DECONSTRUCTING THE IMAGE OF THE AFRICAN WOMAN: A STUDY OF SELECTED WORKS BY YVONNE VERA

by

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DECLARATION

I, Anna Marevanhema Mabuto (11615989), hereby declare that the dissertation for the Master of Arts degree at the University of Venda, hereby submitted by me, has not been submitted previously for a degree at this or any other university, that it is my own work in design and in execution, and that all reference material contained therein has been duly acknowledged.

Signature……. Date…….

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my family.

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ABSTRACT

The prevalence of patriarchal norms and the privileging of the African man in African literary works gradually led to an erasure of women's identities, thereby leaving them to hold peripheral positions. This has motivated African women critics to engage in linguistic and performative methodologies to restructure African women's status in postcolonial writings. Using feminist literary theory, Marxist literary criticism and postcolonial theory, among others, this study explores the changing images of women as depicted in a selection of Yvonne Vera's works, namely: *Butterfly Burning* (1998); *Under the Tongue* (1996); *Without a Name* (1994) and *Nehanda (1993)*. Close reading and textual analysis are employed in examining the strategies devised by Vera to assess patriarchal attitudes that suppress women as well as reconfiguring their identities. This study is inspired by the desire to investigate the techniques employed by an African woman writer in speaking against marginalisation, exploitation and oppression of women in a postcolonial literary environment. Of primary concern to this study, is an examination of how Vera unleashes, re-writes and re-negotiates the potential of an African woman in her novels. This study distinctly shows that, as a subaltern writer, Vera reconfigures her female characters' identities through social and economic liberalisation. It is clear in this study that economic liberty has a great impact on the life of an African woman. This study contributes to the growing body of works that appreciates women writers' efforts in transforming, reifying and reinstating the image of African women in fictional works.

Key words: Vera, women, marginalisation, patriarchal attitudes, reconfiguring, Feminism, Postcolonial theory, Marxist literary criticism.

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CHAPTER ONE

1.1 Introduction

The issue of gender inequality and misrepresentation still permeates many areas of our life as evident in some literary and non-literary works. This problem is primarily prevalent in the literary works produced in developing regions compared to the developed world, principally owing to the dominance of patriarchal norms and values in the developing world. According to Udenweze "male and female children right from their birth are assigned different roles, values, and status by the society where they are born in" (2009: 1). This indicates the level of male-centredness of our societies. Africa as a developing region faces the problem of gender disparity and women are largely denigrated as a result of these orthodox attitudes. Fonchingong (2006: 3) similarly asserts that "African literature is replete with write-ups that project male dominance and inadequately pleads the case of the African woman". In the same vein, McClintock (2013: 382) criticises gender bias in the African nationalist discourse by explaining the way women are tied to the social construct of motherhood. Correspondingly, Peterson (1995) insists that the picture of woman's place and role in our societies does not advocate for women's emancipation. This study, therefore, focuses on exploring how Yvonne Vera as one of the celebrated post-colonial female writers, critiques patriarchal attitudes and empowers women in her literary works. The study centers on examining how the image of women is 'deconstructed' in the selected texts. In this study, deconstruction is used to assess how Vera re-inscribe, undo or re-writes the image of an African woman.

This study examines how Vera subverts the stereotypical and male-centred attitudes that result in the oppression of women in *Butterfly Burning (1998), Under the Tongue (1996)*, *Without a Name (1994) and Nehanda (1993)*. As portrayed in some literary works produced in the developing world, women encounter obstacles that hinder them from accomplishing their ambitions. These range from unjust laws to controlling patriarchal practices. The discrimination of women has been a way of promoting male identities in African societies. Zimbabwean literature, among African literary works, portrays a struggle against social injustices as depicted in the works by Masiteira, Dangarembga and Mahachi among others. Zimbabwe has been consistently battling for gender fairness from the time it attained its political freedom in 1980. Its government has tried to create policies that eradicate gender discrimination nationwide (Chabaya 2009: 234). As a result, increasing attention needs to be bestowed to the issue of gender concerns in present-day African literary writings.

1.2 Rationale for the Selected Texts

Vera's texts that are used in this study are *Butterfly Burning (1998), Under the Tongue (1996), Without a Name (1994) and Nehanda (1993).* Her literary writings are significant as they chronicle the lives of influential Zimbabwean women who strive to transform their lives despite the predicaments they encounter. In the literary texts she published, Vera always sought to realise the potential of a literary work to open spaces for the articulation of formerly suppressed stories. Vera persistently aspired to expose the histories of exploitation and cruelty responsible for the silencing of women. She speaks for women and calls for a gender balanced social atmosphere in her works. In the novel *Without a Name,* Vera tells a story of a strong-willed woman character Mazvita, who fights in order to rediscover and liberate herself after being raped by an unknown soldier. In the novel, Mazvita initially meets and falls in love with a local village man, Nyenyedzi, then she travels to Harare the 'big city' to pursue freedom. There, she is taken in by Joel, who offers a kind of security in the midst of Harare's perplexity. She realised that she had fallen pregnant but she never loses hope in pursuing social and economic freedom. The novel concludes with her return to Mubaira, her village, to bury her child so that she would begin a new life. Mazvita's migration in this text is appreciated as a couched act of resistance against the political and patriachal order as well as sexual assault she suffers.

In the text *Under the Tongue (1996*), Vera offers a more dynamic plot in relating how youthful Zhizha came to voice her feelings after being raped by her father. Zhizha re-discovers herself through utterance and sharing her feelings with her grandmother. The text suggests that utterance is the best solution to inner pain. In the text, Vera revises Freud's 'talking therapy' and reciprocality, particularly amongst women, for instance, Grandmother tells her story so as to motivate Zhizha to articulate hers. In addition, this therapy is not exclusively personal but political as well. In the end, the reader learns that Zhizha's abuse occurred at the moment of Zimbabwe's independence from Britain, and the political freedom symbolises Zhizha's liberalisation. In this novel, Vera subverts the stereotype of women being silent after their victimisation. All the women in *Under the Tongue* portray resilience and resist male imposed oppression. The novel also presents the struggle of women in breaking down the silence imposed on them by pitiable living conditions. In dismantling the oppressive structures of the society, they give voice to their silent trauma of living in a hostile environment. They try to resist the pressures in their own way and struggle to survive, thus balancing the sense of pain with

the sensation of relief on overcoming their problems. The novel provides a discursive space for the enunciation of subaltern histories, which have been silenced in male-dominant socio-political discourse. In the novel, Vera tries to elevate women's status by exploring areas that challenge the patriarchal social order.

The novel Nehanda (1993) is a story of Zimbabweans' first experience with the colonisers and Nehanda's impact in fighting against colonial imperialism. The novel is set in the late nineteenth century and amidst of disturbing news of the entry of the colonial settlers, the VaShona people assemble to welcome the new child, Nehanda. When she is born, Nehanda bears signs of uniqueness and distinctiveness. This is later evidenced when she grows into a young woman, it turns out that she is skilled and different. She soon grows to inspire her people to rebel against the colonial masters. Nehanda became a source of inspiration and motivation and all the VaShona people look up to her. This novel offers a gendered re-examination of the national myth portraying Nehanda as an empowered and deconstructed woman. In Nehanda, Vera attempts to craft a gender re-appropriation of the national myth and cultural symbols as constructive of an alternate national discourse and historiography. Mkwesha (2016: 5) posits that in Nehanda,

> Vera revisits the past… to recuperate women's role in storytelling, use of words to shape the future, and their physical participation in the rebellion by recreating the image of the rebellious defiant spiritual woman-hero Nehanda. In the novel, the author challenges violent nationalist masculinity by recreating the image of the weeping-hunter Kaguvi, a Zimbabwean war legend.

This observation shows how the novel *Nehanda* writes a history, culture and politics from a female perspective.

Butterfly Burning (1998) shows Vera's great voice to the readers. It is set in Makokoba, a township for black people, in the late l940s. The novel is a romantic story centring on Phephelaphi, a young lady full of vital dreams and Fumbatha, a young man working in colonial industries. Phephelaphi is full of dreams which make her unique compared to other individuals around her. She is dedicated to be enrolled at a white nursing school which prohibits black people to study there. She meets Fumbatha, who is so obsessed about making her his own wife. He, therefore, fills her with hope and trust, yet Phephelaphi is not satisfied with their "one-room" love. Later in the novel, Phephelaphi's journey for freedom makes her to divorce her husband. She rejects to live a life trapped in various layers of suppression. Traditional

patriarchy insists on loyalty hence Fumbatha wants her to be a mother to his children, to depend on him economically and not have any career. Colonial patriarchy with its gender and race-discriminatory urban economy marginalises her, and she feels that without achieving her quest for a career she does not belong, she has no identity. She also refuses to live a life trapped by her biology. *Butterfly Burning* therefore subverts the ruthlessness and vindictiveness of the oppositional nationalist and postcolonial patriarchy that has a vicious grip on power and has constructed fortified walls to entrap and imprison women, closing doors for negotiation but insisting on women's loyalty and patriotism. However, Phephelaphi attains triumph, as the text celebrates her sense of self-fulfilment and ability to take charge of her body. She transcends all barriers albeit through her suicide and becomes a heroine.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Regardless of all the roles women play in the development of the world, they are still misrepresented in some literary writings conceivably due to the dominance of patriarchal cultural beliefs in some African societies. Though some male writers such as Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Binyavanga Wainaina and Francis Imbuga, amongst others, have tried to uplift the status of women in their writings, women are still relegated to the background in some literary texts. Dipio (2014: 16) calls attention to the fact that "[some] male artists have failed to represent the genuine concerns of women. Women's voices are either erased from narrative action or romanticised beyond recognition". There is evidence that male-centered attitudes still dominate the literary atmosphere, regardless of the advancement made in relation to women's empowerment in some areas of our life. For this reason, the old-fashioned image of women needs to be carefully re-evaluated. Corroboratively Mkwesha (2016: 3) observes that "there has been a marked dearth of literary criticism on female-authored Zimbabwe literature, even though Zimbabwe has produced some of Africa's most prolific women writers during both the colonial and postcolonial eras". This study therefore explores how Yvonne Vera negotiates space and deconstructs the fashioned image of an African woman in a selection of her literary writings.

1.4 Aim of the Study

This research aims at exploring strategies devised by Yvonne Vera in depicting the changing images of African women in a selection of her novels.

1.5 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are:

- To examine the reconfiguration of female identity in a selection of Vera's texts
- To explore how the author deconstructs masculinity and patriarchal stereotypes in the selected literary works
- To assess the economic liberalisation of women in a selection of Vera's postcolonial texts

1.6 Research Questions

- How is female identity reconfigured in a selection of Vera's works?
- In what ways do the selected works deconstruct masculinity and patriarchal stereotypes attached to women?
- How does the author liberalise women economically in the selected texts?

1.7 Rationale of the Study

This study is motivated by the desire to explore the new spaces taken by an African woman writer in voicing against marginalisation, exploitation and oppression. It therefore, uncovers how women speak in their own voices. This research wishes to be positioned as a scholarly space to discuss African women's quest for hope and success, and hopefully bring them into visibility. This study is considered important as it helps to enhance an understanding of the plight of African women. It further aspires to add to the unending debates as far as feminist literary criticism is concerned. Musvoto (2004: 11) believes that "[l]iterature is a product of human creativity, and is partially conditioned by socio-historical processes". The reason why literature can be viewed in this way, as critic Chidi Amuta (1989:79) observes, is that "the writer is a member of society and one who incarnates the society's structural and ideological 'inflections'. It is therefore imperative that the literature of a given milieu addresses the issues prevalent within its specific context". The critical assessment of the selected texts in this study, undoubtedly involves an inherent respective reflection of the socio-economic literary dimension of the settings of the texts. As a result, this study wishes to serve as a resource base for further research**.**

1.8 Literature Review

The history of women's contestation against oppression stretches back to the 18th century. Fonchingong (2006: 135) writes that "most male writers in the early phase of African literature encouraged the marginalisation of women". In this context, female characters were made

marginal to the plot of the fiction, while only a few emerged as powerful and credible protagonists. Presumably this was due to the desire to promote African culture which acknowledges the dominance of men. Sadek (2014: 170) also insists that "it is quite obvious that African women have often been subjected to negative stereotypes and their contributions have been neglected or even omitted". In this light, women were made to feel powerless and weak in public spaces. Banyiwa-Horne expresses the depiction of various images of African womanhood by African male writers. She details the following:

> Male depictions of female characters are often from a fiercely male perspective, reflecting male conceptions or rather misconceptions of female sexuality [….] They tend to overplay the sexuality of their female characters, creating the impression that women have no identity outside their sexual roles. (1986: 120)

The depiction of the female gender in early African literature is prejudiced with women mainly holding minor positions as child-bearers and motherly figures, primarily in providing for the family and performing other simple household chores.

Another important aspect is that women suffered marginalisation even during the rise of the novel as a genre. According to Laslett, Joeres, Maynes, Higginbotham & Baker-Nunn "George Lukacs falls into sexist thinking in *The Theory of the Novel* when he defines the novel as a fallen epic, an evaluation that implicitly favors [sic] the epic's heroic male protagonist" (1997: 21). Lukacs criticises the weak roles assigned to male characters, linking them to femininity, thereby relegating women. Jagadeesh & Kumar (2016: 33) in concurrence point to the fact that

> Gendering and some sort of misogyny are evident in the texts written by [some of the] men [writers]. They see men as the 'superior sex' or the 'stronger sex' while women are seen as the 'inferior sex' or the 'weaker sex'. Men are considered as logical, rational and objective, and, women are perceived as emotional, inconsistent, intuitive, subjective and lacking self-confidence.

To subvert gender misrepresentation in African literature, the available body of literature endorses Vera's efforts in voicing the concerns of the African woman. As indicated by Ogundipe Leslie

> Feminists have posited that the woman writer has two major responsibilities: first to tell about being a woman; secondly to describe reality from a woman's view, a woman's perspective. (1994: 57)

In her works, Vera attempts to paint a clear picture of a woman's world. Her narratives offer possible solutions to the problem of women's misrepresentation. Her literary writings give power and position to women in African literature. As one of the key figures in Zimbabwean literature, Vera depicts gender writing as a site of struggle. Marima (2011:34) points that "[h]er disturbing woman-centred narratives of resistance and pain signify the complexity of gendered stories that depict a rejection of cultural and political control over the female body and seek to recover female-centered". When she died in 2005, Vera left behind a literary legacy focusing on the violence-shaded past of her country and the marginalised stories of women. Besides her novels, she also wrote a collection of short stories in a book she titled *Why Don't You Carve Other Animal* (1992).Vera's iterative return to the past suggests her commitment to render visible painful issues in the nation's recent history. During her life time, she edited feminist anthologies which include the celebrated *Opening Spaces (1999*). In her literary writings, Vera insists that "women must be brave to deconstruct and destroy oppressive images and create new ones that are liberating. Vera situates herself as an African woman writer with a feminist agenda" (Mkwesha, 2016: 3). Considering her literary output, "Vera is certainly remembered as a writer who had no fear for words and who had an intense love of her nation" (Mutandwa, 2002:6). As a contribution to the undertaking of coming to terms with the past, Vera's writing articulates an ethical gesture towards a better future for the women's community. By voicing silenced memories, she adopts a specific role in relation to her community. Samuel (2002:15) also applauds Vera's work pointing out that it "offer[s] a critique of colonialism…and patriarchal structures, and their customary ideas of land ownership and control over the female body and its fertility". In Zimbabwe, where the government has aimed in changing the past to suit its own purposes, Vera's counter-discursive revision is important.

Nwakanma (2013: 36) also points out that "Vera belongs to the generation of Zimbabwean writers who emerged on the scene of African literature from the 1980s and the early 1990s following Zimbabwean independence in 1980 and the end of the second Chimurenga". This idea offers an essential context to the state of her imaginative writing. Until after political freedom in Zimbabwe, literary works in English by black writers were written by men save for a few. The political force of black Zimbabwe writing in English with its themes of race relations and the liberation war had effectively sidelined black women and their social experiences in society and, as such, women's stories had remained largely untold until 1984 (Musvoto, 2004: 50). Among the better known of this age are Dambudzo Marechera, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Charles Mungoshi and Chenjerai Hove. Yvonne Vera's work explores what may appear to be

an anecdotal junction—what scholars like Liz Gunner and Neil Kortennar have described as anti-nationalist patriotism—a revolution or refashioning of history away from the patriot historiography. In her literary writings, silence epitomises a difficult method of dealing with the past and the only option for feasible communality is a creation of an environment in which inequalities can be spoken. As Samuel (2002: 16) notes, Vera's literary texts can be collectively read as the "search for a language and voice to relate the experiences of women's marginalisation and violation under the often brutal social, cultural and political forces operating in Zimbabwe". Vera repeatedly attempts to search for the human conscience, the hope of a devastated woman in a male-centred world. She has therefore been recognised as an exemplary feminist Zimbabwean writer considering how she influenced other women writers in Zimbabwe.

Women's misrepresentation is overriding in post-colonial discourses. Postcolonial women critics have blamed postcolonial scholars not just for obliterating the role of women from the colonial struggle, but for poorly representing them in their discourses. Tyagi (2014: 46) points out that "Edward Said's seminal study on *Orientalism* accorded little attention to female agency and discussed very few female writers". Additionally, Homi K. Bhabha's work on the ambivalence of colonial discourses explores the relationship between a "colonizing" and "colonized" subject matter, without specific reference to how the specifics of gender might complicate his model. Scholars like Davies who are apprehensive of the male-focused predisposition of postcolonial study ask "where are the women in the theorising of postcoloniality?" (Davies, 2002: 80).

Apart from the above critics, Chinua Achebe writings can be similarly seen as seemingly influenced by the patriarchal mythological beliefs in African culture. His works can be justified by his desire to re-establish the African norms and beliefs after colonisation. He therefore emphasises macho heroism which can be viewed as the best way of promoting Africanism. He portrays this style in *Things Fall Apart and Arrow* of *God*. In *Things Fall Apart*, the well-known masculine hero Okonkwo creates no space for the portrayal of woman characters. Following this, Fonchingong (2006: 138) asserts that "Ngugi's women represent the downtrodden and the pariahs of his society". Owing to the male-ruled fictional tradition, women are portrayed in a reductive way.

Some women writers disliked the way they were treated by their societies and the publishing authorities when they tried to publish their literary works. For instance, Veit-Wild (1992:101),

explained how Ketinah Muringaniza, one of the Zimbabwean woman writers, was criticised by her husband and some publishing authorities. Muringaniza explained how the publishing members created a counterproductive pact, detrimental to women's writing. As explained by this woman writer, "my first manuscript was complete when my husband burnt it saying I was not giving him due attention" Veit-Wild (1992:101). Veit-Wild (1992:101) further indicates Julia Lwanda's complains on the treatment of women writers Lwanda explains that "Shona men tend to regard women's ideas, writings or literary attempts as not worthwhile for public digestion. This might be the reason I hesitated sending some of my early manuscripts". These complaints draw attention to the fact that there was an absence of a forum for black women to air their voices and grievances. Apart from the idea that the afore-mentioned complaints reflect the plight of the silenced voices of women, the complaints also imply that the mere act of writing puts black women outside acceptable patriarchal spaces where their voices should only be heard in the domestic arena. These responses of socially constructed domestic roles form part of an ongoing debate in African feminism, which situates the marginalisation and silencing of African women in the positions of the margin and the centre. In relation to this, Frank (1987:15) notes that "this debate is on whether male prejudice and sexism are an original phenomenon of [black] African society or whether it came with white imperialism". Nevertheless, this is evident that black woman writers were sidelined and faced societal criticism during earlier times.

Musvoto (2004: 56-57) also insists that

> [a]lthough there are differences in the responses of black Zimbabwean women writers to the socio-political dynamics of their society, what is crucial, is the ability to react through writing, which manifests that African women have always wanted to speak out, decrying the injustices meted out on them by patriarchal prejudices and colonialism.

In this respect, the role of literature, and the act of producing it for black women writers in Zimbabwe becomes one of self-expression, self-definition and self-discovery, by correcting these misrepresentations.

In response to the misrepresentation of women in literature, female critics like Betty Friedan, Gayatri Spivak and Kate Millet have highlighted the plight of women. Spivak clearly explains the plight of women in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak". Her essay is viewed as an important contribution to postcolonial feminism. In this essay she tries to challenge the legacy of oppression of the colonised 'other'. She focuses on the marginality of women, stressing on

the fact that they should be liberated and empowered since they cannot speak for themselves. Spivak appropriates the notion of 'subaltern' from Gramsci, referring to voiceless groups of individuals (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2013: 244). She repeats the need for feminist critics to put much focus on the countries that are still struggling to cope with patriarchy.

Spivak questions the universal claims of some Western feminists to speak for all women regardless of cultural differences. She highlights the limitations of Western feminism towards the women in the developing world. Thus Spivak cautions against the universal claims of Western feminism, and emphasises instead how the specific maternal conditions, histories and struggles of the developing world women are often overlooked by Western feminism. According to Spivak, "the institutional changes against sexism (in United States of America or in France) may mean nothing or indirectly, further harm for women in the Third World [sic]" (Spivak 1998:150). Spivak insists on the fact that "the female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish (Nelson & Grossberg, 1988: 308). Spivak hence argues that by speaking out and reclaiming a collective cultural identity, subalterns will in fact re-inscribe their subordinate position in society. Her essay best demonstrates her concern for the processes whereby postcolonial studies ironically reinscribe, co-opt and rehearse neo-colonial imperatives of political domination, economic exploitation and cultural erasure.

