figures, heterogeneous to other women.

However, *Nehanda* not only discontinues the perception of female homogeneity and subalternity in Shona society; the novel also tackles the age-old problem of racial and cultural dichotomies as the seats of subalternity. Thus in an incident that has intertextual similarities

with Godfrey Ndhkala's *Jikinya*, when the white strangers had first arrived, their coming having been earlier foretold as, "[t]he sign [...] in the form of a human being, but a human nevertheless" (Vera *Nehanda* 10). In-keeping with the Shona tradition of *unhu*, they had been warmly welcomed.

The traditional philosophy of *unhu/ubuntu* is common amongst ethnic Bantu-speaking people of southern Africa such as the Shona, Ndebele, Zulu, Tswana and Xhosa. It has as its foundation, an African collective consciousness and "its values include sharing, treating other people as humans, empathy, warmth, sensitivity, understanding, care, respect, patience, reciprocation, and communication." (Coetzee & Roux, 1998: 451) It is best illuminated by existentialism's concept of 'intersubjectivity'.

In a 1946 lecture, Sartre defines the existentialist philosophy thus: "existentialism, in our sense of the word, is a doctrine that does render human life possible; a doctrine, also, which affirms that every truth and every action imply [...] a human subjectivity." (Sartre, 1989:1-2) However, as Sartre further explains, "the subjectivity which [existentialists] postulate as the standard of truth is no narrowly individual subjectivism [...] it is not only one's own self that one discovers in the *cogito*, but those of others too." (Sartre, 11) According to Krishnan *et al* (2012:66), "The cogito is a logically self-evident truth that also gives intuitively certain knowledge of the existence of particular things. That is, one's self" as well as that of others. Consequently, "the man who discovers himself directly in the *cogito* also discovers all the others, and discovers them as the condition of his own existence. He recognizes that he cannot be anything [...] unless others recognize him as such." (Sartre, 12) Although Sartre uses the masculine subject and pronoun, in this paper, his idea of intersubjectivity refers to both sexes.

To Sartre therefore, subjectivity is relational as one "cannot obtain any truth whatsoever about [one]self, except through the mediation of another. The other is indispensable to [one's] existence and equally so to any knowledge [one] can have of [one] self." (Sartre, *ibid*) Subsequent to Sartre's 'discovery' of people's relatedness therefore, he agrees that, "at once we find ourselves in a world of 'inter-subjectivity' it is in this world that man has to decide what he is and what others are." (Sartre, *ibid*) Writing in a different context, Fanon also postulates and "follows 'the monological derivation of intersubjectivity' common to the postwar French tradition which is: "I want for the other what I want for myself, because I acknowledge the other as another me; thus both self and other will gain what each desires in the mutual recognition that will affirm our essential homogeneity." (Fanon, 1967 qtd in Wehrs, 2003:766) Although this author does not subscribe to the myth of Fanon's "essential homogeneity", he does however subscribe to Fanon's understanding and elucidation of intersubjectivity and indirectly, *unhu*.

In elucidating the concepts of *outsider* and *stranger*, Papastergiadis (1996) writes that, "The identity of the *outsider* carries with it an *a priori* exclusion: a relation of non-relation. The term 'stranger', on the other hand, possesses an identity which is internalizable although unlocatable" (180), being from places unknown. Upon their first encounter with white people therefore, in *Nehanda*, the Shonas had acknowledged the white arrivals as stranger's, but human nonetheless, and so "give [them] food and shelter, [for] where one is surrounded by humans, one cannot perish" (*N*: 10). Albeit the phenotypic differences, they had treat them humanely.

However, in contrast to the Shona's *unhu*, their African humanism, the strangers' colonial fixed notions of racial identity, superiority and alterity of difference do not reciprocate. Their totalizing understanding of racial phenotypic and anthropological difference cannot accept their black hosts' humanity. Instead, the whites' essentialist acceptance of binary oppositions gives them a superiority complex over the Shona, the blacks. Consequently, whereas the white strangers had been hospitably treated, they soon repay the Shonas' kindness, their sense of *unhu*, with heartlessness and contempt: "After all, what are these kaffirs besides blood thirsty cattle-keepers?" (Vera Nehanda 77). Subsequently, true to Mbembe's comment: "the colonizer [...] made of the native the prototype of the animal and hunt [blacks] out of their land" (2001:26), like the animals they think them.

