
AFRREV LALIGENS

An International Journal of Language, Literature and Gender Studies

Bahir Dar, Ethiopia

Vol. 1 (1) April-July, 2012: 29-49

ISSN: 2225-8604(Print)

ISSN 2227-5460 (Online)

Myth and Feminism in Traditional Africa: Yvonne Vera's Nehanda as a Postcolonial Riposte

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Abstract

This paper explores Vera's depiction of the trans-historical Zimbabwean period – examining the writer's representation of the past Shona/Ndebele world in Nehanda. It goes on to exemplify the different ways she has highlighted the distinctive features that were discernible in this pre-colonial Zimbabwean society. The paper addresses a number of questions which Vera's work provokes, particularly: what is the significance of the Nehanda myth especially to the woman? Essentially, it argues Vera's stance, in her critique of colonialism, how the coming of the Whiteman has consequently destroyed the essence of the people's social system that takes cognizance, incorporates, and relies on the powerful guidance of the spirit-medium,

Nehanda. It reveals that *Nehanda* is a vigorous postcolonial riposte which reclaims the voice of the traditional African woman. The protagonist is able to draw attention to things lacking in modern Africa regarding the role of women in the new dispensation.

Introduction

Zimbabwe has a complex history. It is a history that has been greatly influenced by colonialism and post colonialism. Yvonne Vera in writing her novels, namely: *Nehanda*, *Without A Name*, *Under The Tongue*, *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins*, has made much use of the history of her country. Because of her sustained engagement with this history, the novels are all historically situated narratives; as such, they can rightly be described as fictionalized history. Even when the stories are not actually in line with real historical events, they are no doubt, in many respects, valid representations of the factual occurrences in Zimbabwe at different points in time. Paul Zeleza, admits that “history was central to Vera; it animated her imagination, framed her stories, her characters, and her literary vision” (“Colonial Fictions” 10). We find that in her artistic representations of these factual events, she has explored the historical situations from pre-colonial times through the colonial times when the country became Southern Rhodesia to after it gained independence in 1980, capturing the distinctive historical moments in the existence of both the country and her people.

Myth and Feminism in Traditional Africa: Vera’s Depictions in *Nehanda*

Nehanda (1993) is Vera’s first novel. In this narrative she portrays “the struggles and antagonisms of history” (qtd in Wilson-Tagoe 160), in line with her preoccupation with history. She begins in this novel to employ, through the use of myth, the great antiquity of her people by retelling the myth of the spirit-medium, *Nehanda*, as told by her ancestors. Constructed from the oral tradition, it centres on this spirit-medium who played a predominant role during the liberation struggles, particularly during the 1893 and 1896-1897 rebellions of the then Southern Rhodesia. Vambe explains that the story told in this novel emanated from “the Shona ‘religious’ myth of spirit possession. [---] In the Shona ancestor veneration, spirit possession is the ritual that establishes the link between the departed ancestors and their living descendants” (127). Obi Maduakor describes myth as “...stories about gods and their interaction with mortals, handed down from the olden times and containing the early beliefs of a race” (44). For Malinowski, “Myth is

...a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force; it is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic character of primitive faith and moral wisdom". As a result, from time immemorial, the female character, Nehanda, had been a mythic legendary and historical figure of reverence among her people, possessing tremendous spiritual powers. Right from birth, she had a divinely designated role to perform for her people as illustrated by Vera. Thus, Nehanda's birth; "Following the directions of the spirits, the women buried parts of the umbilical cord in different places in the fields, spreading it as though to bless the earth, bound her to the future in ways that she could not revoke"(13).

Because of this crucial role, she had been primed with distinct supernatural gifts and qualities; she is, in the main, 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 points out that "Nehanda personifies the national history; she is an icon... the spiritual history of the *Chimurenga* which is the narrative framework of *Nehanda* can in some respect be seen as a pedagogical narrative of the nation" (72).

Hence, set in the past, the novel is recreated imaginatively in the past world of her people, depicting a pre-colonial and colonial Rhodesian world, exposing what could be termed Zimbabwe's cosmogonist universe; that is, the original world of the Zimbabwean nation – the pristine world. She represents the enduring ways the people have resisted the intrusion of the Empire as well as their struggles against the influence of Western Culture. Bull-Christiansen describes *Nehanda* as "the spiritual history of the first Chimurenga" (72), while other critics agree that it is Vera's own "feminist re-writing of the myths of Nehanda" (Wilson-Tagoe 101-103, Vera in Bryce 42, Bull-Christiansen 38).