The rise of feminist awareness in the past has resulted in women artists trying to reclaim their identities. This has seen many literary genres being changed to cater for women One thing to note is that African literary works have been the major components of this trend. According to Kivai (2010:2), "female-authored texts now offer self-images, patterns of self-analysis and general insights into women's world ignored by male/colonial writers". As insisted on by Ohale (2010: 3), "African women's writings have opened up a whole new world of opportunities and awareness for women and the society at large". Women are now alert to the significance of education and different ways to free themselves. Fonchingong (2006: 142) further posits that "contemporary female writers have made giant strides in an attempt to re-define and focalise on the one-sided presentation of the African women in African literature". In Africa, many women such as Mariama Bậ, Masiteira, Tsitsi Dangarembga, and Head have become authors so as to articulate their concerns. This has seen male authors joining the trend in attempting to reverse the facets of women relegation.

Buchi Emecheta in *Joys of Motherhood* (1980) portrays women in a unique way that contests the myths associated with them. She criticises several public institutions that oppress women in her narrative. Emecheta spreads a message of women assertiveness, even in a difficult patriarchal society. Emecheta portrays Nnu Ego as a strong-willed character who perseveres in a challenging situation, where she has to take care of nine children. Also, Adah in *Second Class Citizen (*1981), struggles against the ills of a patriarchal society. Adah battles diligently to free herself from the chains and fetters of all forms of perceptions that hinder women from success. As Vera (1999: 1) stresses, "[a] woman writer must have an imagination that is plain stubborn, that can invent new gods and banish ineffectual one" as a result, some female artists try to portray a changed image of their female characters. According to *(*Mkwesha, 2016: 63), "Vera's novels hence make a significant shift by producing mothers who rebel against colonial and traditional patriarchy, laying the foundations of rebellion for their daughters: the mother figures in *Butterfly Burning* and *Without a Name*".

In *So Long a Letter* (1981), Ba criticises the heartbreaking effects of polygamy. She portrays Ramatoulaye and Aissatou as victims of polygamy in a Muslim nation. She emphasises the call for a revolution to challenge the situation of women oppression. Hence, *So Long a Letter* becomes a medium to express her views on the pitiable conditions of women. Similarly, Flora Nwapa, in her novel *Efuru*, emphasises the need for women's emancipation. She presents Efuru as an honourable and positive character in an endless struggle to free herself. Although divorce is condemned in an African setup, Efuru leaves her marriage to rediscover herself. As pointed out by Fonchingong (2006: 144), "the female writer and her commitment, lays in representing and re-enacting the role of the African woman". In the same vein, Mkwesha (2016:3) indicates Vera's perception that "women without power to govern often have no platform for expressing their disapproval….Words become weapons". This then implies that writing is an act of writing back to oppressive patriarchal conditions and images. Vera hence states that writing "offers a moment of intervention" (Vera, 1999:3) for women to negotiate their position and envision new possibilities for men and women to build an inclusive nation.

In fairness to some male writers, they have been working towards women emancipation. There has been a growth of both men and women writers trying to uplift the status of women. Major Zimbabwean writers are writing against both colonial oppression and the challenges encountered after colonisation. The Zimbabwean literary texts are contributing to the public sphere and to the "search for justice" in the different historical periods and they come as subversions of dominant versions of history. As examples of dissident voices, such works like

Chenjerai Hove's constitute what Lara (1998) calls emancipatory narratives in that they are shaped by the various oppressions faced by the general Zimbabwean public in different chronotopes. Closely linked to Zimbabwean literature, Chinua Achebe in *Anthills of the Savannah (*1987*)* reverses the negative traits that marginalise women. In the novel, Achebe portrays Beatrice as a strong character who fights to emancipate herself from a hostile, male society. Also, Francis Imbuga's two plays *Aminata* (1998) and *Betrayal in the City* (1976) tries to uplift women by putting them at the centre of the narrations. Fonchingong (2006: 146) believes:

> It is high time for male and female African writers in the contemporary era to retrace their roots and in the process, finding a point of convergence that will provide greater meaning to the interactions of the male and female in the search for a construction of an African feminist standpoint based on our cultural specificities.

Though some female writers like Bessie Head and Tsitsi Dangarembga have tried to express the plight of African women in their literary texts, taking for instance in *A Question of Power and Nervous Conditions* among others, efforts still need to be devoted to uplift women in Southern African literature. Mkwesha (2016: 3) also feels that "[t]here has been a marked dearth of literary criticism on female-authored Zimbabwe literature". In the same vein, Mangena (2013: 142) also insists that "there is need to listen to the often ignored and unheard voice of women in national historiography. To listen to the one-sided male voice is tantamount to listening to lies, for this voice is always narrow in its interpretation of history". Hence, this study seeks to restore women's position as depicted in Vera's literary writings.

1.9 Theoretical Perspectives

The main theoretical basis used in this study is feminist literary theory. Some of the feminist theoretical perspectives used are Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* and Gayatri Spivak's *Subaltern* theory. According to Papa, Shenmugasundaram, Addlakha, & Vaidya (2017: 386)

> feminist theories provide the analytic tools to address issues of structural inequities in groups that historically have been socially and economically disadvantaged through the creation of an intellectual discourse which can adequately reflect the struggle of women outside the western world.

Following Spivak's claim that subalternity is effaced in hegemonic discourse, this study focuses on exploring the ways in which Vera's literary narratives bring the figure of the subaltern woman back into signification. Primarily, feminist literary critics aim at exposing patriarchal

premises and prejudices that marginalise women and this promotes gender fairness in literature. These theories aim at improving the conditions of women in literary environments by re-wring their identities as well as reflecting, challenging and explaining power imbalances in diverse literary narratives. Feminist literary criticism initiates discussions for academic studies and research that provide a more nuanced image of women's lives from around the world. This theory is hence suitable for this study since the study explores how a female writer reconfigures the image of women in her literary works. Feminist literary theory, hence, reflects that gender representation struggles are relative and contextual and need to be looked at within specific historical and cultural frameworks. This approach is apposite as it helps the researcher to explore how a female writer unearths masculine principles in her narratives in an effort to promote a better picture of the African woman in literature.

This study also employs postcolonial literary theory which is linked to feminist literary theory. Postcolonial literary theory seeks not only to salvage past experiences, but also to chart how the world can move beyond colonialism towards equality and opportunity for all, more especially previously marginalised groups like women. It can be employed in critical study of colonial texts, both fictional and non-fictional. The theory claims intellectual authority by claiming space for multiple voices. According to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (2013: 2), "postcolonial theory involves discussion about experience of various kinds: suppression, resistance, representation, difference, race, gender". Therefore, since this study examines the issue of women representation after colonialism, it falls within the ambit of postcolonial theory. Essentially, postcolonial women's texts challenge their dual oppression, the oppression from patriarchy as well as colonial intrusion. As argued by Harrison "post-colonial writers use detailed descriptions of indigenous people to counteract or resist the stereotypes, inaccuracies, which colonisers circulated in texts and settings" (2012: 1). Ashcroft et al. (2013: 89) further assert that "postcolonial feminism continues to analyse the perpetuation of gender bias and 'double colonisation' in post-colonial states".

In the same vein, Sara Suleri (1992: 13) also insists that "this reimaging of the postcolonial has made way for the feminist theoretical articulation and has enabled the coalition between postcolonial and feminist theories" Hence this is paramount as it explains the general link between postcolonialism and feminism as the main theoretical basis of this study. Ania Loomba (1998) in brief explains postcolonialism as a concept emerging from late improvements in sociologies, writing, linguistic studies, and discourses in diverse fields of research and critical scientific work. Postcolonial literary theory is hence suitable for this study since the study

explores how African women's status is reconfigured in Vera's literary texts after the period of colonial intrusion.

1.10 Methodology

This study uses close reading and critical textual analysis in collaboration with postcolonialism and feminist theoretical perspectives to examine primary as well as related secondary literary writings. The researcher undertook a literary analysis that involved a close reading of the narratives. According to Jones, Chang, Heritage and Glory (2014: 4), "the goal of close reading is to enable the reader to deeply engage with the challenging and high quality text". Hence, close reading entails a commitment in re-reading and interacting with a text.

1.11 Chapter Outline

Chapter 1: Introduction

This is the first chapter of this study, and as such it highlights the background of the study, rationale of the selected texts, statement of the problem, aims of this study as well as the significance of this research. Literature review on the marginalisation of women in earlier literary texts as well as the changing images of women in different literary texts is also reviewed. This chapter further outlines the theoretical basis as well as the methodology used in conducting this study.

Chapter 2: Reconfiguring Women's Identities

The selected literary writings have almost the same emerging themes, and as such, all selected texts are examined in all the chapters, but focusing on a specific objective. This chapter therefore explores how the author reconfigures women's identity in all the selected texts. The chapter focuses on examining Vera's use of utterance in reclaiming women's spaces in her narratives. The notion of how the author gives a voice to her female characters to speak against inequalities and marginalisation is also examined. The concept of re-writing the identities of women through subversion and hybridisation is equally explored. This section of the study also comments on the resistance of female characters as a way of repossessing their spaces. The concept of a possibility of hope for female characters is also explored.

Chapter 3: Deconstructing Masculinity

This chapter explores how the author deconstructs patriarchal stereotypes in the selected novels. It examines how the female characters in the selected texts grapple with their suppression resulting from patriarchal customs. The issue of women emancipation from patriarchal norms is explored. Closely linked to the mentioned aspects, this chapter also examines how the author criticises gender-based societal as well as depicting the defiant personalities of the female characters.

Chapter 4: Economic Liberation of Women

This chapter focuses on exploring how the author empowers women economically. The concept of intellectual liberty and its significance to the lives of female characters is equally explored. The notion of acquiring Western education and its possibility to bring change to the African women in the literary texts is also examined. The chapter further explores notions of repositioning female characters to the urban spaces and the possibility of its positive impact to the economic lives of African women.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This chapter concludes the overall discussion by evaluating the success of a female writer in changing the images of women in the selected literary works. It explores Vera's success in reconfiguring the image of the African woman by debunking patriarchal attitudes as well as liberating women economically.

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CHAPTER TWO

Reconfiguring Women's Identities

2.1 Introduction

This chapter examines Vera's reflection on the notion of women's reconfiguration in her selected texts. To accomplish this, the researcher focused on exploring how she uses the voice to reclaim women's spaces in her narratives. In the same vein, this chapter also assesses how Vera employs characterisation as a technique of rethinking the identities of women. The concept of re-writing the identities of women through subversion and hybridisation is equally explored. To conclude this chapter, a critical perspective on her success in re-inscribing the identities of women in the selected literary writings is given.

2.2 Background to African Women's Identity

The identities of African women were compromised before the era of colonial intrusion. Boehmer (2005: 216) calls attention to the fact that "native or subaltern women were doubly or triply marginalised. That is to say they were disadvantaged on the grounds not only of gender but, race, social class and in some cases, religion, cast, etc". Commenting on this issue, Ladele (2009: 70) notes:

> Issues of identity are germane in the present-day dispensations of constantly reconstituting politics, gender identities, personal, national and international relations, especially as identities are understood relationally. In various fields of interactions, this is further accentuated in the light of changing patterns of re-territorialisation and globalisations, as well as personal/ gender reassignments.

Questions surrounding representations of women's identity are dominant in developing regions and these have seen postcolonial African female critics trying to textualise women's identities in their fictional writings. Essentially, imperialism and its reverberations of neo-colonialism and post-colonialism infiltrated the male-ruled literary tradition. To subvert the male-dominated literary tradition, post-colonial women writers like Vera attempt to epitomise women as transitional or transformative beings. Transitional women can be categorised by their aptitude for suppleness; they position themselves at the inception of change although they demonstrate features of traditional motherly figures. Similarly, a transformative woman is characterised by her knack of undermining the male-dominated society. In a bid to negotiate new sites to

articulate a worthwhile and acceptable self-image of an African woman, Vera portrays a hybridised identity of women. She focuses much on the previously marginalised groups of people and this largely constitutes a part of the Subaltern Studies Project created by Gayatri Spivak. Vera's focus additionally echoes Homi Bhabha's and Bill Ashcroft's mission to re-write the experiences and the position of the formerly marginalised groups. Similar to Bhabha's 'Third Space of Enunciation', Vera gives an alternative space to women and aims at recovering their identities. According to Lewis (2005: 2), Vera concentrates on:

> …repressed stories, sifting through public and visible narratives to uncover those that are usually silenced or invisible. In telling these stories, Vera often turns to peripheral places, experiences and people: to Zimbabwe's townships and rural areas, to the experiences of poor rural women, to violent, dehumanising and "irrational" acts that expose deep layers of trauma.

In this sense, Vera tries to renew the feminist discourse in her narratives by focusing much on reintroducing women as unique individualities. Ohale (2010: 2) further indicates that "feministic writing is a welcome diversion from the status quo, its objective being to reclaim women's rights and positions in society". Hence, until the debut of a feministic fictional text in Africa, male characters ruled all circles in the African fictional narrative. As a result, Vera attempts to offer a revised version of women. Mangena (2013: 9) affirms that

> Zimbabwean women's narratives challenge the oppression that black women contend with in both the colonial and the independent nation. The represented women's resistance lies in their refusal to live their lives under oppression. In the process of writing, women writers also carve out an identity for the various women that they represent.

Hence, as an opponent of phallocentricism, Vera reconfigures the place of an African woman by negotiating new spaces ultimately through utterance, characterisation and hybridisation. In her preface to an anthology of contemporary African women's writing, entitled *Opening Spaces,* Yvonne Vera argues that creative writing offers a discursive space for subjects otherwise silenced by prevailing socio-political customs. She mainly focuses on the transgressive significance that literature holds for African women who, "without power to govern, often have no platform for expressing their disapproval" (Vera, 1999: 2). Vera argues that writing provides a forum for such women to articulate forbidden views. She sees her writing as a form of subversion, hence, she says:

> If speaking is still difficult to negotiate, then writing has created a free space for women much freer than speech. There is less interruption, less immediate and shocked reaction. The written text is granted its intimacy, its privacy, its creation of a world, its proposals, its individual characters, and its suspension of disbelief. It surprises in the best carnival way, reducing distances, accepting the least official stance. The book is bound, circulated, read. It retains its autonomy much more than a woman is allowed in the oral situation. Writing offers a moment of intervention. (Vera 1999: 3)

As a result, in her texts Vera speaks into the problems of women, she uses her texts as a medium of communicating women's problems.

2.3 Giving a Voice

> [A woman] warned of the risk she incurs by letting words run off the rails, time and again attempts to gear herself to the accepted norms. But where has obedience led her? Elsewhere, in every corner of the world, there exists a woman who, despite the threat of rejection, resolutely works towards the unlearning of institutionalised language, while staying alert to every deflection of their body compass needles. (Minh-ha 1989: 264)

Vera may be recognised as one of female critics who worked tirelessly towards the liberation of the African woman in literature. One aspect to note is that being silent is projected as one of the customary features of a typical subaltern woman. Vera's investigation of unfamiliar, silenced and uncharted areas is appreciated as a key craft in reinstating the identity of an African woman. Vera contests women's inability to speak and ventures into realms of the tabooed to speak out. Vera presents a literary text as undeniably transgressive and transformative modality, capable of levelling out and bringing back the oppressive silences imposed by the superseding customary beliefs. Vera believes that writing "offers a moment of intervention" (Vera, 1999: 3). In the same vein, Nwakanma (2013: 40) notes that,

> [t]he postcolonial feminist novel as a subaltern narrative is constituted as a representational discourse, which marks a canonical departure. It enables the female subject of the novel to speak for herself, against the codes of law, convention, culture, and other forms of authority which makes the subject unable to be fully symbolically constituted.

In *Under the Tongue (1996),* Vera gives a voice to her characters by portraying utterance as a source of freedom and hope. To begin with, the title of the novel '*Under the Tongue* 'carries a symbolic meaning. By 'Under the Tongue' Vera hypothetically refers to the power of speaking and the influence of the words on her characters' freedom, more especially women. In a way, Vera named her novel in that manner to point out that the freedom of women comes from speaking out. The word 'Under' implies suppressed feelings, concerns and ideologies that must be said out. As a result, Grandmother, a leading character in the novel, insists that "…the tongue should not just lie in the mouth…the survival is the mouth" (Vera, 1996: 1). The choice of the word 'lie' imply a state of reluctance and lack of enthusiasm to speak out. The phrase 'survival is the mouth' contests the culture of women's silence hence, Vera emphasises on the need for women to speak against ideologies that suppress them. According to Toivanen (2009:1), "Vera's counter-discursive revision is vital. In her texts, silence represents a problematic way of dealing with the past; the only possibility for viable communality is to create an atmosphere in which painful issues can be voiced". Vera further discourages silence when Zhizha, a young vibrant character in the novel says "Grandma said we choose words not silence…A woman must speak the beauties and the sorrows of the heart, she must dream celebration" (Vera, 1996: 10). This further encourages women to articulate their feelings. The phrase 'beauties and sorrows' refer to the joys and tribulations which women may encounter. Hence women are encouraged to speak up regardless of the prevailing situations.

In the novel *Under the Tongue*, Zhizha further gives emphasis on the need for women to share their experiences. Zhizha opines that "the best words are those that are shared and embraced, those that give birth to other words, more fruitful than themselves, stronger than themselves" (Vera, 1996: 16). The narrator stresses on the need for women to share experiences and speak against any form of injustice. Zhizha thrives in reconfiguring herself through the very act of unveiling the most tabooed things. Attridge (2004: 34) regards literature as "a site that invites people to see differently and which generates transformative potential". Hence, Vera reconstructs the identities of her female characters by showing their abilities to speak. This is because in some earlier texts, women's voices were mostly silenced and they were projected more in the private domain while men were dominant and vibrant in all spheres. Women never had much say in community matters and in most instances they tacitly condoned and were brainwashed into accepting their slavish status.

Vera fears that if women remain silent, this will be passed from one generation to the other. Hence she says, "I am against silence. The books I write try to undo the silent posture African

women have endured over so many decades. (Vera, 2002: 43). In *Under the Tongue* Grandmother says, “If women remain silent, this will pass from generation to generation …a dream will kill her children” (Vera, 1996: 10). With this line, the narrator brings a sense of a need for a complete revolution for all next generations. In the same text, Grandmother further discourages silence when she says, “she must not bury her sorrows and her dreams” (Vera, 1996: 10). By ‘burying’ the narrator refers to any way in which women may decide to suppress their quest for ambitions. The narrator questions, “Will my word grow into a tree while I water everyday in silence?” (Vera,1996: 42). This line is a clear indication that silence cannot bring any progress to a woman’s life. Therefore, Grandmother undoubtedly represents a new and transitional kind of a woman who is prepared to do whatever it takes to liberate her generation. Hence Vera attempts to reinstate the dignity of an African woman through the techniques that she employs.

The notion of giving a voice to African women is further highlighted by Chenjerai Hove, a renowned Zimbabwean male writer. Hove (1996: 48) asserts that,

> [T]here is [a] need to listen to the often ignored and unheard voices of women in national historiography. To listen to the one sided male voice is tantamount to listening to lies, for this voice is always narrow in its interpretation of history. Thus, the stories in *Ancestors* are stories of the female blood… blood that has been neglected by so many tales which father has hidden away.

Similarly, in *Butterfly Burning*, Vera shows that women characters are different because they can speak. Deliwe, one of the main characters in the text, resembles an active strong woman who is forceful in speaking and resisting different forms of oppression imposed on her. She speaks in different ways; her refusal to be arrested after being caught practising an illegal business leaves a lot to be admired. Vera portrays Deliwe as a resistant character who is willing to resist against colonial rule. Deliwe insists that she was not going to jail since she has not committed any crime:

> [T]he scorpions had risen in her eyes after she fell out of the police van on her way to the police station. She did not want to go and insisted she had not committed any crime by having visitors in her house. She did not want to be caged all the way to the station, and said she would walk (Vera, 1996: 61).

Vera also portrays Deliwe as a unique character who undermines the perceptions of other male characters. In the novel, the narrator tells us that “she did not take what men were saying seriously” (Vera, 1998: 80). The storyteller further points out that “women say whatever is on their minds and whenever it is on their minds…” Vera gives her characters freedom to ridicule other male characters, Deliwe derisively pitied her male lover when she said, “… he is a poor man” (Vera, 1998: 63).The author gives her female characters a voice to subvert male-centred stereotypes. She portrays women characters as strong individuals who are confident enough to speak against inequality imposed on them. According to Mupondi (2013: 223), “Vera’s main concern in *Without a Name* and Under *the Tongue* is the recovery of the repressed discourse of women”. Thus, in Mupondi’s view, the two novels are a strategy of re-inscription and recovery.

