



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 3. Issue 1.,2016 (Jan-Mar.)

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

TRAUMATIC MEMORY AND NARRATIVE MEMORY IN YVONNE VERA'S
UNDER THE TONGUE

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ABSTRACT

The most consistently productive among Zimbabwean authors in English, Yvonne Vera (September 19, 1964 - April 7, 2005), has won national and international prizes, and her works have been translated into several languages. The article focuses on the subtlety with which the psychic impact of rape and violence depicted in Vera's novel *Under the Tongue*, especially as manifested in the suppression of the female victim's voice and memory. It attempts to depict some of the paradoxes creative writing of sexual violence has to encounter and demonstrate the ways Vera integrates these into the narrative composition of *Under the Tongue*. The article discusses the role literary fiction can play as a bridge between individual experience and collective memory and presents a reading of *Under the Tongue* with respect to the novel's ability both to perform the effects of trauma by mimetically reproducing them and to transform them into narrative processes by creative choices.

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"Traumatic Memory and Narrative Memory in Yvonne Vera's *Under the Tongue*" focuses on depiction of childhood sexual abuse and some general aspects of the narrative representation of traumatic experiences in Yvonne Vera's novel *Under the Tongue*. Yvonne Vera (1964-2005), an award-winning novelist and innovative museum director was the winner of the first Macmillan Writer's Prize for *The Stone Virgins*. In 1999, Vera was the recipient of Sweden's 'Voice of Africa' award. In 1997, her novel *Under the Tongue* won the Commonwealth Writer's Prize, African Region. She was awarded the Zimbabwean Publisher's Literary Award for the best novel in 1996 and 1997. She is the author of a collection of short stories *Why Don't You Carve Other Animals*(1992) and five novels: *Nehanda* (1993), *Without a Name* (1994), *Under the Tongue* (1996), *Butterfly Burning* (1998) and *The Stone Virgins* (2002).Vera's writings work against the silencing imposed on women by patriarchy and colonialism, and all her novels stress that to write is to banish silence.

Vera's novels are known for their poetic prose, difficult subject-matter, and their strong women characters, and are firmly rooted in Zimbabwe's difficult past. At the time of her death she was working on a new novel, *Obedience*. Her works have been published in Zimbabwe, Canada and several other countries,

including translations into Spanish, Italian and Swedish. She took on themes such as incest, rape, infanticide and gender inequality in Zimbabwe before and after the country's war of independence with sensitivity and courage. She said, "I would love to be remembered as a writer who had no fear for words and who had an intense love for her nation"(Jane 12).

Based on the idea that literature as creative medium offers particular possibilities to communicate and transform mechanisms of psychic trauma as they are frequently experienced by victims of violence, I explore the progression of the novel, *Under the Tongue* as a type of trauma narrative. The first part of the paper dwells upon the concept of trauma and the antagonism between traumatic experience and narrative memory.

The second part of the paper discusses the role literary fiction can play as a bridge between individual experience and collective memory. The third part presents a reading of *Under the Tongue* with respect to the novel's ability both to perform the effects of trauma by mimetically reproducing them and to transform them into narrative processes by creative choices. I have attempted to depict some of the paradoxes creative writing of sexual violence has to encounter and demonstrate the ways Vera integrates these into the narrative composition of *Under the Tongue*(UTT).

One of the main characteristics of trauma is its resistance to narrative representation, revealing itself more in a language of symptoms than in a language of words and sentences. Speaking about trauma we find ourselves in the paradoxical situation of speaking about the unspeakable, to look forwards for what originally surpassed the signifying power of words.

When we talk about childhood sexual abuse we do not always bear this aspect in mind. Usually we associate it only with its sexual dimension, perceiving only the physical, visible part of the drama. The part that is more difficult to discern, is the violent assault on a child's mental and spiritual growth in the world. This assault is particularly serious as it attacks a symbolic order still under construction, as till flexible and fluid and as such specifically vulnerable system of values and meanings. Furthermore, the perpetrator usually burdens the child with the obligation to keep the secret.

The implicit impossibility to tell is crossed by the explicit prohibition to tell. This leads the victim into an involuntary complicity with the perpetrator and overlaps hurt and confusion with feelings of shame and guilt. Since children do not have access to language as an adequate means to transmit what has been done to them, they will experience a loss of confidence in language as something that should be an integrating system of signs and signification at a stage where they are still growing into it.

The novel *Under the Tongue* is itself an instance of the unveiling of embodied atrocities that girl childhood inscribes. The agony and disorientation suffered by a girl child Zhizha, during and after the brutal rape by her father is the basis of Yvonne Vera's cumulative tale of unrelieved pain and unspeakable silences. Vera looks at the idea of the rape of the girl child in a situation in which the entire country is engulfed in a war of liberation as rather ironic, but also as something that should place the struggles of traumatized and silenced voices on an equal footing with the national liberation struggles.

The structure of the novel shows a succession of singular chapters that alternate in a constant rhythm between first and third person narration. The first-person passages lead us into the "hidden places" of Zhizha, the young protagonist. Close to her narration an auctorial voice unfolds a second narrative trail, following the story of Zhizha's family: the origins of her father Muroyiwa, his path to the township of Umtali where he met Zhizha's mother, Runyararo, and where the three of them lived together. As we learn in the end, Zhizha was born ten years before the ceasefire. The third person narration thus fills in the gaps of Zhizha's narration, it accompanies and backs her and unravels her story from another angle. It mediates between Zhizha's mental language and the reader, introducing a certain distance and adding an outside perspective to the interior drama we are lead to witness.