Many Shona people are brutally "killed by the stranger" (Vera Nehanda 11). They not only appropriate as many cattle of their hosts as possible, they also "move [the blacks] into the barren parts of [the land], where crops would not grow" (Vera Nehanda 39). The Shona soon realize that they had gullibly thought that the white strangers as, "visitors to a strange land, [would] be humble enough not to choose the highest ground in the land to build [a] home" (Vera Nehanda 12). Instead, the white strangers prove themselves contrary and relegate them to marginal lands that could not easily support crops. So, whereas before, blacks had been free to cultivate and worship their ancestors wherever they wanted, they no longer have the freedom to do so, as the strangers appropriate all arable land and desecrated Shona shrines. The behaviour of the white stranger leaves the Shona practically dumbfounded: "What [they] saw on that hill tied [their] mouths, and [they] left in silence" (Vera Nehanda 11). Indeed, such is silencing ingratitude of the white settlers, that whereas the Shona had warmly welcomed the white stranger, unknown to them, they had rushed to "embrace a cactus bush which then brought the desert with it" (Vera Nehanda 67) later.

The same contempt shown to the Shonas is extended to their ancestral spirits as, "the strangers sit at the base of the tree. We had never seen such desecration" (Vera Nehanda 23). In full view of the Shonas, the white stranger disrespectfully digs up sacred ground, without talking to them. When the Shonas eventually speak to the white stranger, he chooses not to "listen to the voices that were sent to him" (Vera Nehanda 39). If anything, the white stranger holds, "his gun as they spoke, mistrusting them [looking] at them as though they were children, without respect" (N: 39). Indeed, one white character that embodies the white colonialists' totalizing notion of black identity as difference is Mr. Browning.

True to colonialism's aim "to reconfigure the African identity to fit its own distorted image" (Vambe, 2002: 135), Mr. Browning's othering of the Shona perpetuates stereotypes about blacks. In his bigoted view, "[t]he only certain thing is never to trust the natives, no matter how well behaved they seem. They are the most dishonest race on the face of the earth" (Vera Nehanda 73). This is in line with the colonialists' belief that blacks are thieves and liars.

Mashoko, Browning's black manservant is disdainfully treated by Browning who refuses to call him by his real name. Instead, Mashoko "once [having] told Mr. Browning his heathen name" (Vera Nehanda 44), Browning had cynically renamed him Moses. However, in Browning's racist opinion, this is "because the new name is easier to remember, and more importantly, it is *a step toward the goal of civilizing the country* [my emphasis]" (N: 44). Thus, disrespectful of Moses as a man and a human being, Browning is extremely contemptuous and abusive of him. Obviously perceiving himself as a 'god', Browning designates Mashoko his personal Moses to do his bidding. Resonant of colonial racial



ideology, Mashoko is perceived of as child-like, to be seen, not heard, and therefore, effectively silenced. In this way, Browning further effaces Mashoko's confidence and unique individuality and imposes himself as the colonial 'subject' on a 'civilizing mission' of the 'other'.

Despite, Spivak's earlier declaration that: "The subaltern cannot speak." (Spivak, 1994:104) in this paper I however argue that subalterns, both female and male, do 'speak'. Indeed, Vera affirms how her writing is against hegemonic silence: "The books that I write try to undo the silent posture African women have endured over many decades" (qtd Soros, 2002:np). In this paper therefore, I therefore posit that the impact of the silence caused by the white occupiers is such that it makes some of the Shona to 'speak' in two different modes. Firstly, I put it that, they speak in the form of "speaking as a transaction between speaker and listener" (Spivak qtd in Landry & Maclean 1996: 46) and manage to achieve the "dialogic level of utterance" (Spivak, *ibid*). In the novel, this initial form of speaking is facilitated through what is traditionally known in Shona as *kusvikirwa* or ancestral spirit possession.

In Shona tradition, *kusvikirwa* or literally 'ancestral spirit possession' occurs when an individual involuntarily reincarnates the spirit of a 'departed' ancestor and its omniscience. When this occurs, the ancestrally spirit possessed descendant, more often than not, generates useful existential knowledge which is disseminated to the family or community with weight. Vambe attests to both the authority and power embedded in spiritual possession when he writes how, "[i]n Shona ancestor veneration, spirit possession is the ritual myth that establishes the link between the departed ancestors and their living descendants" (2002: 127). It is such an ancestral spirit possession, that the titular heroine of Vera's *Nehanda* undergoes.