Vera also reclaims women’s identity in her text *Nehanda*. In the opening of the novel, we are told that Nehanda securely ties a bag of words around her waist. The narrator says, “Nehanda carries her bag of words in a pouch that lies tied to her waist. She wears some along her arms. Words and bones” (Vera, 1993: 1). In this first paragraph of the novel, the readers are introduced to this kind of an African woman, a woman who is fortified with words. Essentially, the phrases “a bag of words” comments on Nehanda’s ability to change the situation. These phrases are again repeated in the second page of the chapter so as to continually reminding the readers on the significance of words. This is a diversion from an ordinary traditional woman who is often silenced. According to Mukiwa (2006: 6), Vera indicates the significance of utterance through her characters:

> [O]ur people know the power of words. It is because of this that they desire to have words continuously spoken and kept alive. We do not believe that words become independent of the speech that bore them. The paper is the stranger's own peculiar custom. Among ourselves, speech is not like rock. Words cannot be taken from the people who create them. People are their words.

Vera understands utterance as a tool of women’s emancipation and as a result she provides her women characters with an opportunity to speak. From her perspective, women’s liberation is linked to their ability to speak out. Stratton (1994: 66) points out that, “female writers privilege the female voice and give it moral authority. At the same time they indicate how this voice had been suppressed by patriarchal conventions governing relations between men and women”. In the text *Nehanda*, the young Nehanda resists the orders from the colonial masters and she

affirms that “my people will not rest in bondage” (Vera, 1993: 10). She insists on continual resistance against colonial powers. Male characters in the novel listen to the voices of women as the narrator declares, “the children accompanying the voices of their mothers with clapping. The men listen to the women, who continue to assert their presence with muted song. The custom is that each should be heard”. (Vera, 1993: 42).

In *Nehanda*, the contribution of women characters is clearly acknowledged. Almost everyone in the community is paying attention to Nehanda’s voice, hence the narrator insists, “Nehanda’s trembling voice reaches them coming from some distant past, some sacred territory in their imaginings …it is also the comforting voice of a woman of their mothers whom they trust” (Vera, 1993: 42). The narrator further indicates that, “the crowd recognises and salutes the spirit medium that has been sent to them for the sake of their relief…the people clap their hands in unison, showing their submission to Nehanda’s spirit and truth”(Vera, 1993: 62-3). Vera depicts people’s absolute obedience and embedded trust in Nehanda’s voice. Nehanda’s voice frustrates Mr Browning and Mr Smith as the representatives of the West, hence they say:

> Is it possible that Nehanda has some sway over these people?” Mr. Smith asks. And Mr. Browning responds: “I doubt that the natives can listen to an old woman like her. What can she tell them? The society has no respect for women, whom they treat like children. A woman has nothing to say in the life of the relatives. Nothing at all (Vera, 1993: 75)

However, the fact remains everyone is looking up to Nehanda. In the above paragraph, the author questions the colonial discourses that suppress women’s ability to speak. The dialogue between Mr Browning and Mr Smith indicates the author’s intent in depicting women’s utterance as a threat to the male colonial figures. Vera undermines the colonial masters’ discourses that categorise women and children in the same peripheral group. Later in the text Nehanda, the readers witness Nehanda’s influence on her people.

In *Without a Name*, Vera portrays Mazvita as an expressive character although she is silent in some instances. Mazvita is courageous enough to tell Nyenyedzi, her husband, that she is leaving him to pursue freedom. Even though the novel ends with her return to Mubaira to bury her baby, the journey is a journey to the past, and there is evidence here to suggest that this time, Mazvita is going to deal with the traumatic memory. The repeated use of the phrase “it is yesterday” (Vera 1994: 114-15) indicates that the challenges are now the past and Mazvita would now be ushered into a new life. The narrator further states that “she will carry the voices

that she remembers from this place, from the burning grass. She has not forgotten the voices" (Vera, 1994: 116). Hence, Vera renews women's identity through articulate characters like Mazvita, her characters build confidence to speak against different forms of oppression.

Similar to Vera, the critic Subba (2014) comments on Chimamanda's efforts in freeing her characters through utterance. Subba (2014: 186) asserts that

> *Purple Hibiscus* depicts the contrasting ideas of silence and resistance overlapping and intertwined in the lives of Kambili, Jaja and their mother, Beatrice. Even though they start their journey as silent characters, they progressively, battled in finding their voices in numerous ways.

As a result, Chimamanda Adichie's ideas align with Vera's intentions of liberating women through utterance.

Vera's use of utterance as a technique for emancipating women seems dubious as other critics doubt if the strategies can really works. In supporting this, Boehmer (2005: 175) attests that

> The double subjection of colonised women and her discussion of the silencing of the muted native subject, in the form of the subaltern women, has testified to the fact that, there is no space from where the subaltern (sexed) subject can speak (Spivak, 1985: 122).

From the above, it is clear that Boehmer questions if an African woman is capable of speaking out. Boehmer doubts the ability of a subaltern woman to speak links her perceptions to Spivak's. However Bhabha (1984: 126-7) contest the idea insisting that "the subaltern has, in fact spoken, and that properly symptomatic readings of the postcolonial text can and do recover a native voice. Bhabha's introduction of the ideas of mimicry and parody appropriate the position of the native other, he maintains that the native voice can be recovered and it can never be silenced. As a result, Vera presents her women as bold and strong-willed

2.4 Celebrating Women Characters

To further reconfigure the positions of women, Vera celebrates her women characters in her texts. She points out the distinctiveness and uniqueness of female personalities. She portrays exceptional characters of women by delineate characters that are self-assertive, defiant, rebellious and optimistic. Chukwuma (2002a: 2) also intones that "the rural, back-house, timid, subservient, lack-lustre woman has been replaced by her modern counterpart, a full-rounded

human being, rational, individualistic and assertive, fighting for, claiming and keeping her own freedom". Vera hence, reconfigures women's characters by celebrating the personalities of her female characters. The character of Mazvita, Deliwe and Zhizha in *Without a Name, Butterfly Burning and Under the Tongue* respectively leaves a lot to be admired. These female characters are depicted as strong-willed, bold and optimistic.

Vera subverts the idea of male dominance in literary texts and portrays women as the main characters in all her texts. In Vera's narratives, women are at the centre of her text Begum (2016:103) explains that "postcolonial African women's writing explores how the female protagonists react to oppression in all its manifestations, both physical and psychological". In Vera's texts, the women characters take the active roles in the storylines. Contrary to earlier narratives where women characters would be pushed to the background of the narratives, Vera portrays her female characters as the leading figures in all the selected texts. She subverts male dominance by assigning simple and insignificant roles to her male characters.

In *Nehanda*, Vera re-writes the national history of Zimbabwe by portraying women as supra-feminine figures who are central to the political liberation of Zimbabwe. In *Nehanda*, Vera deploys what Ranger (2004: 205) has called a "matrilinear mode of history-telling" in order to challenge both European historicism and male dominated narratives of Zimbabwean history (Bull-Christiansen, 2004: 38). In the novel, the author opens with the birth of Nehanda a unique female character. As a woman character Nehanda plays multiple roles leading to the liberation of her country. According to Musanga and Mutekwa (2013: 87) "spirits and ancestors, presided over her birth", and this serves as a sign that Nehanda was not just an 'ordinary' being but a symbol of restoration and hope sent by the ancestors against colonial invasion. Vera therefore portrays Nehanda as a superior character. Musanga and Mutekwa (2013: 89) further assert that

> Vera's texts work as a subversion of the masculine nationalism of the anti-colonial struggle that brought independence. Its supra-feminine figure of Nehanda and the role she plays in the primary resistance to colonialism is a subversion of the masculinised conception of nationalism in the secondary resistance movement that silences the roles of women in the anti-colonial nationalist struggle

Vera gives the other side of the story by portraying women as the core figures in the history of colonial struggle in Zimbabwe. She reconfigures the images fashioned by some early writers of Zimbabwean history, who give dominance to male characters. Lewis (2005: 1) also insists that

"Nehanda's leadership provides a metaphor of visionary resistance to all forms of tyranny". The way in which the main character is described hence epitomises the drive of Vera's oeuvre as it renders diverse aspects of tyranny and affirms liberating ways of seeing and living. In most of early texts, there are women who help men accomplish their goals thus being very instrumental in men's lives. However, it is worth noting that the role given to women characters in some of the male authored texts is not an independent role but that of helping the main character, in this case a man, to accomplish his task. For instance, in most of Ngugi's literary works written about colonialism and the Kenyan people's struggle to attain independence, women characters only help Mau Mau fighters by supplying them with arms, food and informing them of what is happening in villages. However, we do not see women arming themselves to fight against the oppressor by joining the guerrilla fighters in the forest. This is a pointer to female subordination in the society where their importance is to offer support to men. Though the above writers give women characters some positive portrayal the very women are resented as people stripped bare of all that make them central and relevant in traditional African socio-political domain.

The change in the portrayal of African women is similarly depicted in Chuks Iloegbunam's novel *Surbenia's Day* (2004). The novel portrays a female character Ilinna Nwamama, who is a Brigadier General and Commander of the all-female commando brigade. Ilinna Nwama is given charge of ground operations during a coup d'état which topples a ruthless dictator and restores balance to a new social order. Similarly, in *Nehanda*, Vera gives her protagonist powers to inspire as well as motivate her people to resist colonial intrusion.

Besides Vera, Ogola's texts such as *The River and the Source* (1994) also seek to project Kenyan woman as capable of not only telling her own story but also of asserting her rightful place and personality in the broader national life. The female heroines in *The River and the Source* (1994) speak to various historic periods in Kenya's history. They emblematically express a kind of womanhood in contemporary Kenya which projects its own societal agency and identity. Ogola's texts look to extend Kenyan women as fit for telling their own stories. In the process these characters rewrite that which has been apportioned to women in colonial Kenya's national history.

According to Lewis (2005: 1) Vera's first novel strives to banish the ineffectual gods of postcolonial rule by telling a story and upholding values very different from those in the stories that routinely circulate in Zimbabwe. She creates visions of society, human dignity and perception that provide liberating codes by which to "imagine" the self and the nation, and

therefore, by which to live. Hence Vera re-writes the view of women. Mezo (1997: 2) also explains:

> For centuries, African women languished on the fringe of their universe—neglected, exploited, degenerated, and indeed made to feel like outsiders. They were not invited to stay when men were engaged in any discussions; they were not included in councils of war; they did not form part of the masquerades representing the judiciary and ancestral spirits .

Vera portrays the young Nehanda as a source of hope for the desperate Zimbabweans. Nehanda and Vatete are made to attend political meetings and everyone listens to every word they say. Nehanda thus becomes a sign of hope and restoration as people seek guidance and inspiration from her in the execution of the war against the colonisers. Hence the narrator says:

> the man waves a long spear covered with blood ... he kneels on one knee as he sings praises to Nehanda, who has protected him as he moved through the settlements of the strangers ... more men surrounded her with their own messages, reporting to her that they had done as she had asked, they have been successful in their attacks. (Vera, 1993: 79)

The language used here highlights Nehanda's supra-feminine role, a unique feminine character who is ready to claim her space and her freedom. Nehanda possesses tremendous spiritual powers and she has a divinely designated role to perform for her people right from birth. According to Ogbazi (2012: 31), "Nehanda is primed with distinct supernatural gifts and qualities". She is ascribed with redeeming propensity thus becoming both a resistance figure and the banner under which her people sought refuge during the period of the national struggles. She offers spiritual guidance and psychological protection to them. Bull-Christiansen (2004: 72) points out that "Nehanda personifies the national history; she is an icon… the spiritual history of the Chimurenga". In *Nehanda*, Vera's protagonist is "not vulnerable and cannot be conquered. She wants us to accept that this female figure is immortal since she transcends time, living continuously in the minds and lives of her people. Ogbazi (2012: 44). It is only on her and through her that the continuity of the nation rests and is assured.

Ogbazi (2012: 45) further highlights how Vera discloses the significant perspective of her work in an interview with Bryce in 2003 when she reveals that

> With Nehanda, I wanted to bring that woman who has led the first rebellion against the British to the forefront. ---In that time (early 80s) women were coming back from the armed struggle and people were not even recognizing that they had gone. But a woman had led the first rebellion, not just physically but spiritually, which in fact was the basis of our entire armed struggle that followed – the second Chimurenga. It is based on a spiritual belief arising from the words: "My Bones will rise". It was not that we had arms or anything else, but we believed she would protect us. People had an absolute belief they wouldn't die, they were bullet proof. But there is this duplicity – people came back, and all the heroes are men all of a sudden. (Interview with Bryce 2003: 222).

Ogbazi (2012: 45) additionally explains how the Zimbabwean president attests to the valuable influence of this figure as documented in Zimbabwean history when he says:

> Nehanda Nyakasikana, appears in our war annals of postcolonial Zimbabwe as the first heroine and martyr. She did not lead just a battalion of a regional army but a national army in a national struggle for the overthrow of company rule and recovery of the fatherland. No doubt, Vera's unremitting assertion of the impressive role women have played in the development of the Zimbabwe begins with her novel *Nehanda*.

Hence, Vera tries to portray a better picture of her women characters by reconfiguring their images in her literary texts. Similarly in *Under the Toungue*, Zhizha and Grandmother take the active roles and the novel opens with these womanly figures. Male characters are only mentioned later at the climax of the narration. Women characters are leading and they are the source of hope and inspiration. Even Zhizha affirms this when she says "Grandmother is here, she is our tomorrow" (Vera, 1996: 69). In the midst of desperation and pain, women characters are the sources of hope. Vera further asserts resilience of her female characters by using a simile when Grandmother assures Zhizha of how strong Runyararo is "[Y]our mother is strong like the skin over your knees, touch the strength of your mother here on your knees… [she] is strong like the soles of my feet" (Vera, 1996: 73). Here, Vera gives images of resiliency to her female characters.

In Butterfly Burning, women characters are also at the centre of the text with Phephelapi taking the leading role. Female characters are ambitious and determined to attain self-rediscovery. The narrator indicates that " Phephelapi was a woman who chose her own destination and liked to watch the horizon change from pale morning to blue light" (Vera, 1998: 63). This is evident by how she made several trips to Deliwe's house in order to get a better insight of the

future. Deliwe is a courageous woman, the one who encourages Phephelaphi to apply for the nursing school, the one who runs a shebeen and sat calmly on one of the empty beer crates which said, in large black print, *Southern Rhodesia*. The possession of this crate was a crime for which she could be punished (Vera, 1998: 60) She is not even a large woman to look at but did not fear the police" (ibid). Hence, Vera portrays women as indomitable and focused characters as they form fundamental part of the narration. In *Butterfly Burning*, the narration centres on Deliwe, Phephelapi and Getrude. The death of Phephelapi, the leading character, marks the end of the narration, which shows her significance.

In the same vein, *Without a Name* portrays women as the main characters and begins with Mazviita, a strong-willed character who is willing to re-discover her life. Through the narration, the author explains how she moves from place to place to pursue freedom. The narrator tells us that "Mazvita arrived in Harari ready to claim her freedom. Here she was protected from the hills and the land. Harari banished memory, encouraged hope". In *Without a Name* Mazvita is so dedicated to claim her freedom compared male characters. Mbatha (2009: 5) supports this idea by noting that "African women's literature depicts diasporic women searching and finding success and happiness outside marriage, suggesting that marriage and motherhood are not the only keys to female happiness and fulfilment." The novel ends when Mazvita has returned to her village and sees a sign of hope.

2.5 Deconstructing Gender Binaries

Vera juxtaposes male against female characters to deconstruct the binaries between her men and women. According to Musanga and Mutekwa (2013: 81) "Vera's main focus is the gendered reading of the nationalist discourse and [she] attempts to combat the masculine construction of the national project and its negation of gender equality". Vera aims at critiquing the binaries that distinguish men from women in her fictional narratives. According to Mkwesha (2016: 30), "Vera challenges the rigidity of male–female binaries, and consequently alludes to gender as socially constructed and historically shifting. During each transition (from pre–colony to colony, and from colony to post-colony) new definitions of womanhood/femininity and manhood/masculinity are constructed by and on the political and social terrain of relationships between men and women". As indicated by Connell & Messerschmidt (2005: 68) the terms "masculinity and manhood attain substance only in contrast to femininity or womanhood. As a result, in order to rethink femininity, it is crucial to reconceptualise masculinity as well thereby liberating both binaries". In the text *Nehanda*, Vera attempts to create male and female as

equal and complementary, destabilising the hierarchical opposition between masculine and feminine by producing a “new man” through redefining Kaguvi as a weeping hunter.

In the text *Nehanda*, Vera privileges Nehanda as equally as Kaguvi in regard to the roles they play in the liberation struggle. Musanga and Mutekwa (2013: 87) ascertain that “as a sign, symbol of restoration and hope, Nehanda becomes a rallying point of the primary resistance against colonialism in the same way as Chaminuka is a rallying point of resistance against the expansionist project of the Ndebele”. Musanga and Mutekwa (2013: 89) further elucidate that

> It is equally critical to note that war in conventional European literature has been designated as the province of men. The genealogy of this thinking is rooted in the classical texts of European fiction such as *The Iliad* by Homer, where men are seen as the executors of war and the form of masculinity that is valorised is the warrior masculinity. Women, on the contrary, are portrayed as the perennial victims.

Vera subverts the idea of male figures as super-heroes. In *Nehanda*, there are male figures like Kaguvi who only play a supplementary role to Nehanda. In the text, Nehanda is depicted as the leader of the liberation struggle, contrary to the customary belief that male should lead the war. The narrator points out that

> the men stopped dancing and knelt around Nehanda and the women in the outer circle cast protective shadows over the bending bodies of the men. Nehanda closed her eyes and spoke with a trembling voice. Her voice rose higher, as though to reach every crag surrounding the village (Vera, 1993: 33).

Vera deconstructs supra-femininities and supra-masculinities binaries. Vera counters the national tale that has honoured Kaguvi’s guidance in the uprising. At the same time, she restructures and writes equality in the Zimbabwean postcolonial nation that has forgotten women’s contributions to the liberation struggle, and which is instead enforcing colonial versions of domesticity. She draws attention to Kaguvi being given orders by Nehanda in leading the Vashonas to fight against the colonialists (Mkwesha, 2016: 31). Vera therefore, portrays Nehanda equally as Chielo, the priestess in *Things Fall Apart* (1959). In Achebe’s novel, Chielo executes dominion over male characters like Okonkwo who conventionally might be said to belong to the hegemonic masculinity class. In *Nehanda,* Vera rewrites the First Chimurenga from a female perspective (Muchemwa 2005: 200). Vera therefore insists on woman–hero against weeping hunter as complementary. As described by Mr Browning,

"[Nehanda's] face cracked, like mud on a riverbed" (Vera, 1993: 117), a sign of crumbling and disintegration. Still, Vera craft leadership room for Nehanda by letting Kaguvi die first. As depicted by Mkwesha (2016: 31) "this allows her to confirm and consolidate Nehanda's hyphenated subject position as woman–hero". In contrary to the official nationalist narrative, Vera contests and demythologises the war historiography and brings women liberation fighters to the fore.

Vera renews her female characters through the portrayal of her characters as defiant and rebellious. Vera's female characters take ferocious measures to claim their freedom. In *Butterfly Burning*, the narrator tells us of the defiant character of Deliwe,

> [she] had once been locked up for a whole night in a police cell for selling alcohol. She threw her heard back and laughed like a madwoman. When she returned to Sidojiwe E2, she carried on as if nothing had disturbed her (Vera, 1998: 60)

In *Butterfly Burning*, Vera presents a resilient character of Deliwe; a personality trait customarily associated with male figures. In the same novel, Vera portrays Phephelaphi's character through stern rebellion, her ritual suicidal act signposts resistance and autonomy. She wants a sense of belonging "finding herself that was it. Phephelaphi wanted to be somebody. She could not stop the longing…" (Vera, 1998: 75). Phephelaphi's character is deferent from an expected feminine figure. The act of committing suicide can be interpreted as a way of showing extreme resistance against unwanted male-centred oppression.

Vera further portrays this character in *Without a Name*. In the novel Mazvita engages in unfavourable acts in a bid to rediscover herself. In her quest for self-discovery, Mazvita commits infanticide because the child had been born out of rape. Mazvita felt the unwanted baby would pull her back. According to Subba (2014: 186) "although the act of killing cannot be appreciated or justified, however, it can be interpreted as – an only alternative to atrocity, an extreme form of resistance, an act of strong defiance or a voice of self-assertion". Therefore, "Mazvita would like to begin without a name, soundlessly and without pain" (Vera 1994:102). According to Thabela (2010: 30), *Without a Name* "takes the thread of migrating women further as it chronicles the story of Mazvita's quest for self and fulfilment". The narrator indicates that "she had no fear of the departures". Hence, in a bid to free her female characters, Vera portrays Mazvita as an uncontrollable and defiant character.

In *Nehanda*, Vera portrays a unique character in the personality of Vatete the midwife, whom she does not exclude from effecting and executing authority:

> Sometimes she closed her eyes and transported herself to the Dare, the village fire place, where she was often invited by the elders to arbitrate in matters of the village, especially those concerning women ... those who were admitted to the Dare knew the power of words. The midwife was also among the shapers of wisdom, who determined the future of the village (Vera, 1993: 9)

Unlike what is expected of a woman, Vatete is strong and determined and she performs duties that are not socially expected of her gender. As a result, the author deconstructs the binaries that are socially created in relation to gender-based roles.