The cultural nationalism which Vera depicts in *Nehanda* starts with the people's resistance to the white settlers who have colonized their land. The people maintain that the settlers have no place within the Zimbabwean space, and they insist that the colonizers are the outsiders who, therefore, must be recognized as dangerous intruders. As such, there is need for urgent action in order to obliterate whatever constitutes their presence. Their continued stay is perceived as ominous as it has the potency of evil and is equally

tantamount to taboo. When viewed from the religious angle, the strangers are forbidden to be part of the “spiritualized landscape” (Muonde, XV). The following discussion between some female characters in the novel illustrates the people’s wary disposition towards the visitors:

“We discovered that the stranger had decided to stay among us. The stranger becomes a sign of our future. What does it mean to have a stranger become a sign of our future?. What does it mean to have a stranger with unknown custom live among you? To live I say, not to visit?”

“That is indeed a sign”.

“[---] There was evidence all over the hill that the stranger wants to be among us for a long time. He had built a home [---] He had taken many cattle away from us. He had moved us into the barren part of our land where crops could not grow. Many people were killed by the stranger...”

“You said this place was on a hill? Why would the stranger choose to build on the hill, instead of below it? A visitor to a strange land must be humble not to choose the highest ground in the land to build his home. These people could not have known our customs.” (12)

It is at the later part of the novel that we get to know the relevance of the hills to the people; “hills that are filled with silence. The silence echoes the wisdom of the ancestors, and the presence of Mwari, who has put the strange rocks on the earth” (84). Nehanda herself testifies to this significance of the hills when she says: “Our people have fled to the hills. This is where we shall fight our enemies. In the hills we shall protect ourselves from the stranger. [---] In the hills, the wisdom of the departed will guide you. The past is in the hills”(80).

From this we find that the hills play triple roles in the community. First, they serve as protective fortress to the people, second, they are a source of wisdom and inspiration and thirdly, they bear testimony to the people’s history.

Further in the story, the men lay credence to the indigenous ownership of the land and its sanctity. A character testifies thus as the people – men, women and children – converge to mobilize in a unifying manner against the white settlers, “We allow him to dig our gold, but the land is not his. The land cannot be owned. We cannot give him any land because the land does not belong to the living. While we live, he is only a stranger here” (43). We not only find the people speaking with one voice and acting in unison, but also the entire scenario becoming evident of the freedom of speech that was prevalent at that time. The writer tells us that

The voices of women move sorrowfully among the men, beseeching. 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. (42)

The complementarities of roles are also illustrated in the above quotation. Here the people harness their resources. Everyone has a role to play; the contribution of every member of the community is significant and is acknowledged irrespective of sex or age. In essence, Vera in this regard seems to be saying: “There was a way our people posed stiff resistance against the colonial power, the nature of resistance that is typical of the first *Chimurenga*. Our country had a long standing tradition of putting up courageously with intruding colonial forces in a collective manner as a unified and determined group.” She even goes on to say that the collective strength of her people takes its cue from the strength of the female. This collective spirit is particularly portrayed early in the novel where the women have gathered to receive the mysterious child, Nehanda, during her birth. Vera tells us:

The circle of women asserted their strength through their calm postures, waiting. They looked upon their presence in this enclosure as a gift; this was not a chance for them to fail or succeed, it was a time to rejoice, or else to mourn (4).

The protective and assuring assistance they give to the young woman in labour is glaring when it is stated in the story that “though this was her first child, she was fortified by the presence of the other women” (7). Zeleza rightly expresses the following view:

In this moment of birth, we see the enduring, creative solidarities of women, their collective investment in the start of a new life. It is a birth, moreover, that is witnessed by the spirit of the ancestors, symbolizing the unbroken ontological chain between the unborn, the living, and the dead, that birth is a transition from one state of being to another. The spirits' presence also marks the prophetic endowment of this child destined to carry the torch of struggle for freedom against foreign invaders ("Colonial Fictions" 17).

Nehanda is replete with other instances during which female bonding are evident. Apart from this communal spirit, Vambe brings in another perspective when he emphasizes:

The 'birth of voices' implies the community of women who are present at *Nehanda*'s birth. These women have also been chosen by the ancestors, and each of them has already met *Nehanda* in dream. Implied is that the process of evolving a national consciousness is a community undertaking. The women who welcome *Nehanda* come from different directions and yet they have been unified by her birth. What the novel suggests is that this is simultaneously the birth of a new nation, an historic occasion at which women are active agents. (131)

It is principally in these regards that Vera represents the character, *Nehanda* as the rallying point of the people's resistance to colonial rule.

From the religious perspective, Vera in this novel also tries to portray the profound distinguishing features between Christianity and African traditional religion. She represents the former as an unrealistic, oppressive, non-accommodating and discriminatory type of religion and the latter as realistic, more humane, more tolerant and making no distinction, especially between man and woman. These situations can be illustrated first with the choice of *Nehanda*, a female spirit, as the medium spirit of the people and the encounter between Kaguvi and the Christian priest.