Albeit still a young woman, Nehanda in her spiritual possession speaks with the omniscience of an ancestral spirit and as such, with authority. It is "as though overnight she has inherited the wisdom of all her departed" (Vera *Nehanda* 60). She speaks with the guidance of the departed. She "tells them what those who had gone before have said, [...] the dead are not gone. The dead are among us, guiding us to clearings in the future where we shall all triumph" (Vera *Nehanda* 63). The Shona thus far silenced by the white occupiers, gather around Nehanda and listen to what the ancestors have to say and direct.

Indeed, such is the empowering quality of spiritual possession that spellbound, "[t]he people clap their hands in unison, showing their submission to Nehanda's spirit and truth. Now the truth is among them, and they succumb." (Vera *Nehanda* 63). The crowd sings, as a way of both welcoming the spirit and "[e]ncouraging Nehanda to speak [...]. Her voice tells of [the] fear and suffering" (Vera *Nehanda* 60) of her people. Although she is yet unmarried and, therefore, without any children, her voice "is also the comforting voice of a woman, of their mothers whom they trust. Her voice throws them into the future" (Vera *Nehanda* 60, 62). Nehanda's is no longer just an individual voice but the designated "voice of the departed [...] borne upon the dancing arrows of the morning sun" (N: 60). Consequently, "[t]hey listen to the unmasking of their destiny" (Vera *Nehanda* 61). So when the spirit possessing Nehanda informs its audience that because "[w]e extended too long a hand to the stranger. Now there is much work to be done, and it must be done quickly. Together, with our spears and our hard work, we must send the enemy out of our midst" (Vera *Nehanda* 61). They answer to the spirit's call to action to "fight for what belongs to [them], and *for their departed*, [my emphasis]" (Vera *Nehanda* 61) with Nehanda as their director, who is directed by the ancestral spirits. Her promises are inseparable from their ancestors and the people grant Nehanda the authority and privilege to lead them into war against the white 'stranger'.

Secondly therefore, subaltern 'speaking', is through action and through it, the subaltern can "actively move into hegemony" (Spivak, 1993: 137). Spivak's revision of the essay for *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (2006) "reflected new emphases and conceptualisations of the problematic of 'speaking.'" (Morris, 14) One such emphasis was that subalternity did not necessarily mean that, "the other does not continue to act and live" (Morton, 2006: 29). Accordingly, to Spivak, the subaltern voice, "figures will and agency" (Moore-Gilbert, 1997:104) and in the case of Vera's Shona, it takes the form of armed resistance for freedom, or what the Shona refer to as *chimurenga*.

Led by Nehanda, women equally assume a protective, near-spiritual shield over their menfolk. Vambe highlights how Kaguvi is equally "subordinate to the spiritual powers of Nehanda" (132). Later, during the *chimurenga*, "[m]ore men surround [Nehanda] with their own messages, reporting to her that they had done as she had asked [my emphasis]" (Vera *Nehanda* 79). Nehanda arguably becomes amongst the first pre-colonial African female generals. And when during the war with the white stranger, "[a] larger, more angular boulder is propelled by three women, one pushing the top while the others use a log as a lever" (Vera *Nehanda* 86), women's equal participation in combat during the armed struggle with the whites dispels any notion of their status as the 'weaker sex'. Explicit are the military roles that women take on to fight settler occupation. As Vera herself explained, "I wanted to bring that woman who had led the first rebellion against the British to the forefront" (Bryce, 2002: 222). She does so "by challeng[ing] history" (qtd in Mangwanda, 2002: 134) and its omissions of women's contribution to the struggle against colonialism.

Different kinds of silence pervade *Nehanda*. The most devastating is that of the ancestors during the war, which leads to what I perceive to be yet another form of subalternity for the Shona. In the context of this paper, the silence and "absence" of the ancestors: "literally and figuratively is about the retreat of the [ancestors] from various sites of visibility and authority" (Muponde & Muchemwa, 2007: xviii), a cosmological discontinuance but not of their presence in its varied forms. It is such an apparent discontinuance that the Shona traditionally call *kufuratirwa nevadzimu*. When it occurs, it has far-reaching subalternizing implications as it leads to their defeat and further subalternity.