Zhizha, the child narrator, presents herself as landscape, as an open territory. Her body language is translated into metaphors of water and stone. Her body/soul/spirit landscape is mainly shaped by a river, her tongue, which hides beneath her belly that has turned into a rock due to fear and defense.

A tongue which no longer lives, no longer weeps. It is buried beneath rock. My tongue is a river. I touch my tongue in search of the places of my growing. My tongue is heavy with sleep. I know a stone is buried in my mouth, carried under my tongue. My voice has forgotten me(UTT1).

So says Zhizha in her desperate song of lament and of hope. For her, Grandmother represents the ultimate embodiment of the ironical realization that it is the lot of women to break out of the silence that society, tradition and family imposes on them.

The space-time of memory, to which Zhizha and Grandmother guide each other, is a position from which the trauma of such a violation can be overcome by being articulated. Zhizha unwittingly prompts Grandmother to tell her the story of Tonderayi by whispering his name. Grandmother wishes she had had the power to use her body to shelter her son Tonderayi who died when he was a baby as she says, "I should have kept him safe, inside of me" (UTT 70).

The relating of the story is described as opening up of spatial access so she reveals, "I have seen her hidden world, her place of forgetting.... Scars are our hidden worlds, our places of forgetting" (UTT 60- 61). But it also has temporal significance; in telling the story of her dead child to her young grandchild, Grandmother has touched both the past and the future. By revisiting her past, Grandmother contributes towards Zhizha approaching her own 'place of forgetting'. On seeing her grey hair in the mirror, she describes the process of ageing in a spatial image that evokes Zhizha's trauma: "Grandmother says her hair used to be black but the world has entered her too much and her hair has turned white" (UTT 98).

Zhizha's grandmother's voice is predominant throughout the narrative and shapes it. Zhizha is an intense and imaginative listener to her grandmother's own hidden story. In a mutual process of giving and taking words from each other she brings forth her grandmother's power to tell and grows to 'inherit' her voice and words. Once Zhizha's active witnessing has enabled her grandmother to transmit her own story of loss and hurt, which she had been forced to bury a long time ago, a new flow of remembrance is set into motion. This flow leads Zhizha to rebuild an interior image of her mother as the one who taught her to spell.

Mother calls to me in a voice just like mine, she grows from inside of me I change into me, and I say a e i o u. I remember all my letters.My mother's voice is resonant and searching. She says we live with our voices rich with remembrance. We live with words (UTT81-82).

As both a recipient and teller of stories, Grandmother thus becomes the focal point in the exchanges between the women. Her voice, uttering consoling words, songs, and laments, figures throughout the first series and is always addressed to a listener. "Silence", says the narrating voice "is linked to sorrow" (UTT 63). The verbal sharing of previously unspoken sorrow unites the three female characters and enables them to bring about a whole new dimension of being inaccessible individually or silently.

In Vera's words, silence is as destructive as physical violation. This is a key meaning of this novel's title, and the reason why, silence is described as "the opposite of life" (UTT 104). The physical act of rape is described as something that pushes a woman's voice backward into her own body. Women cannot counteract such violence and regain their voices on their own. Zhizha seeks grandmother's help to regain her voice:

Grandmother says a woman must not swallow her tears. A woman is not a tree. My arms reach toward Grandmother. She has given me a word which only a woman can give to another. This is a place where women harvest (UTT 54).

Finally, the writer of the story strengthens Zhizha's narration. She shows herself a sympathetic listener to the hidden voice of a girl, who grows into too much of significant pain and suffering. She empowers this voice and other hidden voices that have similar stories to tell by writing what she witnesses, and communicates it to the outside world. This leads us back to the collective level, where this empowerment is reenacted with each sympathetic reading of the story.

Together with Zhizha we find ourselves in a dreamlike state, where we cannot tell imagination from reality, present from past, sleeping from being awake. While reading what happens in her mind we feel the confusion and the urge to find meaning for this confusion. Zhizha searches for a word, which makes remembrance, mourning, and living, flow again.

We follow the repeated efforts to make the narration flow and we meet the obstacles and ruptures that incessantly put a halt to the flow, so that another trail must be explored. Maybe at some points in our wandering we feel impatient, have an urge to break through, to finally find a way out of this confusing landscape. Maybe we do not always understand the signification of the images, sounds, and rhythms we encounter. Maybe we cannot explain this ever-threatening deadly silence, just acknowledge its persistence. But whatever irritations we might feel while reading, they are part of the performance of how trauma works.

I have attempted to depict some of the paradoxes creative writing of sexual violence has to encounter and demonstrate the ways Vera integrates these into the narrative composition of *Under the Tongue*. While telling the story of a sexually abused girl, the novel simultaneously performs the failing, the impossibility of telling. At the same time it unfolds complex processes of witnessing, listening, and remembering in which our reading actively participates. Apart from their function of allowing suppressed memories flow again; these mutual processes also transmit the power and beauty of transmission itself. By recreating these flows of transmission on a narrative level, Vera transforms the isolating, stumbling, and hardly understandable language of traumatic memory into the strength of narrative memory that can be shared.

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