In *Under the Tongue*, Zhizha's mother kills her husband as an extreme sign of resistance. She kills her husband after finding out that he was sexually abusing their daughter. Hence Vera shows that her women characters can fight for their families although it has adverse consequences. Chukwuma (2002b: 131) insists that

> [F]emale assertion has been a continued trend in African Feminist literature. Thus, self-assertion of Beatrice [in *Nervous Conditions*], through the climactic act of eliminating her oppressor, can be seen as a deliberate attempt by the author to continue the trend of female assertion. Female assertion can be seen as an attempt to correct the traditional image of women as indeterminate human beings who are heavily dependent, gullible, voiceless and stuck in the background of the patrimony which marked most African societies.

However, taking a closer look, one may see that Vera's characterisation can be assessed as slightly hyperbolic and exaggerated. In a bid to liberate the African woman, Vera ends up giving her woman characters undue privileges. However, she cannot be discredited for that, as she is undoubtedly fulfilling her mission to rewrite the former colonised other as one of the primary objective of the postcolonial project.

2.6 The Quest Motif

There is a motif of quest for change in almost all of the selected texts. This theme is similar to texts like *Purple Hibiscus*, where there is perpetual quest for freedom. As pointed out by Thabela (2010: 12), "Mazvita in Without *A Name* (1994) refuses to remain at the farm with

Nyenyedzi because she is aware of the exploitation and negative identity that the coloniser has crafted for the black workers". Mazvita is fed-up of the stinking tobacco gasses in the tobacco barns and attempts to convince Nyenyedzi to move to the city so that they can have a better life. Vera indicates that "she possessed strong desire for her liberty… [she had to] banish limits for progress (Vera 1994: 40). Mazvita is therefore determined for transformation by discovering something new.

Mazvita feels that the city is "…the perfect place to begin" (Vera, 1994: 24). She felt that she had a potential to begin again. However, unlike Mazvita, Nyenyedzi is too attached to the land that he feels that his identity is bound to the land. Mazvita feels that the city can make them better people. However Mazvita grows tired of waiting and moves to the city where she believes she would find her freedom.

Female characters in the texts continue to search for a better life because they are sure that the new collective freedom ushered by political independence would not cater for their identity needs. Black women therefore migrate from place to place as they hope it may open up other avenues for them. As a quest for rediscovery, the motif of a journey occurs at two levels; physical, as well as the psychological. At the end of the narration Mazvita undertakes yet another journey, she comes back to her village absolutely perplexed. This time, she has only one wish, to begin without a name and pain. This can be related to the fashion of the Greek, where epic heroes and heroines return as victors in order to be celebrated.

In *Butterfly Burning*, characters like Phephelaphi and Gertrude are determined to pursue freedom and are eager for reinstatement and a quest for a better future. Phephelaphi makes trips to Deliwe's house in a bid to rediscover what she wants in life. She cannot mourn in self-pity but fights in order to discover what it means for one to have personal freedom. Hence, Vera's texts are embedded with a quest motif which complements the identity of a modern women.

2.7 Notion of Hope

It is imperative to note that Vera ends some of her narratives with a signal of hope and anticipation for women's victory. Almost all the novels end on an optimistic note. In *Under the Tongue*, the novel ends with the return of Zhizha's mother, Runyararo from prison. The jail signifies a constrained environment of captivity and as a result her release from the jail signals the first step towards women's freedom. The narrator declares:

> 1980 spelt the end of loneliness and unfulfilled desire long kept. Where ceremonies were discovered and celebrated. 1980 was a time to shorten distance and desire. Even those who had been restless and unconvinced found it necessary to open their windows an inch wider, to raise their voices a tone just enough to be heard above the hopeful rhythm (Vera, 1996: 111-112)

The phrase “open their inches an inch wider” symbolises the expansion of the vision and opportunities for the previously marginalised groups. This can be interpreted as a symbol of growth and increase of the space of the previously suppressed groups of people, more especially for women.

Under the Tongue concludes by giving women characters the possibilities of a new dispensation and hope. The political era presented by the narrator symbolises a new kind of an African woman:

> These women had new names that the past did not echo, they had long arms and long legs and long voices. They laughed louder than the men because they had shared secrets with them. The women were strong and looked only at the sky where they said it was free. They would begin in the sky where they said it was free. They would begin from there so they removed the yellow roofs and the red roofs and tore them to ground, with their own arms. They wanted to see something else not the canopy of painted sky (Vera, 1996: 101).

The above indicates a completely transformed kind of an African woman, a woman who is eager to tear new grounds and re-discover herself.

Besides *Under the Tongue,* the novel *Nehanda* also ends with a signal of hope and a gesture of expectation. In spite of the fact that the novel ends with the death of Nehanda the main character, her demise is an indication of conceivable hope. Nehanda’s death would bring freedom to her kin and is a symbol of a new dispensation. Her death usheres political freedom for her people. She surrenders herself to the imperialists in return for the liberation of her country. This demonstration shows that her people were to be driven into a new political and social dispensation. This is on the grounds that the political opportunity would deliver both social and financial flexibility to the Rhodesians. In *Butterfly Burning*, the narrator gives a hint of hope the images of “bright sun and rain” (Vera, 1998: 147) symbolise hope and re-birth for

Phephelaphi. Vera celebrates women as complete beings who struggle to make their voices heard in the public sphere. Vera's women are thus celebrated in their totality in her novels.

Vera depicts the place of women characters, and has faith in their transformation. She offers them a ray of hope in their predicament. She does this by changing them into better people in the general public. The enthusiasm to re-define the identities of the African women by Vera indicates a great revolution in African literature.

2.8 Summary

This chapter has explored how Vera attempts to reconfigure her female characters' identities. The chapter has focused on examining the strategies employed by Vera in breaking the binaries between men and women. Her characterisation is remarkably typified with women forming the basis of the narratives whilst men feature as the minor characters. Her female figures are incredibly determined to reclaim their spaces and this is predominantly manifested through utterance. However, the journey of struggle to liberty, for these women, seems quite unfinished lest they have fully-fledged control over their own lives. This chapter however, indicates that utterance and hybridisation are not enough to reinstate women's positions in African literature. Vera indicates that there is a need for women to begin a new life and bury the past hence she advocates that women should anticipate a better future.

CHAPTER THREE

Re-writing gender

3.0 Introduction

This chapter examines how Vera deconstructs patriarchal stereotypes in a selection of her literary texts. It explores how the female characters in the texts grapple with their suppression resulting from patriarchal customs. Begum similarly notes that "the African woman in the pre-colonial and traditional society was stereotyped in her restricted role when she was denied her place outside her home" (Begum, 2016:103). Unlike the Western literary culture, the African woman has been generally projected as being bound to performing several distinct roles, including those mainly linked to motherhood. This chapter, therefore, assesses how the author negotiates space for women characters in her writing. At the beginning of the chapter, the researcher traces the roots of patriarchy to give a better understanding of the concept. This chapter further explores the approaches employed by Vera in an attempt to critique the stereotypical attitudes attached to women.

3.1 Brief History of Patriarchy and Sexual Politics

The notion of patriarchy can be traced to ancient times. According to Asiyanbola (2005: 3), "the word patriarchy was there before the current resurgence of the women's movement and women's studies". The concept was propounded to analyse the conditions of women's oppression by men. The concept was primarily used to explain the authority of the father as the head of the family, but post 1960s feminist critics describe it as methodical organisation of male dominance and female subservience. Okpala (2016: 25) insists that

> [s]ince the status of women in any given society is inextricably reflected in the representation of women in the literature of that given milieu, it is an established fact that women in African literature have suffered the same misrepresentation in texts as they have in their social context.

It is also pertinent to note that the misrepresentation of female characters is not only limited to literary production by male writers but by female writers as well, as evident by how some of the female writers berate and subjugate their female characters.

Quite a number of feminist literary critics such as Julia Kristeva and Kate Millet amongst others, explain how patriarchal chauvinism dominates the literary environment. Sexual politics theories

explain the disadvantaging of women as the weaker sex. These theories explain how hegemonic patriarchal attitudes are used to control women. Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics* (1969), explains how patriarchy begins at family level:

> Patriarchy's chief institution is the family. It is both the mirror of and a connection to the larger society; a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole. Mediating between the individual and the social structure, the family effects control and conformity where political and other authority are insufficient. (Millet, 1976: 33).

Millett insists that it is time we understood that the entire structure of male and female identity is self-assertively imposed by a social conditioning which has taken all the conceivable attributes of the human personality. Millet urges us to begin to realise and to re-train ourselves to see that both intelligence and a reverence for life are human qualities. Therefore, Millett's *Sexual Politics* gives a useful hypothetical understanding of a male-dominated society. Her key perception is that male-controlled society's main foundation is the family and this reflects the larger society, hence she calls it "a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole". Her conception is evidently applicable to Vera's rethinking of an African family in her literary texts. According to Okpala (2016: 27), "[i]t is of paramount importance that writers translate feminine consciousness into writing because the louder women's voices are heard and read the more attentive the world would be to women's issues". Hence, Vera's narratives seek to give power to the woman at family level. She deconstructs the pre-defined hierarchies of the family. As argued by Begum:

> Women writers concur that it is their cardinal onus to undo the scenarios that subject women to gender discrimination in order to entail a new life that will enhance an egalitarian society. They strive to demythologise the distorted constructions of the African women as slaves, matriarchs, mammies, lewd women, castrating bitches and second-class citizens. (Begum 2016: 87).

As a result, the more feminine consciousness is ingrained into the psyche of both men and women, the more likely society can achieve progress in balancing gender relations in African literature.

3.2 Understanding Patriarchal Attitudes

When studying the representation of patriarchal attitudes in fictional works, it is important to firstly understand how a patriarchal social order operates. In most customary African societies,

men are viewed as the mainstay of the general public. They are assigned the obligation of driving and heading the family and society at large. In contrast, women are seen as the weaker sex and are subsequently differentiated from men and this reinforces gender imbalances. Indeed, even in matrilineal cultural societies, a decision cannot be reached without the contribution of men since they are viewed as more grounded than women. Women are therefore expected to fulfil certain gender responsibilities, which, to a large extent, disadvantage them. Asiyanbola (2005: 2) notes that patriarchy

> is a system of social stratification and differentiation on the basis of sex, which provides material advantages to males while simultaneously placing severe constraints on the roles and activities of females. There are clearly defined sex roles, while various taboos ensure conformity with specified gender roles.

Asiyanbola's explanation gives a clear understanding of how a patriarchal regulatory system disadvantages the woman as the "other". Begum (2016: 87) further concurs with Asiyanbola's perception that "the patriarchal culture in Third World [sic] countries proves to be androcentric and enforces marginalisation of women, which is inherent in their masculine, hegemonic culture and upholds social injustice in oppressing women". As a consequence, it is quite demanding for a literary writer to debunk such patriarchal attitudes since the beliefs are deeply rooted in African culture. It is not easy to revolutionise culture. The assignment of gender roles in our societies is basically at the roots of gender discrimination. In *Performativity Theory*, Judith Butler theorises how gender is a social construct meaning that gender is not a pre-fixed identity, but rather a socially created entity.

Though there has been an attempt to create a gender-balanced literary atmosphere in African literary texts, the condition of women in African society is fraught with contradictions and oppositions, mostly arising out of the colonial domination of Africa, others intrinsic to the organisational customary structures of particular societies. A rigorous feminist approach to African society would therefore reveal a number of excesses in structure and situations which deny women equality. According to Begum (2016: 48), "contemporary women writers are striving to liberate women from such extreme exploitation and are successfully transforming the society through rewriting the gender norms and ultimately, deconstructing the gender identities". Vera's thematic message is that women should strive to free themselves even in the worst patriarchal environments.

In a patriarchal society, men are assigned unique qualities such as being courageous and self-confident. In contrast, women oversee domestic chores like housekeeping, cooking for the family and child bearing among others. Lare (2015:107-109) describes patriarchy as a

> society that lays too much emphasis on the social functions of men as public decision makers, heirs of family properties, community leaders, relegating women at secondary positions as home-keepers, child bearers, housewives, in short, the appendage of men. The patriarchal dictates prescribe subordinating gender roles to women.

Closely linked to that, Simpson & Lewis (2005: 14) opine that everything circulates around men and that they are the ones who control language which is a symbol of power. The idea that men control the symbol of power basically implies that they control women too. Sunderland (2006: 3) concurs with Simpson et al. by citing some sexist clichés that degrade women:

> 'a woman's tongue spreads gossip fast', 'men talk like books, women lose themselves in details', 'never listen to a woman's words', 'three inches of a woman's tongue can slay a man six feet tall', 'silence gives proper grace to women', 'how hard it is for women to keep counsel…' (Sunderland 2006: 3)

Considering these generalisations about women, one can conclude that language is one of the mediums through which women have been objectified and reduced to non-entities. Both Simpsons (2000) and Sunderland (2006) concur in their assertions. Lare (2015: 109) also believes that "male dominance and centeredness unveils misogynist language use". Pauwels (2003: 550) terms the use of this sort of language "linguistic sexism". Linguistic sexism is contemptuous, hostile, derogatory and impertinent and it defiles the social atmosphere of any literary text.

In *Without a Name* (1996), Vera clearly points out that, "it was heavy to be a mother. It made one recognisable in the streets, even when one no longer recognises herself. *Amai* [mother]. It was painful. *Amai*". What Vera means is that women always face challenges in life. Thus, in her writings, she derides inequitable sexism by depicting uncompromising characters of women who are primed to claim their space in a hostile male-centric setting. Vera constructs women who find different ways of freeing themselves, women who are self-determining in fighting against the socially-constructed selves. Hence Vera works battles against linguistic sexism

The patriarchal society depicted by some African male writers mainly reserves subaltern roles for women. Such literary texts are embedded with sexist language (Pauwels, 2003). Fonchichong (2006: 135) also notes that

> …male writers like Chinua Achebe, Elechi Amadi, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi Wâ Thiongo, and Cyprain Ekwensi in their literary mass are accused of condoning patriarchy, are deeply entrenched in a macho conviviality and a one-dimensional and minimalised presentation of women who are demoted and assume peripheral roles. Their penchant to portray an androcentric narrative is at variance with the female gender that is trivialised through practices like patriarchy, tradition, culture, gender socialisation process, marriage and domestic enslavement.

An assessment of texts like *In the Chest of a Woman (2008) by* Mawubge shows that some of the male characters control women in all dimensions for example they control women's speech, their properties and womanhood. The novel *Bride Price* by Emecheta also depicts the mother as a pathetic or incapable parent. One of the characters Aku Nna is portrayed as a woman who submissively accepts to marry of her husband's brother as per African custom. In addition, she remains silent when other men sexually molest her daughter, all in the name of observing patriarchal norms.

According to Mukiwa (2006: 9), "Vera's fictional works are important in breaking the taboos by shifting centres to margins and margins to centres". In literary works written by recent female authors, there is potential for better methods of initiating change in African societies. To corroborate the idea, Gaidzanwa (1992: 123) points out that "all these developments should be harnessed in a theoretically creative manner with the realisation that meaningful changes do not normally occur over short periods". Hence, African feminist writers need to be dedicated and patient enough to fight against these patriarchal attitudes. Mangena (2013: 10) also argues that "unacknowledged women experience results from silence imposed upon them by patriarchal domination". From Mangena (2013)'s perspective, the imposed silence is broken when women authors articulate these experiences in their writings. As a result, it is important to note that during her lifetime, Vera interrogated patriarchal attitudes and behaviours in Zimbabwean society through her literary writings which range from short stories to novels.

Another disparaging and sad patriarchal environment is presented in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. In the novel, female characters are audaciously submerged in tyrannical collectivism and

bigoted extensions. According to Mgbojirikwe, Chinaka & Ifeyinwa (2015: 1388), the women in *Things Fall Apart*,

> are never called by their names but referred to as somebody's wife or somebody's mother (preferably the son) such as Nwoye's mother. Women in *Things Fall Apart* like others in most male narratives are not meant to ask questions but expected to do what they are asked to do.

The repercussion of a woman's unconventional behaviour is evident when Okonkwo mercilessly beats Anasi, his wife for failing to prepare his meal. Similarly, Ekwueme in *The Concubine* (1966) by Amadi, cruelly disciplines Ahurole to show off his position as the head of the family. Hence, from male scholars' representation, women's dignity is derived from their adherence to the expected motherhood and wifehood norms. It may be argued that patriarchal attitudes were created to degrade the positions of women. As a result, women writers' contribution is important as it fosters the deconstruction of the patriarchal norms.

3.3 Women's Emancipation

Women emancipation in literature essentially refers to how African women work towards the deconstruction of patriarchal and phallocentic attitudes. As a feminist literary critic, Vera writes to fully emancipate her women. She portrays women as independent beings free from macho patriarchal beliefs. Okpala (2016: 32) notes that

> The literary creative output of African feminist writers demonstrates an engagement with the project of redefining and reconstructing African womanhood through the representation of positive textual female characters and the awakening of feminist consciousness in the minds of readers through the thematisation of issues of feminist concerns in their texts.

One thing to note is that some male literary works in Africa also expose unjust relationships between men and women. A good example is Leopold Senghor's poems on negritude. In these poems, he evokes the Mother Africa image and tries to lull feminine consciousness into apathy. However, the novelist Miriam Tlali (1987: 49) objects fiercely to this:

> It is a problem when men want to call you Mother Africa and put you on a pedestal, because then they want you to stay there forever without asking your opinion --and unhappy you if you want to come down as an equal human being.

Hence, from Tlali's perspective, the 'Mother Africa' paradigm does nothing good but confines the African woman to the same peripheral position.

Women critics speak of the solemn nature of the problems of the African woman. Time and again one comes across the broken and travailed figure, for instance Flora Nwapa in *One Is Enough*, and Grace Ogot's literary writings. All these writers attempt to give a clear image of women together with possible solutions to solve their problems. For Bâ, female solidarity or bonding is the solution to the problems of the African woman.

3.4 Deconstructing the Institution of Marriage

In a patriarchal society, marriage is the smallest unit of organised power and it is hence regarded as the foundation of gendered politics. Culturally, marriage is mainly designed to benefit men as the head of the family. Ogundipe-Leslie explores the oppression of women within marriage, noting the following:

> The oppression of women within marriage takes various forms. First, the woman loses status by being married ….With marriage, she becomes a client or possession; she is voiceless and often rightless in her husband's family ….She also loses much of her personal freedom. (1994: 75).

One important aspect to note is that Vera's female characters deride patriarchy by undermining the institution of marriage. The women in the texts do not place much value in marriage because they see marriage as an institution that facilitates their oppression. In *Without a Name*, Mazvita completely rules out the idea of marriage. In the first chapter of the novel, the readers are introduced to her, leaving Nyenyedzi, her husband and going to Harari to rediscover herself. No matter how hard Nyenyedzi begs her not to leave, she still insists on leaving. Vera's female characters portray a negative attitude towards marriage while their male counterparts are fixated and obsessed with marriage. Later in the text, Nyenyedzi tells Mazvita "we should live together and cook together… this is a good place for us to live" (Vera, 1994: 25). The kind of life that Nyenyedzi thinks comprises of "living and cooking together" (Vera, 1994: 25), however Mazvita wants more than that. Mazvita insists "I can't live here". The use of this phrase is emphatic because Mazvita's refusal to stay in Mubaira can be interpreted as a rejection of the psychological oppression of patriarchal ideologies. Mazvita's refusal to stay in Mubaira with Nyenyedzi demonstrates Vera's central goal to free women from the customary values of an African marriage. This is because Mazvita's stay with Nyenyedzi meant that she

could not explore other better economic avenues. Despite the fact that Nyenyedzi is worried that they would lose each other in the city, Mazvita thinks less about their marriage and insists on going on. Mazvita hence claims, "I must move on. I will move on" (Vera, 1994:25). Therefore, Mazvita gives up on her marriage in a bid to pursue her dream.

Upon her arrival in Harari, Mazvita decides to move in with Joel. However, later, she realises she did not want that kind of a marriage either as it would inhibit her from exploring different economic opportunities of Harari life. As a result, "…she could not think about Joel [her husband] and pregnancy together…Mazvita had stopped thinking of Nyenyedzi and Joel. She could replace Joel's face with another, with beginnings" (Vera, 1994: 64). Mazvita is flexible and completely free to make any decision in her life so as to emancipate herself from men. By constructing this kind of character, Vera deliberately devalues the significance of family and its hierarchies so as to free her female characters.

In *Butterfly Burning*, Vera constructs a unique character, Phephelaphi, a strong young woman who valorises her dreams first before marriage. Phephelaphi:

> …had learnt that everything else between a man and a woman could be forgotten; the caress, the touch, their lips searching, and the belonging which made each movement tempting, their mingling necessary. This could be forgotten…This was passing. It was possible to part, to turn and walk away after he had made and unmade her. She wanted more (Vera, 1998:107)

The repetition of the phrase "could be forgotten" indicates how the author undermines marriage, because if something can be easily forgotten then it means it is insignificant. Phephelaphi understands that her dream is much more important and, as a result, she consideres it better to relinquish her marriage and chase her dreams. Phephelaphi is portrayed as a character who is willing to live and make decisions without the knowledge and, by implication, approval of her husband Fumbatha.This is because she needs dignity and respect.