In Shona tradition, *kufuratirwa nevadzimu* or literally to be 'given the back of the ancestors' is the belief that when not all is progressing well in one's, a family's or community's life, then their ancestors are not listening to them and thus deserted their descendants and so not ensuring they prosper and live well. This is especially believed when events in one's or a family's life or a people's lives, continuously go wrong. So, while occasional misfortune is tolerated, recurrent misfortune becomes an indicator that the ancestors have turned their backs on their descendants. This traditional belief is akin to both Spivak's earlier notion of 'speaking' and Sartre's existentialist notion of 'abandonment'.

Spivak earlier in her academic career, wrote of such a subalternity, when she explains that when she wrote that "the subaltern does not speak [it] was confined to speaking as a transaction between speaker and listener" (qtd in Landry & Maclean, 46). According to her, under such circumstances subaltern speech does not achieve the "dialogic level of utterance" (Spivak, *ibid*), "the impossibility of subaltern speech as audible and legible predication" (Morris, 2) resulting in a pervading silence. When existentialists speak of 'abandonment' however, they "mean to say that God does not exist, and that it is necessary to draw the consequences of his absence right to the end." (Sartre, 6) Given such a scenario therefore, to

existentialists this means “that we ourselves decide our being” (Sartre, 6, 8). In this study, I adapt the idea of ‘abandonment’ to illuminate the silence of the ancestors.

Suddenly therefore, in the midst of the Shona’s rebellion the ancestors fall silent, and Nehanda becomes spiritually dispossessed. The silence confirms a long held suspicion of abandonment, as the Shona had earlier incessantly pleaded, “Do not *abandon* us in this fight [my emphasis]” (Vera Nehanda 88). In spite of this pleading, their situation is worsened “[w]hen they arrive at the clearing where they have previously consulted with Nehanda, [...] she is not to be found” (Vera Nehanda 88). Panic-stricken, they call into the cave but to no avail. Instead, “[t]he cave answers with silence” (Vera Nehanda 88). Nehanda, “[the] gift from the departed” (Vambe, 144), the conduit for the voices of the departed is nowhere to be seen and the Shona are defeated.

The Shona’s subalternity takes yet another form when they are defeated. With the departed’s silence, brave Kaguvi is the first to succumb and “surrenders to the settlers and is imprisoned, the villagers are alarmed.” (Vera Nehanda 100) When the settlers “come and kill half the families to force the leaders of the rebellion to come down from the hills” (Vera Nehanda 100), the villagers “place *mhunga* [sorghum] in clay pots filled with water and make beer for their ancestors” (Vera Nehanda 100-101). They once again beseech their ancestors: “Do not abandon us on this difficult path. We are your children. They pray [...] and send messages to the ancestors by pouring beer into the ground.” (Vera Nehanda 101) However, “[t]heir prayers will not reach the departed.” (Vera Nehanda 101) In spite of the Shona’s pleas that those “in the ground, do not forget us.” (Vera Nehanda 101), the ancestral cosmos remains silent. Ultimately, the Shona surrender their fate into the hands of the oppressors.

Recalling the symbiosis between the descendants and the ancestors, it is intriguing how the former will react beyond their ancestors’ silence and defeat. In Mhlahlo’s (2012) opinion, it is during such ‘silence/abandonment’ and the despair it triggers, that cause postcolonial Shonas, “to draw the consequences of [the ancestors] absence right to the end” (Sartre, 6) and some of them to take on existentialist hues evident in Vera’s later novels.

## Conclusion

African fiction, in particular Vera’s, at times deflects, complicates, exceeds or rejects some of postcolonial theory’s categories and concerns. Yet, despite this, “postcolonial theory continues to exhibit a lack of interest in non-Western cultures articulations of meaning and value[....] That postcolonial theory largely refuses to engage either the empirical or theoretical implications of such scholarship reflects more than disciplinary insularity.” (Wehrs, 2003:761-762) It reflects a blatant refusal to add to and expand the world’s ways of knowing and understanding. This paper has hopefully demonstrated how the nuancing and/or adaptation of some Western theoretical concepts can illuminate and enliven certain aspects of in particular Zimbabwean experience, tradition and culture as re-presented in fiction such as Vera’s, if they are to be fully understood. Thus, by way of her novel *Nehanda*, I hopefully have clearly demonstrated how, initially, the Shona’s subalternity stems from the complexity of their tradition, is aggravated by their humanistic tradition of *unhu/ubuntu* (best illuminated by the existentialist concept of ‘intersubjectivity’), is intensified when their ancestral spirits’ fall silent and they are defeated.

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