Phephelaphi's quest to be a different woman creates conflict with her boyfriend, as their dreams were no longer resonating with each other. Fumbatha belongs to the older generation and he is much older than his girlfriend. He fears losing her and senses that she needs more than their domestic life. He desires to keep Phephelaphi still and "wants to love her without risk" (Vera 1998: 71). He does not support her career aspirations and forbids her from applying to study. He says "We are happy together. I work. I take care of you. It is not necessary for you

to find something else. We have our life together" (Vera 1998: 71). In this context, the author condemns the commoditisation of women. Phephelaphi is so dedicated to pursue her economic dreams hence she is so determined to liberate herself from oppression. Fumbatha treasures Phephelaphi, and wants her to belong to him and makes her feel content with the life he provides. He guards her like a hawk and insists on her "unwavering loyalty" (Vera 1998: 70). He is a traditional man who believes a woman's place is in the domestic space and her main role is to have children, while he provides for her. Fumbatha is an adoring, possessive, obsessive, controlling, demanding and insecure boyfriend. Patriarchy invokes loyalty to imprison and contain women. However, Phephelaphi leaves her husband to re-discover herself.

In *Butterfly Burning,* the black women in the township defy colonial influence and the local patriarchal system by staying single. Zandile, Phephelaphi's biological mother, establishes her own solid shelter. Zandile insists, "I built my own house in Makokoba, not out of asbestos sheets, but out of brick and cement. It is one room, but it is my own solid shelter" (Vera, 1998: 129). The word "own" in the phrase indicates a state of independency, unaided by a man. The narrator indicates that Zandile leads a self-directed life. In addition, the choice of the word "solid" in the phrase indicates that as a woman, Zandile is capable of building a very strong shelter unexpected of her gender. The narrator tells us that she chooses a man to live with her in her house, on her own terms (Vera, 1998: 41-2). The author, thus, grants her characters freedom from all regulations pertaining to the institution of marriage. Choosing a man to stay with, at a given time, is a sign of resilience and it is actually perceived as prostitution. Essentially, prostitution contradicts the expectations of a customary marriage. In this way, Vera breaks the taboo and depicts her female characters as free to stay with the men they want under their own conditions. This also grants the female characters freedom over their bodies.

In *Butterfly Burning*, the author also undermines customary marriage. Zandile and Boyidi lives together under an unofficial marriage, neither legalised by African custom nor by Western Christianity. Mkwesha's (2016: 60) perspective is that, "their unconventional coupling deprives the traditional patriarchy of lobola (bride price), and destabilises the European Christian nuclear family structure of husband and wife established through a legalised white church wedding, followed by having children". The novel indicates that forming a union with men outside the patriarchal customs of marriage demeans the institution of marriage as established by colonial government and the tradition of patriarchy. Mkwesha (2016: 61) indicates that women who are like "Zandile are tabooed and stereotyped for lacking a maternal instinct. Zandile nearly

abandons her child, [Phephelaphi] after giving birth, but instead gives up the child to her friend Getrude, who volunteers to look after her". Zandile, therefore, perceives motherhood as a burden (Vera, 1998: 143-4). She chooses freedom and pleasure, thereby rejecting motherhood as a socially constructed identity. Zandile aspires to be remembered "for her poise, her voice and liberty" (Vera, 1998: 38). Her drastic and subversive decisions and behaviour foreshadow Phephelaphi's radical rejection of motherhood in favour of a professional career. To emancipate her women, Vera constructs women who are prepared to live without men.

Similarly, Tsitsi Dangarembga cross-examines the ills of a patriarchal marriage in *She No Longer Weeps*. She questions what it means to become a woman in a patriarchal society and queries the fulfilment of the promised freedom after the country's independence and the passage of the Legal Marriage Act. According to Dangarembga, the Act was intended to give women the privilege to contract their own marriages and speak for themselves in court, as well as becoming guardians of their children. In some of her literary works, Dangarembga exposes the evils of patriarchal marriages.

Essentially, motherhood is perceived as a key responsibility of an African woman in customary societies. It is apparently related to different types of male-centric abuse. Ogundipe-Leslie (1994: 75) examines the abuse of women in marriage, stating the following:

> The oppression of women within marriage takes various forms. First, the woman loses status by being married [….] With marriage, she becomes a client or possession; she is voiceless and often rightless in her husband's family [….] She also loses much of her personal freedom. (Ogundipe, 1994: 75)

Contrary to this, *I Swear by Apollo,* gives voice and power to women within the family dynamics. The text reveals mothers who have a constructive impact on their children and the general population around them.

Bite (2013: 313) explains how Achebe describes the role of women in pre-colonial Africa. In *Things Fall Apart*, women are considered as mere appendages to men as evident in their treatment as chattels and their placement in degraded positions. Bite further explains how gender divisions are caused by the misconceptions of the patriarchy order. For instance in *Things Fall Apart,* Okonkwo earns a high societal status by having many wives. Petersen (2006: 237) disputes the notion that women are happy in customary African marriages by interrogating women's roles in *Things Fall Apart.* She draws attention to the irony as follows:

> [Achebe's] traditional women are [depicted as] happy, harmonious members of the community, even when they are repeatedly beaten and barred from any say in the communal decision-making process and constantly reviled in sayings and proverbs. It would appear that in the traditional wisdom, behaving like a woman is to behave like an inferior being (Petersen ,2006: 237).

However to a certain extent, Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1982: 233) demonstrates a change in the presentation of women characters. In *I Will Marry When I Want*, Gathoni, Wangeci's daughter for example ignores the proposal to marry and when the topic is revisited by her mother, she tells her plainly that "I shall marry when I want, nobody will force me into it". Gathoni has a say as far as her marriage is concerned. Though it appears a futile attempt, she registers her message of self-realisation in the minds of those around her, especially her mother.

Marriage can therefore be seen as a way of owning and controlling the lives of women. Essentially, the subjugation of women is primarily institutionalised by patriarchal marriage laws because these laws relegate women to the status of minors under the control of her guardian, the husband. Burkeywo & Kabira (2016: 29) opine that "patriarchy looks at women as objects. During dowry payment, it is the men in society who negotiate and determine how much should be paid as a dowry. This turns a woman into a commodity that can be quantified".

To debunk the patriarchal attitudes rooted in marriage, Vera constructs women who are emancipated from men. Most of Vera's characters are not married and they remain single. In *Nehanda*, the main character Nehanda, is not married but dedicates her life to significant responsibilities like politically liberating her people. Throughout the novel, the author only focuses on Nehanda, her mother and other women in her village. Nehanda remains headstrong though other characters are against Nehanda's decision of staying single. Other characters also believe that "as long as a woman is not married, she will be talked about as if she were a young girl, even if she has already lost half of her teeth" (Vera, 1993:48). Nevertheless, Vera overrules the idea and she hence attempts to counter the dominance of male-centred beliefs.

Apart from the above, women in *Beyond the Horizon(1941)* are portrayed as sex commodities. Akobi, Mara's husband treats her as a sex commodity. In their sex lives, Akobi sees her as an object that has no sexual feelings. Thus, anytime he wants to have sex with her he just beckons her to sleep on the mattress, jumps on her and when he is satisfied he instructs her to go back to where she usually sleeps. This is what Vera tries to subvert in her novels. She

attempts to present women as better individuals who are free from the bondage of marriage. Thabela (2010: 32) also believes that Vera focuses much on the lives of a few women who are beginning to make attempts to escape from their patriarchal and apparently suffocating roles in order to find some measure of freedom in male dominated spaces.

Vera exposes the male centric mentalities predominant in some African societies. According to Nyanhongo (2011: 21)), “African women in deeply patriarchal societies such as Senegalese Islamic society are not given the opportunity to choose the men they would want to make their life partners”. The decisions that are made for such women are more often than not in favour of the legitimate concerns for men. All the while, they ignore the fact that conjugal decisions ought not to be formed only by such concerns. Vera portrays a fighting spirit of her female characters who never lose hope in fighting against the ills of a patriarchal marriage.

3.5 Rethinking the Notion of Infanticide, Abortion and Adoption

In her quest to liberate her women, Vera’s characters commit forbidden acts such as abortion and infanticide to solve their problems that emanate from a patriarchal controlled system. Generally, committing abortion is regarded as an unthinkable act, especially in an African culture, nevertheless Vera breaks the taboos. In the selected texts, the author portrays abortion as a social and psychological act of freeing some of her characters like Phephelaphi. Vera devotes the longest part of the novel *Butterfly Burning* to Phephelaphi's abortion, a textual length matched by allegorical and emblematic intensity of the prose. Phephelaphi flees the confinements of Makokoba and Fumbatha's shack to the banks for the Umguza River, where she commits her abortion alone, isolated from a community hostile to her hope for freedom. The location is appropriate; Phephelaphi returns to the banks of the river where she was claimed by Fumbatha, to assert her autonomy and claim control over her body. She “closes her eyes and pours her sorrow down. She adds more and more of the soil till she has formed a high mound around her and she collapses to the ground. Then she rest” (Vera, 1998: 126). The eulogised symbols of land and mother are divested of a mythological glory in these passages and the descriptions of Phephelaphi’s painfully endured abortion powerfully disavows the cultural connection between women and the generative power of the land.

By aborting her foetus, Phephelaphi attains a sense of thoughtfulness and agency previously denied her by the constraints placed on her by her race and gender. The abortion is depicted as Phephelaphi’s own birth and her stubborn action is compared to “cracking open a shell”

(Vera, 1994: 107). Her body, which structures her subordination under paternal law, becomes the site of her triumphant release. She is finally able to assert control over her body and claim presence and identity: “It is her own vessel filled to capacity. It is herself, her own agony spilling over some fine limit of becoming… It is she” (Vera, 1994: 99). Thus, as Wilson-Tagoe (1999: 9) has argued, Vera’s descriptions of Phephelaphi’s abortion provide an effective “counter-narrative” to “the obligations of motherhood and fertility” enforced by the dominant system. Yet, Phephelaphi’s courageously endured abortion is not ultimately successful in securing for her an autonomous subjective position. Since Phephelaphi’s individuation occurs only through painful and destructive means, it concomitantly entails a division and loss of self. Thus, foregrounded in her narrative is the dangerous ambiguity that attends acts of female agency and self-definition within a system dominated by paternal law. For Phephelaphi, resistance to the dominant system can only be articulated through self-inflicted harm, so that her resolute act of self-definition simultaneously and paradoxically involves a negation of the self. This predicament is brought into focus in Vera’s representation of Phephelaphi’s suicide, which comprises the novel’s tragic conclusion.

Vera is careful in building Phephelaphi’s decision to abort her baby. Unlike Fumbatha’s poignant dream of having a family with Phephelaphi, her hope is to be new and different. Therefore, Phephelaphi is against domesticity and progeny. Although Fumbatha hopes to build a family and recover the lost past, Phephelaphi’s logic is that she would have “missed the future somehow” by focusing on childbearing (Vera, 1998: 91). Phephelaphi feels that she has to grab the opportunity and utilise it to build her future. Vera’s men and women’s worlds are set at odds because their dreams collide. Her women cannot compromise their dreams for the sake of the men. For portraying women's nonconformity in such shocking ways, Vera is often described as a taboo writer. Depicted as abortionists, baby killers and abandoners, Vera's women characters show an acute awareness of the social trappings of motherhood and a distrust of intimate relationships. According to Marima (2011: 9), “[t]hese images of women overturn commonly-held cultural views on mothers as subservient and loving nurturers; while at the political level, Vera's exploration of the complex relationships between men and women, women and the colonial state, reveal how acts of taboo function as a strong critique of power”. As a result, Vera attempts to debunk the patriarchal attitudes of childbearing and child-rearing as a way of liberating the African woman from the bondage of societal expectations.

Butterfly Burning creates a radical taboo aesthetic that gives women agency. In the context of this thesis, radical taboo aesthetics refer to the use of beautiful, poetic language that

transforms painful, unsayable, disastrous, horrific and patriarchal domestic taboos into aesthetic beauty that evokes admiration, sympathy, respect and awe, thus reshaping perceptions, cognition and thought about women and patriarchal domestic taboos (Nwakanma, 2013: 43). In an interview Vera says:

> I am interested in Zimbabweans reading my work and maybe transforming their understanding of some of the taboos ….This is a way of mediating between people who are unable to speak, like women, and people who should be listening (Hunter, 2000: 82).

Vera's pronouncement on the role of the writer as mediator raises theoretical and ideological questions, which however, are not the focus of this section. However, this section focuses on how Vera seeks to transform the understanding of abortion taboo and suicide, using poetic discourse. The abortion scene and the suicide scene shape a radical taboo aesthetic. The suicide foregrounds a radical taboo aesthetic that attracts respect and awe for Phephelaphi, and not condemnation or flinching from the reader. While suicide is taboo in African societies, for example in Zimbabwean traditional and religious culture, the text accommodates it. In the text, the author gives Phephelaphi authority over her body, "a touch, her own genuine touch; to love her own body now, after he has loved and left it, to love her own eyebrows and her own knees, finally she has done so, embracing each part of herself with flame, deeply and specially" (Vera, 1998: 150). As indicated by Nwakanma (2013: 42) "it is a suicidal act of "defiance of patriarchal and colonial law". The taboo discursive space enables Vera to create a new language to allow marginalised women to articulate the unspeakable, to speak out, to explore uncharted territories, and silenced narratives of the nation, nationhood and citizenship. Vera experiments with poetic language and prose and develops a strong feminist taboo aesthetic that destabilises patriarchal discourse.

In *Butterfly Burning,* Getrude becomes Phephelaphi's foster mother and embraces single-mother identity. She informally adopts the child, thus circumventing the patriarchal bureaucracy on adoption. She also evades Zimbabwean bloodline patriarchal kinship structures and politics, which make it taboo to adopt a child one is not related to by blood or one with a different totem. Again, Getrude's single-motherhood family model is portrayed as an alternative model for barren women or women who do not want to procreate. Rather than continuing to construct the patriarchal nuclear family (comprising husband, wife and children), the text argues for

alternative constructions of motherhood that are woman-defined. The text offers a feminist intervention model for adoption of motherhood and of family.

Later in the novel *Without a Name*, Vera indicates that "Mazvita rejected the baby because it pulled her back from her design to be free" (Vera,1994: 64). Vera indicates how a woman is capable of taking decisions regarding her body. This is because "the baby was her own, truly her own burden. Mazvita rejected the baby because it pulled her back from her design to be free" (Vera, 1994: 64). To Vera, the idea of rearing a child born out of rape is a terrible burden. Therefore, keeping that baby would do nothing good for her. Vera further indicates how the baby was a burden to Mazvita, "the child brought to her such powerlessness she could hardly move forward… [she] longed to release the heaviness that made her unable to spread her arms and embrace the future". Throughout the novel, there is a repetition of Mazvita's hatred of the baby; this is because of the negative effects it would bring to her life.

3.6 Undermining Societal Expectations

For quite a long time, women have been influenced by male-dominated beliefs and customary societal expectations. The present day life empowers individuals to have complete freedom and as a result, gender equality is one of the dominant issues. (Wharton, 2009: 9). Boyce Davies calls attention to that when he states:

> Literature is one of the channels through which negative attitudes and stereotypes of women are perpetuated, even created. Modern African literature too facilitates women's opression, because it has adopted many of the western patriarchal modes of thought and expression. (1986: 75)

For instance, in *Butterfly Burning,* the author depicts women who challenge customary generalisations with uncompromised hope. The women in the text cross-examine their proverbial roles.

Vera further depicts a resilient attitude in her female characters as a way of deriding patriarchal stereotypes. Her women characters do not respect unfavourable societal attitudes. According to Nwakanma (2013: 42), the novel *Butterfly Burning* "consciously shows how a postcolonial feminist novelist like Vera uses her profuse narrative power to reconstruct the experience of women under colonialism". Phephelaphi's thoughts are infused with uncompromising respect all the way, she does not bend to the ideologies of the colonial masters. Mkwesha (2016: 63) also insists that "Phephelaphi has an uncompromisingly defiant and rebellious attitude to

colonial marginalisation and traditional patriarchy. Her mind is fully formed and free as a butterfly (as portrayed by her conscious decision to go to the shebeen and investigate the vibrant township life around her. To challenge Fumbatha, Phephelaphi, “felt a sense of wholeness in making a decision without him” (Vera, 1998: 52). In a patriarchal set-up, the wife should respect her husband in any given scenario. However, we see Phephelaphi acting differently. Although Fumbatha had warned her of not visiting Deliwe’s house, Phephelaphi felt that she had to fulfil her dream and get to know Deliwe better. The first signal of her boldness is her visit to Deliwe’s house while Fumbatha is away. Nwakanma (2013: 42) further insists that “Phephelaphi’s unwillingness to succumb to the regulatory codes of colonial power, or live with her rejection by Fumbatha demonstrates the will to sabotage patriarchy”. Thus, Vera constructs the kind of African women who do not adhere to the patriarchal customs that suppress them.

In addition, Phephelaphi’s very act of killing herself is an extreme way of showing resiliency. Phephelaphi became a “butterfly burning” because she could not take it any longer, she would rather die than to live with unfulfilled ambitions. Phephelaphi’s self-immolation can be seen as an extreme way of protesting against unfavourable conditions. Phephelaphi’s suicide, like her abortion, is a deeply ambivalent act. It signifies a moment of control and authority, but one that can be effected only through her negation. At the moment of her death, she is positioned ambiguously between subjectivity and its annihilation. The dominant tone of the passage is, however, one of triumph and not defeat, and Vera clearly intends Phephelaphi’s suicide to be read as an act of resistance and agency: “The fire moves over her, light as a feather, smooth like oil. She has wings. She can fly” (Vera, 1998: 129). The unmaking of her body, which is the site of her oppression under an inflexible paternal law, is registered as a profoundly cathartic act, and Phephelaphi is finally able to claim her own body and achieve self-love: “A touch, her own genuine touch, to love her own body now, after he has loved and left it, to love her own eyebrows and her own knees, finally she has done so, embracing each part of herself with flame, deeply and specially” (Vera, 1998: 129-30). This final image of Phephelaphi is one of symbiosis and harmony, signalling that she has attained a vantage point outside the dominant discursive order which inscribes her inferiority and deficiency.

This reading of Phephelaphi’s suicide relies on the idea that a wilfully enacted death does not imply silence, but that, because it is performative, it can be interpreted as a speech act. Suicide becomes Phephelaphi’s “one effective communicative act under a patriarchal system which otherwise disallows female authorship” (Bronfen 1999: 143). Accordingly, it can be argued that she attains an enunciative position and is finally able to speak her marginalisation, interrupting

the silence and passivity to which she is otherwise condemned. Fumbatha is finally able to acknowledge the significance of Phephelaphi's struggle. His ability to properly interpret the message of Phephelaphi's death represents the possibility of a broader cultural transformation, in which the seemingly irreconcilable paradigms of men and women can move closer together in a reciprocal, rather than hierarchical engagement. Through his empathetic response to Phephelaphi's struggle, Fumbatha is able to move "from his own song into her astonishing melody" (Vera, 1998: 29), an emotional and ideological development that allows their respective histories of struggle to come together. The liberatory promise of *Butterfly Burning* is thus not only located in Phephelaphi's courageous struggle to reject women's subordination, but also in the possibility of a dialogue between the narratives of male and female resistance. Fumbatha's ultimately empathetic response to Phephelaphi's death provides an appropriate paradigm for the reader's own engagement with her narrative, signalling the importance of an ethical response to her struggle. It is finally the space of writing that allows for the acknowledgement and validation of Phephelaphi's fraught and sometimes ambivalent journey. Vera's fictional narrative secures the trace of women's agency and resistance uninscribed by the dominant narratives of patriarchal nationalism.

In *Butterfly Burning*, Vera later tells us of a resilient woman who used to live in Thandanani Street. The woman had refused to be reduced to an object. In the novel, we are told that "…she knew a woman whose husband sold her to another man for the value of a bicycle wheel but she had refused to leave instead, stood on that asbestos roof…" (Vera, 1998: 91). Here, the author portrays a unique kind of an African woman, who refuses to be objectified. As part of patriarchal norms, a woman is not expected to resist whatever the husband says. This is because the husband is the head of the family and his word is final. Nevertheless, Vera breaks the limits.

In *Nehanda*, women characters are very assertive and active. Vera's male characters in this novel respect the presence of women, "…the children accompany the voices of their mothers with clapping. The men listen to the women, who continue to assert their presence". Vera therefore, portrays a transformed kind of an African woman, a woman who is respected even by men. Throughout the text, Nehanda's attitude towards male colonial intruders is hard-nosed and adamant. Vera makes Nehanda the most respected individual regardless of Mr Browning's doubts that Africans would listen to her instructions.

Vera further attempts to wipe out patriarchal customs by undermining the societal expectations and familial responsibilities. Vera's women characters reject their responsibilities as these would pull them down In *Without a Name*, Mazvita does not bother to name her unwanted baby because the baby has no space in her life.. Mazvita:

> [H]ad no name for the baby. A name could not be given to a child just like that. A name is calling a child into the world …a name binds a mother to her child… she had no promises to offer this child". (Vera, 1994: 75).

Vera shatters the traditional African myth that women should bear many children in order to safeguard the marriage institution. Vera's women are not concerned with child-bearing and rearing, but rather, are much more concerned with liberating themselves. Such rebellious attitudes show the author's attempts to challenge the motherhood responsibility. Vera even goes to the extreme extent of showing motherhood not as a destiny, but as a hindrance to achieve one's ambitions. To Vera's women it is not necessary to have a man to feel complete. Her women desire to lead independent lives as active participants in their societies' public spheres and not to exist as helpless individuals. To such women, the question of development is very important, and as a result, they move from one space to another in an effort to recreate themselves.

Without doubt, African women have been frequently exposed to undesirable generalisations. Taiwo (1982: 2) concentrates on the role of an African women, when he states the following:

> In most parts of Africa, the whole of a girl's life is one long preparation for the useful role she is expected to play in society. This role pertains mainly to marriage and childbearing [….] When she is betrothed to a man his relations expect her to conform to certain traditions and norms of their family (1982: 2).

The exclusion of women from public settings and being denied equitable chances to defend themselves in their societies also indicates that women are discriminated in terms of decision-making process in their communities and families. Vera's texts revise these discriminations. Her narratives challenge the customary stereotype of the African female as being enslaved, mistreated, abused and a beast of burden. In the same vein, Mkwesha (2016: 60) points out that "[t]he new independent urban township female dancers frequent shebeens, and dance boldly to kwela music, in free and erotic ways, in contrast to the innocent, submissive, meek girls from rural villages who have disappeared from the city" (Vera, 1998: 87). Thus, Vera offers

a modernised image of an African woman so as to shun societal expectations. In *Writing African Women: Gender, Popular Culture and Literature in West Africa*, Stephanie (1997: 1) also notes:

> …gender images and ideologies constantly shift to account for their changing status. This has led to the emergence of new perspectives that interrogate, reformulate and analyse inherited popular codes.

Through her narratives, Vera calls for contemporary ideas, innovations and a sense of freedom from conventional bonds. Vera banishes patriarchal societal expectations to uplift the status of the African women. Hunter (2000) analyses how the novel *Under the Tongue* destabilises gender divisions in a post-colonial Zimbabwean setting. Vera's characters deflate the glorification of societal expectations. Through the characters of Mazvita and Phephelaphi, Hunter analyses the cruelties, maternity and the history of women's oppression. Hunter insists how Vera's texts challenge the wholesale glorification of manhood and the corresponding domestication of women's combat activities. Female characters like Mazvita, desire to be recognised as individuals whose role is important and independent of their male counterparts. The story of their lives runs against the grain of their communities' expectations of what roles should women play.

In *Nehanda*, Vera portrays women who are active in decision-making and this contradicts the patriarchal society's expectations. In the text, the narrator shows us how Vatete is assigned the responsibility of being one of the shapers of wisdom, "the dare was a large clearing in the centre of the village. Those who were admitted to the Dare knew the power of words. The midwife was amongst the shapers of wisdom, who determine the future of the village (Vera 1993: 9).Vera assigns her female characters positions that go against norms and values of a patriarchal society. The whole community is made to kneel before Nehanda: "the men stopped dancing and knelt around Nehanda"(Vera, 1993: 62). In an African set-up, a woman is the one who is expected to kneel before men not vice-versa. Later the text shows how man habitually kneel before Nehanda:

> men waved a long spear covered with blood… he knelt on one knee and sings praises to Nehanda, who had protected him as he moved through the settlements of the strangers…more men surrounded her with their own messages, reporting to her that they had done as she had asked (Vera, 1993: 79)

This confirms how Vera attempts to break patriarchal taboos. She subverts the idea of women's submissive to men. Hence, she privileges her female characters to be honoured by the entire village.

Vera also deconstructs patriarchal masculinities as far as dressing is concerned. In a patriarchal society, a woman is expected to put on respectable clothing. A woman is expected to dress in modest manner. Nevertheless, Vera breaks the boundaries; she completely liberates her female characters. Her women are liberated and they dress as they please. Vera believes that to feel the freedom, one has to wear it, hence she points:

> Men and women wore trousers. REVOLUTION- a small tag along the waist, in black and white. The widened bottom of the trousers turned and turned. It was also an era for turntables and Long Play. Freedom came in circles. Endless and dizzying. What was freedom if it could be curtailed and contained and passed around. Freedom was a thought tantalising and personal. You had to wear your freedom to be sure it had arrived. 1977. That is how it was expressed. People walked into shops and bought revolutions. (Vera , 1994: 47.

The first sentence in the above paragraph indicates how Vera presents women and men the same as far as dressing is concerned. The men and women wear the same kind of clothing. Apart from that, the word 'REVOLUTION' printed on the tag symbolises a complete change mostly for women. In terms of dressing, Vera's women wear their freedom, the author links dressing to social and psychological freedom. The widened bottom of the trousers is also symbolic of the extension of the opportunities of the general Zimbabwean masses, and African women at large. The narrator also states that the period in question was a time for "turntable", symbolic to change. The phrase "freedom came in circles" indicates the reverberation of independence which was mainly shown off through dressing. Vera privileges her female characters to dress equally as men so as to banish the constructed perceptions about men and women. Contrary to an African woman who should dress in a descent and dignified way, Vera's women are determined and ready to claim their freedom.

Vera also incapacitates her male characters as a way of counteracting previously fashioned discourses about women. In *Nehanda*, Vera depicts the character of Mashoko/Moses. To debunk patriarchal attitudes, Vera portrays Mashoko as a housemaid. Mashoko, who is depicted in a sarcastic way, is stuck in the kitchen to cook for Mr Browning. In reality, Mashoko, "does not find his work interesting; in fact when he is in the village he feels ashamed of it"

(Vera, 1993: 45). Vera deliberately assigns womanly roles to male characters so as to deride the dominant macho beliefs.

Furthermore, Vera further depicts Vagomba in *Under the Tongue* as one of the weakest and most pathetic characters in her narratives. At the beginning of the fourth chapter of the novel, we are told "VaGomba was blind. Muroyiwa had been born into his father's blindness and it received and contained him like a vessel" (Vera, 1998: 17). At this point, Vera links VaGomba's blindness to yet another pitiable male character, his son. In the novel, the narrator tells us how VaGomba's blindness had affected his son. The characterisation of VaGomba as "blind" symbolises his complete debilitation. Essentially, one's physical blindness resembles a total shattering of dreams, vision and hope. The narrator later tells us that Vagomba had no wisdom to impart. Again there is a continual repetition of Muroyiwa's search for butterflies in the mountains and this is frankly an extreme level of derision. In the novel, we are told that "this was not a good revelation to her mother who said a man could not travel from Njanja to Umtali to look for butterflies" (Vera, 1996: 91). Hence, Vera makes her female characters deride their counterparts as an approach to debunking the patriarchal attitude that male figures are always super-heroes.

3.7 Summary

This chapter has explored how Vera debunks patriarchal attitudes in her literary works. Much attention has been given to how she emancipates her female characters as well as how she deconstructs the politics of the institution of marriage. Additionally, this chapter has analysed her approach of incapacitating her male characters as a way of countering male-dominated beliefs. A further examination of how she deconstructs societal expectations and customs in relation to abortion, adoption and dressing has also been assessed.

CHAPTER FOUR

Economic Liberation

4.0 Introduction

This chapter explores how Vera introduces her female characters to the resources of economic freedom for possible fully-fledged liberty. It examines hope for women characters' liberalisation by assessing how she introduces them to educational resources, professional training and handicraft. The issues regarding migration and the repositioning of women characters in the urban environment in search for economic liberty are equally explored**.** Begum (2016: 87) notes that "the study of women in general and African women in particular contributes to the breadth and depth of knowledge and theorising African realities in diverse ways". This demonstrates the importance of women as economic agents rather than mere passive breeders. In this chapter, Marxist literary criticism is fundamentally applied in exploring how Vera brings her female characters to the fore.

4.1 Background to Women's Economic Transformation

Women's economic transformation is linked to Marxist literary theory. Marxism is an ideological discourse which provides an economic and social understanding of life. Since its inception, the Marxist premise has given a progressive method of understanding life and history. Marxism posits that the moving power behind mankind's history is its economic scaffold, because individuals' lives are dictated by their economic conditions. Hence, social class struggles are due to the "forces of production" and the strategies used to create the material mechanisms of life. The economic condition important to the general public is its material circumstance, and the ideological climate it creates to the historical situation. This implies that any social or political setting or occasion is largely influenced by the economic condition in which it occurs. The same applies to literary works; this is because they are largely embedded within economic discourses to serve different ideological purposes. In this view, Marxist criticism moved away from a system and became interdisciplinary in 1960s. Raymond Williams (1921-88), a Marxist critic relates literature to the lives of people. He felt that the Marxist critics unduly separated economics from culture and overlooked individualism. With this in mind, Williams modified and shifted his philosophical beliefs away from Marxist thoughts to embrace culture. In true Marxist fashion, the postcolonial female scholars deconstruct the image of the African women in their

literary texts. They write to liberalise their women characters by infusing accommodative economic climate in their texts.

In spite of Marxism's conformity to other schools of thought, it has, however, remained opposed to Formalism. An explanation for this is that, the Marxists see a scholarly work as a product of the socio-economic environment under which it is produced. From a Marxist literary perspective, a piece of literary work is characterised by how it makes its readers mindful of the surrounding social and economic ills. As such, a text has both a subject matter and a manner of presentation that can either advance or marginalises the historical circumstance in which it is set.

A literary text, therefore, is a great tool for reflecting the current state of affairs because it operates under the guise of being entertaining yet unconsciously swaying the readers to critically reflect on the situation. Hence, as a feminist writer, Vera depicts literature as a medium of uncovering unjustifiable economic tendencies as well as promoting economic liberalism for the women. Her literary skill is an indication that, indeed, a text is a product of human creativity and is partially conditioned by socio-economic processes. This is evident by how she positions her female characters like Deliwe and Mazvita in a rapidly growing globalised world. Musvoto (2004: 11) also reflects that "the writer, like other social beings, is exposed to socio-economic pressures and therefore any meaningful reading of his/her work should situate it within the milieu from which the writer's artistic vision springs". Similar to any other literary genre, fiction is created within the social, economic, political and cultural contextual specifications. According to Macgoye, "[w]riters and artists have to be sensitive in a deliberate way to the public and personal issues of their time" (Macgoye, 1996: iv). Macgoye's views concur with Chinua Achebe's and Wole Soyinka's conviction that "writers, [are] sensitive points of their communities; they are teachers whose duty is that of a visionary, a warning voice and a builder of the future" (Petersen, 1986: 79). As a result, Soyinka and Achebe suggest that an artist should be a mouthpiece of the society he or she lives in.

The time when Vera wrote her texts, economic empowerment was touted as a significant process and a journey that would lead women to change in perception and shared thoughts. (Rowlands 1997: 86) notes that

> Common to many writings was an insistence that empowerment was not something that could be bestowed by others, but was about recognising inequalities in power, asserting

> the right to have rights and bringing about structural change in favour of greater equality"

This kind of empowerment therefore essentially shifts power relations. Sen posits that "empowerment is, first and foremost, about power and changing power relations in favour of those who previously exercised little power over their own lives" (1997: 67). Batliwala (1993: 63) describes power as "having two central aspects – control over resources (physical, human, intellectual, financial, and the self), and control over ideology (beliefs, values and attitudes). If power means control, then economic empowerment is a process of gaining control over economic resources" (1993: 2).

It is no doubt that feminist work during this time put much emphasis on economic empowerment as relational, and it indicates that there is a composite relationship between women's self-understanding and a wish for self-development. The focus was also on women's access over economic resources. Kuttab reminds us that

> Women want not only access to resources, but also control over them. They want not only to participate in decision-making through quotas for women, but to do so with full rights as equal citizens. Women don't want to work in any employment opportunity, but to be employed in protected and decent work. In such a situation women become empowered and this is why this kind of empowerment cannot happen under colonial occupation and patriarchal domination (Kuttab, 2014: 207).

Feminist writers advocate for equality in the sharing of power and they largely criticise the oppression of the minorities. They argue that the practising of fairness benefits not only women but the world at large. Young (1993: 42) indicates that, "economic empowerment enables women to take control of their own lives, set their own agenda, organise to help each other and make demands on the state for support and on the society itself for change". This shows that "economic empowerment is a complete change of the processes and structures responsible for women's inferior status in society. It is based on a transformatory potential related to the need to change women's position in such a way that their advancement is sustained" (Cherop, 2015: 68).

In deconstructing the image of an African woman, Vera draws some aspects of Marxist literary theory. Marxist literary theory assesses how fictional characters are economically liberated from economic oppression. For a full transformation, Vera reflects on how a woman can be

economically liberated. This is evident mostly in *Butterfly Burning*, where most of the female characters like Deliwe and Phephelaphi hold discussions on how they can liberate themselves.

Amuta (1989:81) further explains that "because of the inseparability between the writer and his/her society, the former is a producer within a specific social and historical context who changes reality". Conveyed in another way, Amuta proposes that the writer is the conduit through which and through whom the social and the historical experiences enter a fictional narrative, and the literary product that he/she creates is in itself informed by society's realities. This social and historical perception of literature, which is also adopted in this present study, argues that a meaningful comprehension of critics and their works can only be gained within the context of their particular society, and, if literature is seen as an interpretation and evaluation of perceived possibilities in the real world. Amuta (1989:84), one of the Marxist postcolonial writers, further argues that a contextual perception of a literary work discourages a monolithic and monographic interpretation of the work or the individual writer, because no literary work is "born alone". This brings us to Okpala (2016: 26) view that

> Writing is a medium of empowerment for the female writer because it enables her to confront the forces that threaten women. The power base of literary creativity implies that there is power of some sort in the pen that transcends from the consciousness of the writer to that of the reader.

As explained by Cherop, (2015: 69), "the female writer has the autonomy to expand this imaginative power and resort to her literary output as a vehicle for raising women's consciousness". Writing can therefore be treasured as a mode of covering inequality gaps. In this respect, the criticism of a literary work has to move towards a perception in which it is informed by society's historical issues.

4.2 The Need for Intellectual Liberty

Vera tries to infuse a sense of economic liberalisation in her literary work. She treasures intellectual liberalisation as the foundation of both social and economic liberty. She does this because freedom of the mind paves the way for the freedom of the body. An important aspect to note is that women received little or no education during the colonial period; this is because neither Africans nor colonial patriarchs regarded it as insignificant to them**.** An introduction of the characters to the educational system can be acknowledged as enlightening to the African women since it is a preparatory ground for economic independency. bell hooks (2002: 52)

points out that “economic self-sufficiency is needed if… women are to be free to choose against male domination”. In spite of the deep rooted, male-dominated beliefs within Zimbabwe, Vera’s women are aware of the importance of education as a liberating tool to their situation.

According to Burkeywo & Kabira (2016: 25), “African women in many ways have been left out of the mainstream of knowledge making. Their experiences and knowledge have always been rendered invisible because of being placed on the margin”. Burkeywo & Kabira explicate the disadvantaging of the African woman in the intellectual mainstream. In that regard, Cherop (2015: 3) insists that “women intellectuals must generate knowledge and engage in inquiry and action regarding our interests as women in the context of the genuine liberation of women in Africa as the continent liberates itself economically”. Cherop’s idea is very essential since it encourages African critics to infuse the concept of women economic liberalisation in their writings. This is because as one of the main aims of a subaltern intellectual, a woman writer should uplift the status of women economically.

In making the new awareness about womanhood realities, Vera moulds women characters who are capable of correcting what is not right. This affirms Stegeman's contention that

> The new woman represents a model of personhood where the individual exists as an independent entity rather than her kinship relations, where she has a responsibility to realise her potential for happiness rather than to accept her role, where…she must reason about her own values rather than fit into a stereotype tradition. (1974: 82)

Stegeman's comment is an attack on the institutionalised male-centred interests and an encouragement for women to break free from the chains restricting them. He aspires for change in the societies in which women live. In the same vein, Ogundipe-Leslie thus questions:

> What does empowerment mean to us as African black women and the diaspora? It means the social recognition, dignity and space to speak, act, and live with joy and responsibility. (1994: 17)

Ogundipe-Leslie underscores the portrayal of uneducated rural women by some male writers, noting that

> Most African imaginative writers either by omission or commission, portray a rural woman as uncreative. Bound by tradition and culture [….] She is constantly depicted as

> closed to or frightened by new ideas, limited to her narrow world, interested only in what affects her in a small environment (1994: 49).

The above representation depicts an ignorant kind of an African woman, the one who is afraid to explore and embrace new ideas. Following this, African critics such as Chinua Achebe have been working towards women's economic liberation. For instance, in *A Man of the People* characters like Eunice are enlightened. Eunice is a proficient modern individual who shows the qualities of an autonomous lady. She is a wonderful, refined and committed lady and lends Max good scholarly help. She is totally committed to Max's ambitions.

In the same vein, Oladele (1984: 215) discusses the contribution of the African female writer. Oladele explains that "the success of a novel often depends on the type of material used and the mode of communication employed". As a result, any literary work is important and interesting if it is appealing to the contemporary situations. To support this, Vera's writing "relates to the contemporary world. Her female characters go beyond the society's expectations of women. She depicts productive, selfless and independent women characters" (Cherop, 2015: 69). Her writings reflect and appreciate the role being played by women in their societies. In this regard, Boyce Davies (1982: 1) postulates that, "African women must address the problems of women's position in their societies". He emphasises on the need for women to transform their lives through writing. Oldfield (2013: 1) reflects that "African women's act of writing is simultaneously the creation of their identity and transgression of boundaries". She explains that, "the role of a story teller offers African women the opportunity to transgress boundaries while appearing to comply with forms of behaviour associated with normality" (2013: 14).

4.3 Introduction to Educational Resources

As a postcolonial writer, Vera tries to introduce her characters to an educational system. As indicated by Ogundipe-Leslie, "[a] brief glance at women all over the world today suggests that women are oppressed in educational attainments, participation rates and occupational structure…all is weighted against them" (1994: 27). Vera uses her narratives to deconstruct this perception by strengthening, emancipating as well as liberating her female characters as indicated in *Under the Tongue* where the theme of a quest to acquire educational skills forms the basis of her narration. In this text, Vera shows Zhizha's first step towards her attainment of education. Zhizha learns how to articulate the vowels 'a e i o u'. The ability to articulate the

English phonetic sounds and vowels is emblematic as it stands as a signal towards the enlightment of the African woman. Her mother teaches her how to read and write, “she says in a measured voice, repeat after me, a e i o u… I sit very still reading aloud, repeating after my mother…” (Vera, 1996: 80). There is evidence that Zhizha’s mother is knowledgeable as far as basic education is concerned. Vera shows how African women stand by each other in sharing ideas and information. Oral liveliness essentially portrays her capability in achieving her dreams:

> I watch myself through the mirror, my mouth moving in different directions with the letters, my lips move forward when I say ‘u’, ad sideways when I say ‘e’. I like most to say ‘o’, my chin moves down, the sound rises from deep in my throat, my breath sudden stop so near. I sit beside the mirror. I repeat the letters carefully. I say the letters with my eyes closed… I write the letters across the mirror with my finger. I paint them in blue ink, red ink, green ink…I write and write over the mirror…I try writing with my left hand (Vera: 1996: 81).

The way Zhizha plays around with colours and letters shows an incredible move from an African woman who does not have any hope in acquiring education. In her vision, Zhizha is capable of reading and writing through perseverance and ambition. Zhizha portrays excellent learning skills in English language and Mathematics:

> I am practising my counting. After seven I start again and stop at six. Seven plus six equals thirteen. I keep the thirteen and start again. I comb five times. I add that to thirteen. I start suddenly, eighteen I say (Vera, 1996: 98)

Education is therefore depicted as a “powerful tool for social transformation. As such, education for women has to be accorded special attention. A greater access to an educational system by women must be ensured” (Cherop, 2015: 71). Gender sensitivity must also be developed in reality as well as in literary works.

Vera’s narratives emphasise the importance of education for women’s emancipation. In most literary works across the world, the infusion of educational aspects in the texts is depicted as one of the ways for liberating our societies. However, in some literary works, the introduction of Western education in Africa was unfairly done where young girls were not taught in similar fashion to boys. This practice restricted women to homes thereby subordinating them to men. This traditional practice has, however, been challenged through the provision of opportunities

to a girl-child to make her own choices, thus helping her to stand up for herself. Mareng (2010: 43) notes that "education is essential for improving women's living standards and enabling them to exercise a greater voice in decision making in the family, community and place of work." Correspondingly, Skard (2003, 89) reiterates how education empowers women by pointing out that it provides "better health for family and children, more education for children and higher productivity and income for women". Ogola's speech in Beijing (2004) at the UN Fourth World Women's Conference reads:

> The woman is the heart of the family, and the family is the cornerstone of society, therefore it is very fitting that we should be here in Beijing for the Fourth World Conference, seeking new ways to enhance her well-being, natural talents and gifts.

The ability to make this choice leads to biological, psychological and sociological rupture aimed at one's own emancipation as depicted in Phephelaphi's resolute desire to access education despite having been denied this chance by being married off to Fumbatha.

Vera's fiction shows a divergence from an ignorant to a better and knowledgeable African woman. Some of her characters strive to acquire education regardless of the hostile environments they live in. In *Butterfly Burning*, there is clear evidence that Phephelaphi had been made to attend school by her mother. The narrator says that "Phephelaphi had a mother who made sure she attended school. The United School provided the opportunity and comfort". The author shows us how an African woman is incorporated into the Rhodesian educational system. Vera's characters are privileged to acquire colonial education equal to their colonial masters. The fact that Phephelaphi could write legibly shows Vera's intentions to portray women as capable fast learners, hence, proving that education can create a better African woman as depicted by Phephelaphi who could write in her neatest handwriting. This is completely different from the early depiction of some of the African women, portrayed stuck in the kitchen desperately waiting to be provided for by the man. This shift in writing is very important as it reflects the first step towards women's intellectual liberation.

Education therefore expands women's economic, social and political prospects. Cherop (2015: 78) posits that "it leads to direct economic benefits in the form of higher lifetime earnings for them. The society and community also benefit from its labour force's higher productivity. Besides improving human capital and increasing economic growth". Societies which discriminate against women in relation to accessing education suffer a lack of economic

growth. According to Dollar & Gatti (1999) “an investment in female education starts a virtuous cycle that leads to improved levels of income, growth and gender equality. Inequality in education is like a distortionary tax that misallocates resources, thereby reducing economic growth”.

Vera’s works advocate for gender equality in regard to access to education. In her narratives she privileges female characters compared to the male ones. Her female characters are depicted as dedicated to improve their intellectual capacity and wellbeing. According to Page & Jha (2009: xvi) “gender equality in education is about boys’ and girls’ entitlements to access education. It is about the process in education facilitating the realisation to provide a range of equal opportunities to expand the capacities of all genders to the fullest”. Vera’s craft is very important as it contributes to the progression of a passionate and responsible society. In the text *Half of a Yellow Sun* one of the characters, Odenigbo, states that “education is a priority! How can we resist exploitation if we don’t have the tools to understand exploitation?” (Adichie, 2006:11). Therefore, education cannot be undermined as a means of fighting against social and economic discrimination.

In a broader sense, “education essentially involves penning the mind, enhancing the self-esteem and self-confidence, building a sense of positive self-worth, accessing information and the tools of knowledge and acquiring the ability to negotiate this unequal and unjust world from a position of strength” (kuttab, 2014: 89). In actual fact, “no society has ever liberated itself - economically, politically or socially –without a sound base of educated women” (Tilak, 2001: 221). Many countries, therefore, encourage an investment in women’s education.

In addition to that, Torild (2003: 89) notes that “education increases the productivity and income for women”. Vera employs education in her narratives, and sensitises her women to its importance. Vera’s introduction of her characters to the resources of education is very important as it enables them to gain an understanding of the world and how to solve their predicaments. Her female characters are enlightened and bettered since education provides them with exposure and awareness which contributes to the solution to women’s plight in African societies. Torild Skard (2003: 89) further indicates that “African women have contributed a great deal to education and literature”. Oladele (1984: 1) further insists that “pre-literate African women contributed a great deal to education and literature. Their art was verbal and their purpose didactic”. Vera tries to improve her female characters’ conditions through education.

Ogundipe-Leslie (1994: 21) discusses the issues that affect African women by mainly focusing on their way of life and advancement. She takes note that, “the right to education, expression, information and the management of production are all rights that articulate the same need for socialisation”. It is, in this manner, a charade “to envisage that the symposium on development can be limited to what is called the satisfaction of basic material need” Cherop (2015: 88). Education in this sense constitutes an important segment of life as depicted in the lives of African women in Vera’s literary writings. Vera’s women are completely changed and bettered through their quest to acquire education.

According to Cherop (2015: 87), “education is essential for improving the women’s living standards and enabling them to exercise a greater voice in decision making in the family, community and place of work”. Similarly, Torild (2003: 89) notes the importance of educated women. Vera tries to portray a possible hope for women’s emancipation with the way she embeds her literary works with the recurring theme of women’s quest to acquire education.

Vera's narratives depict the mushrooming of schools due to imperialism. This factor supports the liberation and freedom of women and young girls since they acquire information and scholarly abilities. Vera tries to accord them extraordinary abilities of dauntlessness and perseverance, normally associated with men. Education is acknowledged as one of the most vital tools of strengthening women characters in Vera’s novels. She makes it clear through her narratives that women are the recipients and active consumers of modernity. She, therefore, depicts education as an important “weapon for self-reliance and financial independence, Vera corrects the cultural stereotype that a woman’s place is in the kitchen” (Cherop 2015: 87).

4.4 Quest for Economic Freedom

There is a motif of quest for economic liberation in Vera’s texts. Economic liberty is essentially linked to social and psychological freedom. Vera’s novels explore women’s economic situations. She depicts this through the inimitable characters of Deliwe, Mazvita and others. In her novels, the characters are depicted as industrious and conscientious individuals who are willing to contribute to the welfare of their families. Vera’s novels explore women’s economic situations. They “depict women as hard-working agents who contribute to the well-being of their families and who benefit from their labour, hence ensuring economic independence” (Cherop, 2015: 89). Obbo (1980: 156) explains the predicament of an African woman by noting that

> …women take action to bring about change in their personal circumstances and hence, indirectly wider social change. It has been shown that East African women are doing something about their situations by tackling the specific problems of poverty, ignorance and unsatisfactory personal relationships.

The female characters are portrayed acquiring independence through hardworking and perseverance. The above economic portrayals contrast with those of Kenya's "male literary works. For instance, in Mwangi's, *Going Down River Road,* and Ngũgĩ's *A Grain of Wheat*. These narratives negatively portray the image of the female characters" (Cherop, 2015:91). They are depicted as sex-workers without any hope of making it through in life without men's assistance.

4.5 Search for Employment

Vera's women characters economically liberate themselves through employment, handicraft for self-employment. They engage in trading goods for financial liberty. In *Without a Name*, the Harari women are ever busy selling different types of commodities to make ends meet. Vera portrays them as industrious and active where, "Mazvita turned from one end of the street into another, and the aprons greeted her. Apron Amai! Apron Amai! A commodious and enterprising woman shouted at her... the voice was anxious and pressing." (Vera, 1994: 10). Vera's business-minded women subvert an earlier African woman who is always stuck in the kitchen. She tells us how Mazvita moves from place to place in a bid to find a job. Mazvita clearly points out to Nyenyedzi that she had left Kadoma, her home because of the zeal to get a better job and she insists that she would never go back.

Vera explains how Mazvita could not settle for a poor job or a job she did not like. Mazvita did not want to work as a domestic worker or any other low job. The narration reflects that

> Mazvita was definite she had not come to the city simply to nurse the children of strangers. She would look for another kind of employment. She waited. She thought very hard for the employment she would like to secure. She dreamt of herself freed from Joel. She did not like to ask for money and felt uncomfortable when she had to. Mazvita hoped desperately to find a job in the city. (Vera, 1996: 58)

In this passage, Vera presents us with an ambitious character of Mazvita, who would never settle for less. Mazvita is very careful and enthusiastic in taking a decision on the kind of employment she would like to do. In Mazvita, Vera portrays an African woman who is eager to

be economically independent. Mazvita could not feel comfortable in asking for money from Joel. This shows a great step in psychologically liberating an African woman. In this novel, Mazvita is depicted as a psychologically emancipated woman. She completely contradicts Nyenyedzi who is presented as psychologically attached to patriarchal and colonial ideologies. Nyenyedzi is content with the poor living standards he finds himself in, as indicated in the following:

> We are servants, paid poorly for our labours. We cannot decide the crop to grow, or when to grow it. We labour because it is or task to labour. We do not own the land. You lack patience and hope, Mazvita, you want things to belong to you, just like the stranger does (Vera, 1996: 33).

Mazvita is not impressed by the economic situation she faces, hence she decides to search for better prospects. She is so eager to be economically free and anticipates for a better job. On her arrival in Harari, Mazvita tries her best not to depend on her new husband Joel. As the narration goes, Mazvita "felt that each day she was without employment drew her closer to Joel" and to her, this underlined her dependability. In this way, the author attempts to free the African woman. Her attempts at this can be gleaned from the following extract:

> Mazvita was definite that she had not come to the city simply to nurse the children of the strangers. She would look for another kind of employment …she thought very hard of the employment she would have liked to secure…she did not like to ask for money and felt very uncomfortable when she had to…she had to find work first… Mazvita hoped desperately to find a job in the city (Vera, 1994: 58).

Unlike the early desperate and dependent African woman, Vera's women have the economic vision and zeal to break the barriers to women's economic advancement. They cannot wait for economic freedom. This is a very important step taken by Vera as an African woman writer in reinstating the image of an economically independent African woman. In *Butterfly Burning*, Deliwe is an independent woman who survives on brewing and selling alcohol to Sidojiwe men. Although the police would lock her up for that illegal business, "she continued brewing beer for male customers" (Vera, 1998: 60). By portraying this kind of a character, Vera tries to show us an African woman who is ready to venture into men's perceived domains.

In *Butterfly Burning*, Vera portrays African women who are skilled. The narrator says that, "the Thandanani woman could be seen outside her house any time of the day, knitting whatever

she could, a full candle burning beside her, whether it was in the morning or night" (Vera, 1998: 92). This shows one's dedication to economic independency. There is evidence that Zandile had worked for five years in one of the retail shops and simultaneously selling her own goods as well. Zandile had "decided to keep her job on the day she met Boyidi, a decision that made her abandon other desires, thereby keeping him truly yours" (Vera, 1998: 94). In this respect, Zandile sees her employment as the only reasonable way to be free from her husband's control.

Vera also portrays African women who are always entrepreneurially engaged as the economically liberated ones. She adds, "the women had other ideas about their own fulfillment, not only did some of them arrive in the city independent of men, but they also stayed single no matter the threat to their new found freedom", (Vera, 1998: 103). Their resilience for economic liberty and freedom is remarkable.

In *Under the Tongue*, the novel reflects how Runyararo and her mother used to do handwork for a living. The narrator informs the readers that, "her mother had come from some place where she had learnt to make mats. Runyararo's mother had also taught her the skills of the trade, impressing on her that mats could be made out of anything", (Vera, 1996: 68). Having been initiated into the craft business, Runyararo occupied Dangamvura streets selling her wares. Also, evidence abounds that Dangamvura women survived through selling various commodities such as dried fish. Vera's characters are bestowed with creativity, business acumen and divergent business skills; women who challenge the status quo.

4.6 Quest for Professional Training

To further depict a transformed African woman, Vera portrays women characters who are eager for professional training. She shows us characters who are keen and dedicated to get professional training to liberate themselves. In *Butterfly Burning,* Phephelaphi emphasises, "I want to become a nurse at the hospital…I am sending in my application" (Vera, 1998: 70). Phephelaphi's "desire is to re-create her identity, and to erase the identity of both the prostitute's daughter and Fumbatha's girlfriend. Her desire turns into reality when she finally articulates it" (Nyamulondo, 2010: 35). Essentially in this novel, Vera takes the readers through a period when the Zimbabwean government implemented policies specifically meant to economically empower black women. In cognisance of this, Phephelaphi insists that "it is not being a nurse which matters, but the movement forward- the entrance into something new and untried" (Vera, 1998: 71) Phephelaphi knew that her liberation would be complete if she

applied for nursing as reflected in her utterance, “No one will come knocking at my door telling me to apply…and if we do not apply, will anyone know that we are interested”? (Vera, 1998: 71). As a result, Phephelaphi becomes the first black person to be accepted as a nurse and this would pave way for the rest of the black women in the community. Phephelaphi’s desire to become a professional nurse indicates a unique African woman who is ready and empowered enough to claim the space previously denied to her.

Retrospectively, the white economy precluded black women from pursuing their career aspirations, however, Phephelaphi in *Butterfly Burning* is a politically conversant individual, and she relentlessly questions the ideologies of her society. She has issues with the reasons that prohibit black men from driving trains yet they know everything about trains, hence she emphasises; “they know everything about the trains’” (Vera 1998: 27). Given Phephelaphi’s inquisitive predisposition, it is suffice to say that Vera’s characters are intellectual enough to question their unfair economic treatment. This is why Phephelaphi calls for fairness in the allocation for jobs. This reflects her liberated economic and political thoughts compared to Fumbatha’s. Phephelaphi’s “idea of progress begins with attending the United School. What comes after that is now the nursing school” (Vera, 1998: 71). In this case, progress entails “movement forward – entrance into something new and untried” (Vera, 1998: 71). Phephelaphi is so naïve that she thinks Fumbatha would support her dream, but his masculinity forbids that. However, Vera presents Phephelaphi as “a woman who chose her own destination and liked to watch the horizon change from pale morning to blue light” (Vera, 1998: 63). Phephelaphi

> does not bow down to Fumbatha’s command, nor is she deterred by the colonial economy that shuts out black people from professional jobs. In defiance of racism, patriarchal defined domesticity and confining love, she secretly applies for her dream job. Her action is subversive to African tradition and a bold social pronouncement that challenges the racist and sexist patriarchal society. The unsettled township woman’s desire is crystallised by Phephelaphi’s swish and push for a career and economic independence (Mkwesha, 2016: 47).

The idea of Phephelaphi’s aspiration for an independent career and her subsequent preparation to enrol as one of the first African nurses has a female genealogy. It is Deliwe, (a woman who is not threatened by the colonial policemen as she runs her illegal shebeen) who

initially opens Phephelaphi's eyes to a different way of being a black woman in this colonial setting. Phephelaphi is intensely future-orientated. When she decides to cohabit with Fumbatha, "each of her strides pronounced a changed womanhood" (Vera, 1998: 26). Contrasting to Fumbatha's repressed reminiscence of his father as "a shadow in which he constantly searches for" (Vera, 1998: 9), Phephelaphi "argued with the memory of her beloved, admired mother Gertrude as it dawns on her that she was a prostitute".(Vera, 1998: 27). As indicated by Gagiano (2009: 49), "the more cowed, yet fiercely resentful attitude of an older generation complicates the adjustment to a modernising society that younger people like Phephelaphi are prepared to undertake. There is a generational as well as a gender and familial-cultural gap between them". As a result, Vera tries to cover that gap by presenting women who are prepared to fight for their economic spaces.

4.8 Repositioning Women in Urban Environments

The rural and urban spaces are usually depicted as gendered and this is evident in most African literary works. The rural space is depicted as a place for women while the city is for men. This is a thought that was engendered by the colonialists to guarantee perpetual control and oppression. This led to women's subordination since they were compelled to depend on their men financially. Stratton believes that the urban-rural dichotomy contributed to the process of "women's economic marginalisation by relegating them to the rural economy, which in practice meant subsistence farming" (Stratton, 1994: 16). The dissection of the two spaces puts the woman in a difficult position because if she chooses to go to town, she will be "labeled a prostitute or singled out as a case of national indiscipline" (Stratton, 1994: 17) and if she remains in the village as a housewife, she is economically segregated without direct access to the resources of economic liberty. Ogundipe-Leslie notes that the submissive rural woman

> is often depicted as a subordinate, dependent and passive. In many novels she does nothing except to endlessly serve food to men and then get beaten up by them for their pains. She is full of complexes, feels inferior and is wholly dependent on the man materially. (1994: 51)

Ogundipe-Leslie gives a vivid picture of a rural woman by explaining how she is always associated with miserable and pitiable qualities. She is always in a disadvantaged position and cannot sustain herself economically. The conviction that women should remain in the rural areas and grow crops for their families is quite intended to control them from being exposed to the outside world. As noted by Muponde (2005: 36):

> African women were not welcome in the urban townships of Rhodesia which (like apartheid South Africa) wanted a male workforce with families (women; children; the elderly) confined to the barren reserves where traditional patriarchy contained them.

Vera cross-examines these confinements (of women staying in the rural areas) by allowing her female characters to migrate and venture into towns. The younger generations in the characters of Phephelaphi and Zhizha among others, migrate and stay in urban centres. They are able to learn and redefine themselves through venturing into urban space.

More importantly the urban area pushes such women to figure out how to negotiate their life and how to survive in the changing socio-cultural, political and economic times. As her country moves toward independence, Phephelaphi manages to achieve a kind of independence as well since she gets accepted at a college which requires her to stay away from home, thus breaking the traditional circle where a woman is supposed to stay in the home. In this case, the urban space comes out as a place that offers women a chance to prove their potential and independence. The city therefore becomes an eye opener for women's empowerment, a social order absent in the rural setup where women are supposed to be submissive and always restricted to the home. When women move to urban centres, they subvert the commonly held belief that men have to provide for them economically. The deconstruction of such convictions is made conceivable on the grounds that women in urban centres are divorced from cultural dictates that require them to be economically dependent on men.

Vera uses a technique of relocating her female characters to the urban environments as a way of introducing them to the resources of economic liberty. The relocation of women characters from the rural to the urban areas can be seen as a big step towards economic liberation since the city offers endless entrepreneurial resources. Conversely, the rural Mubaira in *Under the Tongue* symbolises stagnant development for most of the characters, even male ones. Mubaira is just a place where women are not capable of exploring new economic avenues. Nonetheless, the town exposes women to "new economic realities in which productivity and prosperity are anchored and measured in terms of how much money one can make" (Muriungi, 2003: 75).

Vera's depiction of women is different from other renowned male wirers such as Achebe. Ogundipe-Leslie refers to the representation of women in Chinua Achebe's literary writings, indicating that

> most African imaginative writers either by omission or commission portray the rural woman as uncreative. Bound by tradition and culture... She is constantly depicted as closed to or frightened by new ideas, limited to her narrow world, interested only in what affects her in a small environment …. The women in Chinua Achebe's novels and others can be said to simplify this variety of uncreative rural women (1994: 49).

Given the above, Vera tries to offer a corrective version of African women by exposing them to urban settings, places full of economic opportunities for those willing take chances.

In Vera's narratives, courageous and enterprising women start moving into townships to make a living "against the rules". As depicted in the characters of Gertrude, Zandile and Deliwe, Vera identifies and

> articulates the historical meaning of such women's lives, pulling down the gender curtain that has hidden transgressive black women's involvement in the establishment of an African modernity. What she suggests is that the female role was at least not more important than the male's (Muriungi, 2003: 75).

In her literary texts, Vera unveils the potential of an African woman through heroism and psychological emancipation. She privileges her women characters to move to better economic settings. In *Butterfly Burning*, the narrator gives us a better picture of different kinds of women who relocate to the urban areas in pursuit of economic liberty:

> The women had other ideas about their own fulfilment, not only did some of them arrive in the city independently of the men, they remained in these single shelters no matter what threat was advertised, they gave birth and raised children on the palm of their hands. […] They craved something possessing the hint of rivers or an expanse as wide and fascinating as the sea (Vera, 1998: 88).

Closely related to *Butterfly Burning*, Vera presents the unique qualities of enthusiastic women in *Without a Name.* In the novel, Mazvita insists, "I really must go to the city" (Vera, 1994: 23). This line eloquently reiterates a female conception of freedom that is distinctive to the male's conceptions of the limited possibilities of the colonised condition. Phephelaphi, too, has a "genealogy of resistance to colonisation – a 'female' form of resistance, and certainly an ancestry of determined female self-insertion in the modernisation process. Thus Vera stakes a claim to the African women's role and places it within modernity" (Cherop, 2015: 61).

Most of Vera's female characters are situated in towns which give them the privilege to access the resources for economic development. The theme of modenisation is dominant in Vera's literary writing and she deliberately does this as a way of unlocking women's potential. Her novels "explore change that builds and increases women's opportunity in the job market, hence placing value on them and reducing poverty, therefore making them financially and socially independent" (Cherop, 2015: 69). This presentation increases hope for an African woman and Africa as a continent.

Kuttab (1980: 2) explains his idea of the circumstance of the African women who are staying in towns. He gives a literary depiction of urban African women in West African literary works. In these accounts, he talks about wives, mistresses, prostitutes, and independent women. He discusses these women's relationship to the modern-day economic world. He concentrates on writings that focus on urban regions by foregrounding that

> It is the city that provides the best guide to current social attitudes and trends. It is there that the major decisions are made, that social change is most rapid and that considerations of traditional origin have been partially superseded. In the city, women are brought into new and different relationships with the opposite sex. There are also other fresh situations to face including modernising influences that affect women's lives beyond the city's own boundaries [….]. It is one that enables women to be regarded as participants in the kind of milieu that is developing out of the older order of society. Kenneth (1980: 2)

In line with Vera, Ogola presents rural women who are ingenious and resourceful. For instance, in the novel *The River and the Source*, Jael is depicted as an extraordinary and hardworking woman. In the text we are made aware that:

> This year alone they had twenty acres under wheat, ten under maize, five under potatoes … but each year she seemed to have impressive surplus for the market …. She spent quite a bit of time behind the wheel of her little pickup delivering farm produce. (Ogola, 1994: 107)

This gives us a better understanding of how women writers attempt to present their female characters as better and productive individuals within our societies regardless of where they are located. Vera "narrates the positivity of modernism for women characters. She corrects the

negative images of urban women irrespective of the overall tendencies for African male writers to portray them negatively" (Cherop, 2015: 61).

4.9 Summary

This chapter has focused on reflecting how Vera explores the issue of women's economic liberalisation in her literary writings. She re-configures her female characters by going against the norm of their economic inter-dependence to men. This chapter has shown that Vera's narratives revolve around women's possible hope for transformation and independence. By economically equipping her female figures, Vera tries to emancipate them socially, economically, culturally and psychologically. It is evident that Vera longs for a new society that realises women's contribution. As demonstrated in this chapter, Vera castigates the customary and modern attitudes that encumber the success of women by re-instating the influence they have within an African society. This chapter has indicated how Vera rectifies the distorted image of women by depicting women characters who yearn for economic freedom for themselves, their families and the society they live in.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

This study sought to illustrate Vera's literary adeptness in deconstructing the image of an African woman in a selection of her literary works. The study aimed at exploring techniques she employs in reinstating the positions of African women in a postcolonial literary atmosphere. Multiple methodologies and characterisations were examined in relation to how Vera uplifts the status of women in her literary texts. In the preceding chapters, different strategies and modes have been discussed in relation to Vera's efforts in reconfiguring, emancipating as well as liberating her female characters. What is significant in the selected texts is the depiction of women's persistence in realising their hidden potential within the patriarchal societies. Thus, this study has assessed the potential of a post-colonial writer in offering a deconstructed and a reified image of an African woman by renegotiating, contesting and re-inscribing previously gendered depictions.

The first chapter of this study presented the literature review and diversity of feminist perspectives and approaches employed in exploring the selected texts. Literature review regarding the changes that feminist theory has gone through since its inception is equally traced. The literature review presented gives an understanding of women's representation in African literature. However a gap was identified that in African countries, women have not been fully represented. As posited by Fonchingong (2006: 134) "there has been very limited account of the nature and historiography of gender in all avenues of African society, and by the same token, taking cognisance of the contextual realities of earlier African literature". This indicates a gap in the representation of women in literature. The first chapter also indicates that male writers have been trying to work together with female artists in trying to reconfigure the identities of women. In Africa, the likes of Chenjerai Hove and Francis Imbuga have been trying to re-inscribe the positions of women in their literary writings. However, the available body of literary work indicates that the identities of women were compromised and women are still depicted in complex ways that their identities remain vague and indistinguishable. However, using different feminist theoretical perspectives, the researcher indicates how Yvonne Vera tries to review and reinvent the images of the African woman. The first chapter of this study shows that with the use of different theoretical perspectives like postcolonial feminism and feminist literary criticism, the image of the African woman can be deconstructed and re-

evaluated. This chapter points out on the underlying significance of this study by giving a further exploration of how women speak in their own voices.

In the second chapter, the concentration was on exploring how Vera reconfigures her female characters in the selected texts. The issues regarding how she gives a voice to her women characters as well as how she depicts women as protagonists in her narratives are explored. This chapter also assessed efforts made by Vera in deconstructing femininity and masculinity binaries thereby trying to create a balanced literary environment. From the discussion, it is clear that the author represses gender-based conventional norms and revamps a new narrative space for the depiction of female characters. She breaks the cultural gender stereotypes by introducing female characters who are subjects of her the narrations. In the selected writings, women are presented as curious and eager for a possibility of hope. The conclusion of the second chapter indicates that to a greater extent, Vera succeeds in reconfiguring her female characters from pitiable to better individuals. She renews the feminist discourse in her narratives by using a strategy of reintroducing women as unique individuals. As an African feminist writer, Vera reconfigures the place of an African woman by negotiating new spaces ultimately through characterisation, utterance and hybridisation. This study indicates that Vera overcame the discrimination of women through the act of writing and her constructive breaking of women's silence. As indicated by Lewis,

> [Vera] urges her readers to consider different forms of marginality, silencing, and violation, and insists on the need to hear the voices of those that are powerless and victimised...she traces the confluence of courage, determination, futility and despair in the struggles of those whose voices are not heeded in society. Her writing therefore opens up expansive visions of freedom and ever-widening paths of resistance. (2005: 3)

In her novels, Vera depicts writing as a way of subverting the suppressed voice of a subaltern woman. She criticises silence and depicts utterance as a source of freedom and hope. Vera reconfigures her female characters by re-rewriting and unveiling the most forbidden things they are not allowed to speak about.

The second chapter indicates that women can be articulate in all spheres including the political sector. In the text *Nehanda*, Vera succeeds in depicting a deconstructed African woman through the character of Nehanda. Nehanda's voice has authority and power and it influences

the society that she lives in. The character of Nehanda is commendable because she is capable of speaking against colonial conquest. Though she is a woman, she is however capable of inspiring the Vashona people to fight against political imperialism. She is also capable of imparting war skills and instructions and advice. Nehanda's voice is full of power and command; she gives honourable support to her people. With the character of Nehanda, Vera depicts a kind of an African woman who is defiant and capable of speaking against political inequalities. Even other women characters like Vatete are made to attend the *Dare* court sessions where they are privileged to air the concerns of women. This study has shown that as a woman writer, Vera succeeds in re-writing and revisiting the *Chimurenga* war narratives by deconstructing the self-glorifying masculine heroic depiction as well as reclaiming women's valiant responsibilities and contributions to the national political history. Nehanda's historical role in the earliest anti-colonial uprisings foregrounds women's urgency and involvement in the making of the nation. Vera's literary works present a postcolonial aesthetic contestation of the dominant male-centric political ideologies. As a postcolonial writer, Vera re-engages the imperial freedom wars as the warfare about women as well. She strategically positions them in the liberated country so that they may be politically represented. Vera hence portrays Nehanda's representative significance as essential to her community and the political and gender battles of the twenty-first century.

This study shows that Vera succeeds in recovering a directed voice of African women by giving them space to articulate their noteworthiness and lay equal claim to their relevance in the building of a nation's political legacy. In addition, "more than simply subverting androcentric constructions of heroism, nationality and history, Vera's fictional reconstruction of the VaShona spiritual legend of Nehanda as the pillar of the Chimurenga wars becomes an act of re-gendering national memory" (Nyambe, 2012: 6).

However, though Vera tries to empower her women characters through utterance, some of the characters struggle to get their voices heard. For instance in *Under the Tongue,* although Zhizha is given the opportunity to speak, her utterance is to some extent is not audible enough. Nevertheless, Gunner (2007: 6) states that Zhizha's utterance marks "the beginnings of new orders of knowledge and subjective consciousness". Hence, zhizha's utterance can be appreciated as a way of recuperation and healing.

In *Butterfly Burning*, the ability to speak out is also somehow questionable. The fact that Phephelaphi commits suicide indicates her inability to speak out and find solutions to her

predicament and this portrays a certain degree of powerlessness. The death of Phephelaphi is interpretable in its socio-political enactment. To a certain extent, her death can be interpreted as a failure to articulate her feelings. Phephelaphi's death, therefore, cannot, in this manner, be deciphered as an act of resilience or insubordination. Similar to Bhuvaneswari's death in Spivak's essay *Can the Subaltern Speak*, her community cannot "excavate a reading and understanding her death in a manner that imbues it with agency rather than stigma" (Nge 2000: 196).

As an emblematic portrayal of death as opposed to a materially imposed one, Phephelaphi's suicide unmistakably has diverse interpretations for our comprehension of subaltern agency. These are different to those brought up by Spivak in her narration of Bhuvaneswari's death. The novel *Butterfly Burning* points to the troubles encompassing the interpretability of demonstrations of female resistance. In a scene which prefigures Phephelaphi's shocking death, a strong young woman commits suicide resulting from her rejection by her lover. A man she had cared for had not smiled back when she did, not touched her wrist on the pulsing wanting spot she asked him to, not come back one night and the many nights that followed.

The thread is indicative to the women's voice and a mark of the words they are not capable of speaking. Her viewers, both incapable and unwilling to recognise its significance, wish to conceal the horrible thread underneath her lips. As Hemmings (2005: 62) noted, "by tucking away the trace of her voice, the onlookers attempt to place the woman's story back in her mouth, ensuring that her silence will live on". The horrific scene poses questions over the ampleness of Phephelaphi's own defiant act, indicating the absence of a community to acknowledge the significance of her death. As she dies, Phephelaphi is "not sure if [Fumbatha] can hear the fragile whisper underneath that ribbon of flame" (Vera, 1998: 129). This further problematises the question of getting the subaltern voice to be heard.

However, it is important to note that Vera represents an African woman who is capable of speaking out and express her concerns. This is evident with the personalities of various characters mentioned earlier, such as Zhizha, Nehanda, Mazvita only to mention a few. The characters strive to get their voices heard, against the patriarchal ideologies and the Western colonial environment. In *Nehanda* for instance, Vera portrays an articulate voice of Nehanda that is questionable to Western figures like Mr Browning and Mr Smith. Vera's female characters go beyond the society's expectations of women. She depicts productive, selfless and independent women characters. The novels highlight and appreciate the role women play

in their society. This chapter concludes by examining how Vera presents a possibility of hope for her female characters. She does that by depicting a quest motif. Women characters are depicted by Vera as ambitious and yearning for vivid change and transformation.

The third chapter of this study focused on Vera's deconstruction of patriarchal customs and gendered politics. As indicated by Fonchingong (2006: 138), "instances of female subordination as a result of tradition and culture feature prominently in African narratives". The chapter, therefore, dealt with how women characters in Vera's texts challenge and subvert the constructed stereotypes used by society to define and confine them. In this chapter, there was an attempt to show how women characters employ diverse strategies to overcome pessimistic portrayals of their persona which include their suppression in marriages. The discussion proposes that the writer undermines a male-centric society and advocates for gender equality at family level.

This chapter also concludes that to a greater extent, Vera succeeds in debunking the stereotypical beliefs that suppresses women. This is evident by the way she re-thinks the issue of marriage, abortion, infanticide and dressing among other cultural customs. In relation to marriage, she depicts the success of the first-generation of women's rebellion and how those women manage to re-create their images and achieve self-defined subjectivity. Characters such as Deliwe in *Butterfly Burning* and Nehanda remain single because of different reasons. Their choice to stay single can be interpreted not as a dismissal of parenthood, but rather as an individual decision to control sexuality and destiny. Glissant links the idea of the "reconstitution of the body with that of reclaiming or controlling the passage of subjectivity leading to the ultimate liberation of the body" (Glissant, 1989: 79). Freedom is subsequently epitomised in women's sexuality and bodies. For this reason, the body turns into a key piece of how the individual finds her way through reality. This fills in as a state of motivation to restore women's identity.

Some of the women depicted in the texts are not married but rather exercise their freedom by engaging in prostitution. The act of practising prostitution indicates the highest level of insubordination to the calls of the patriarchal culture. According to the African norm, a woman is socially expected to be married to one man, hence wandering from one man to the other indicates a form of resistance and contrary to the expectations of an African culture. As a result, Vera deliberately deconstructs those norms as a way of giving freedom to her female characters. She gives them authority over their bodies. The women in Harari do not care about

the traits of a reserved African woman. However, while prostitution brings sexual autonomy, it still falls under the male-centric structure of being accessible to give sexual enjoyment to men, and prostitutes play out the maternal part for their male customers, cleaning wounds perpetrated by the colonial police and giving passionate support. These unsanctioned sexual connections are however radical in that they deny male-centric *lobola (*bride price), in this way keeping women from being objects of male trade, yet at the same time falling inside the male-centric family structure. Also, Vera presents us with characters like Phephelaphi who rejects the alternative of being a prostitute, as symbolised by how she rejects sexuality as an expression of freedom or an alternative to domesticity. Her negative response is indicated by how "she burns Getrude's beautiful pale green erotic work dress" (Vera 1998: 76-8) which symbolises female sexuality. Hence, Vera presents us with various complex identities of women attempting to free themselves in diverse ways.

It is evident from the analysis that Vera's portrayal of women characters counteracts the dominant view in African culture that women are objects of men's desires and power rather than fully formed subjects with an equal position in society. Her female characters exemplify the capability of women to defend themselves and refuse to be silenced by the patriarchal system in which the husbands and their relatives have complete power over their wives. This study also shows how Vera presents women as agents of their own lives. The individual women's ability to take charge of their actions and stand by the outcome is very important in a society that is out to confine and control them. For instance, Phephelaphi, Mazvita and Deliwe's ability to assert their rights against marriage indicates a great step towards deconstructing the image of an African woman. Nancy Hartsock (1987: 61) notes that "when marginalised others begin to demand the right to name themselves, they are in fact demanding the right to act as subjects rather than objects of history". In Phephelaphi's situation she requires her own agency. By taking action, women challenge structures that discourage their self-awareness and improvement.

Looking on the issue of adoption, this study surmises that Vera speaks to it in a more radical manner. Generally, foster mothering is not encouraged in African culture, a culture that values bloodline kinship. A woman is essentially expected to take care of her baby as long as she is still alive. However, to deconstruct the patriarchal role of a woman, Vera depicts women who give away their children so as to accomplish their dreams in life. Though some of the reasons for giving away children are considered as selfish, Vera attempts to portray a clear picture of a liberalised determined African woman. However, to some extent, a woman who gives foster

care to the adopted child can still be perceived as occupying a mothering responsibility. Nonetheless, by depicting a concept of adoption in her literary writings, Vera portrays how an African woman can be flexible in denying her socially constructed role. In the case of Gertrude, she gives away her child so as to pursue her economic dreams.

Comparable to other female writers across the globe, Vera shatters the traditional African myth that women should have many children to protect their marriages. Her female characters are dynamic and characterise themselves by opposing patriarchal disparaging practices that hinder their capabilities to achieve their dreams. This chapter also indicates how Vera derides the expectations of an African society by incapacitating her male characters. Her male characters are assigned minor and insignificant roles, previously believed to be the roles of women. The issue of dressing is also depicted in a fundamental way as Vera's female characters portray their resilience in deciding what to put on. They feel that to fully sense complete freedom, one has to wear it. As a result, Vera portrays dressing as an important aspect of freedom. The study reveals that women writers are also constantly adapting themselves, rebelling, negotiating, renegotiating and engaging with patriarchal stereotypes.

The fourth chapter focused on examining how Vera liberalises her female characters economically. This chapter has shown that as a feminist writer, Vera tries to elevate the status of her female characters by introducing them to the resources of economic liberalisation. She depicts the liberation for women as attainable through women's economic independence. Though we do not have a fully economic independent woman in the texts, Vera shows us different ways in which her women attempt to free themselves economically. Vera depicts women who engage in small entreprenual businesses. In Harari, women are engaging in different businesses which include selling of small scale commodities. In the texts, there is a clear picture that women do not want to beg from men any longer. In *Butterfly Burning* Deliwe resembles a woman who is striving to be economically free, evident by her illegal alcohol business. The women in Deliwe's area are also selling cosmetics and clothes for economic sustainability. Besides that, the women in *Under the Tongue* are obsessed with doing subsistence businesses like selling woven mats and dried fish. This shows great steps towards economic liberty. Vera also depicts how the women in rural areas are also passionate to liberate themselves economically. In *Without a Name,* we are given a clear picture of hardworking women who practise farming for their families as well as getting employed in tobacco large scale farms. This study indicates that though the women depicted by Vera are not running big business, there is a possibility of hope for economic freedom for these women.

This study additionally presumes that an exposure of women characters to urban environments facilitates their chances of being freed economically. This demonstrates Vera's endeavours in finding distinctive ways of depicting a deconstructed African woman. Most of the women characters in the texts are positioned in the urban settings where there is an exposure of different recourses of economic liberty. Some of the characters in rural settings are made to move to urban areas to look for different avenues to liberate themselves. Vera presents Mazvita in *Without a Name* as a woman who journeys from one place to the other in search of economic freedom.

It is clear that most of Vera's women characters during the historical period in question possess a battling soul that is hardly expected of their gender. The study shows that the author's modern women characters are geographically located in urban regions and their relationship to the urban environment displays a kind of life that is clearly connected to urban ideals. This examination has demonstrates how Vera uses urban environments as the point of development in her literary works. The urban environments facilitate the freedom of women from economic ailment.

The study also appreciates how Vera introduces her female characters to the resources of an educational system. The fourth chapter concludes that education is a great tool for women characters' intellectual liberty. In the texts, Vera presents us with characters who are at least striving to become educated so as to liberate themselves. Vera portrays women who are eager to acquire knowledge. The young Zhizha in *Under the Tongue* leaves a lot to be admired. Her imagination about becoming educated is awesome. The character of Zhizha, hence, represents a young generation of women who are striving to become intellectual free. Zhizha strives to articulate English vowels and learn basic mathematics. Through the character of Zhizha, Vera shows her readers that women are not always ignorant as normally perceived. Also, Phephelaphi's eagerness to be enrolled at a training college is so admirable. Vera indicates that young black women also wish to acquire Western educational resources. Unlike the primitive and ignorant women depicted in earlier times, Vera deconstructs that image and comes up with women characters who are better as far as intellectual liberty is concerned.

Making an observation on the issue of women's access to education in Africa, Abena Dolphyne (1991 61) states that "women's education has always lagged behind to that of men in most African societies" and she points out that this emanates from traditional dictates that consider a woman's role in the society as one that ensures continuity of her lineage which does not

require education. This assumption was informed by the idea that “a woman was supposed to be provided for by her husband, so it was a waste of resources to take her to school when her needs could be well taken care of by the husband” (Dolphyne 1991: 29). However, in *Butterfly Burning*, Vera deconstructs this belief by suggesting the importance of girl child education as a way of women’s emancipation and advancement which is beneficial to the society as a whole.

This study also concludes that as a feminist writer, Vera further deconstructs the image of an African woman by trying to destroy the gender line in relation to access to educational African woman. In terms of access to intellectual liberalisation resources, Vera privileges female characters compared to males. Generally, the concept of Western formal education was generally used to discriminate girls. However, Vera breaks the binaries and creates an atmosphere whereby women are actually welcomed to the educational institutions.

Closely linked to the above, Achebe (1988) also questions the way in which African subjects are believed to be empowered through education. He believes that “in African history, Western education was one of the many advantages that nobody in his right senses could underrate yet it also occupied an ambivalent position for the colonised people” (Achebe, 1988: 39). Hence, Achebe tries to give an enlightened view of how education can act as a weapon of oppression. This is because it is embedded with Western ideologies; hence he feels empowering women characters with education is controversial. Similarly, Freire (1996: 65) also believes that “education as an instrument of oppression attempts to control thinking and action and leads women and men to adjust to the world and inhibits their creative powers while indoctrinating them to adapt to the world of oppression”. However, education, as a humanist and liberating praxis, posits that the people subjected to domination must fight for their emancipation (Freire 1996: 67). As women fight for inclusion in the education system, such dimensions are often ignored. Hence, this study concludes that women characters are not so much worried about the ambivalent role of colonial education but are impressed by the prospects that come with the attainment of education in a modern African set up and this is evident in the eagerness of female characters to attain it.

This study also drew the conclusion that besides Vera, there are other African writers who dealt with the same vision of economically liberating their female characters. For instance in Buchi Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood*, Adaku runs away from her complicated marriage to seek economic refugee in the city and she is eventually economically emancipated. She is ultimately capable of her sending her children to school. Ngugi’s play *I Will Marry when I Want* also

questions the issue of women's access to education. Besides Ngugi, Margaret Ogola's *The River and the Source* attempts to portray differences between women's misery in marriages and their political development in post-independent African societies.

From this study, it is apparent that through her narratives, Vera tries to use possibilities and inventions to liberate her female characters to gain independence. She introduces modernity in her fictional work. She does this by deconstructing the African traditional opinions of women by bringing on board women characters who conform to the principles of modernism, women who are in line with economic and social independence. The study has also demonstrated that women in Vera's literary writings try to acquire new identities through urbanisation.

Vera's efforts can be appreciated in relation to how she presents her female characters as eager to get employed. Her female characters are ambitious to be economically independent. In Harari, the women are employed in different economic sectors though most of them work as domestic helpers. Some of them even go to the extent of doing handicraft for economic sustainability.

In summing up, this study has shown that Vera is one of a few women novelists who articulate the concerns of women through creative writing. This is evident by how she deconstructs her female characters and presents them as reasonable and transformed individuals who are open-minded and ready to claim their space. This study has indicated that Vera's novels are reflective of a new society that aspires to build the potential of African women to the realisation of their ambitions and objectives. Vera, therefore, presents a deconstructed African woman, a woman who is determined to bring change to her immediate environment. She depicts women characters who strive to reach their full potential in their hostile patriarchal and colonial settings. Her writings endeavour to transform and emancipate women socially, culturally and economically. As demonstrated in this study, the author reinstates women characters' authority by reifying their distorted image. This study has also indicated how Vera uplifts her female characters by instilling in them, a sense of hope for the potential to break free from patriarchal structures that confine them to susceptibility and over-dependence on men. This thesis has demonstrated how a woman writer renegotiates, disputes and re-writes gendered images. This research has additionally demonstrated how female figures in the narratives embrace themselves with essential firmness to accomplish this. This study has also indicated that women writers in general are capable of challenging and countering gender depictions made and circulated by colonial masters and African patriarchal hierarchies.

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