With regard to the choice of *Nehanda*, Vera tries to highlight that the African ancestral spirits (just as the 'agwu' in Igbo traditional religion), are not

discriminatory in their selection of a medium since they possess both the woman and the man. And whoever the choice is, either woman or man, the generality of the community is bound to accept that choice in unflinching obedience to the pronouncement of the spirits. In the case of Nehanda, Vera shows that even when she is a female spirit, the power she wields is also not discriminatory because it is not restricted to any gender. She performs her functions of protecting the culture of the land and the upliftment of her people. Very significantly, we observe that the entire people, women, men and children, worship and respect her. They also revere and obey, without questioning, her directives. These are exemplified in the quotations below that have been taken from the events of the struggle:

- “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” (62).
- “The crowd recognizes and salutes the spirit medium that has been sent to them for the sake of their relief” (62).
- “The men stop dancing and kneel around Nehanda, and the women in the outer circle cast protective shadows over the bending bodies of the men” (62).
- “The people clap their hands in unison, showing their submission to Nehanda’s spirit and truth” (63).

The people’s unalloyed obedience and implicit trust are glaringly illustrated in these excerpts. And it is this hallowed reverence of the seemingly inconsequential female that perplexes and disturbs the colonizers in the persons of Mr. Smith and Mr. Browning. As representatives of the West, it is something they can hardly fathom and they express their frustration in this way: “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” (75). But the fact remains that: “These people could not have known our customs” (12) as one of the women characters had earlier noted. For sure, it is this desire to surprise and confound that makes Vera compel the colonizers to marvel at the unique qualities of a race they ignorantly despise and deride.

It should be noted moreover, that Vera depicts *Nehanda* as a woman of great vision with tremendous powers, of great insight and resourcefulness and a source of inspiration and hope to her people. The writer presents her as the rallying point, an energizing force to the revolutionaries. These are illustrative of the fact that such distinct qualities of hers have not emanated from her contact with any establishment that has been structured by the Western colonial government such as Western education, Western religion or any other Western institution – political or social. Equally, she has not imbibed any of her qualities from Western cultural norms. Vera wants us to believe that her protagonist is highly knowledgeable and so richly endowed because she is deep-rooted in the culture of the land, and also that she is an ardent practitioner of the indigenous religion. Essentially, *Nehanda* is very successful because she has not been tainted by colonial influences, particularly as it concerns the imbibing of Western cultural norms and beliefs.

Throughout *Nehanda*, Vera depicts a tradition-oriented people who are spiritually and emotionally stable. We find a people who have their beliefs – believing earnestly in the sacredness of the land and in the spirits. We find a people who nourished and maintained their world-view in the past (Bull-Christensen 43). In these people, Vera portrays the genealogical traits of hard work, resilience, valour, strong morals and cooperative spirit. The men are great warriors, successful in their endeavours and are, in addition, responsible patriarchs. The people generally have great wisdom and possess great memory – remembering such things as the heroic deeds of their ancestors. Vera depicts a rich illustrious people who own their lands and farm on them without inhibition. They are really in charge as they take control of events within their inherited space. Within this “fertile valley” (60) and “unified cosmology of the unified Shona” (Vambe 130), all inhabitants, including women and children, are wholly part of their natural community and can only discover their existence within the community. They can also find fulfilment only when they exist as integral parts of the community. Expatriating on the significance of the community in Africa, Ikuenobe, Polycarp emphasizes:

The community is at the center of every thought, activity, or practice; it shapes one’s ways of life, attitudes, ways of seeing things, and methods of doing things. Many African ideas, beliefs, and values are grounded and made

meaningful only in the context of their communalistic conceptual and normative schemes. Traditional African societies are founded on, and sustained by, the idea of communally shared beliefs, practices, and values. (118)

One of the most important of these shared beliefs is their belief in the ancestral spirit. They respect the legacies of their ancestry and their cultural inheritance. Nehanda's mother expresses the fact that: "The dead are not gone. The dead are among us, guiding us to clearings in the future where we shall triumph"(53). It is in this light that Ikuenobe also informs us that "The African idea of communalism is founded on the interrelationships among persons, ancestral spirits, and divinities in the context of a community" (124). Vambe further explains the point that the "...spiritual world of ancestors is here meant to operate as cultural sieve for retrieving cultural memory that will energize opposition to colonialism" (130). As a matter of fact, these "communally shared beliefs, practices, and values" constitute both the pivot on which the traditional society revolve as well as its bonding medium.

Hence we find that within this ordered, highly moral space, there is peace and every member of the community participates actively towards the preservation of traditional values and habits. The political structure represented is closely knitted and has cohesion. It is only the general interests of the community that propel political actions from the people and not the vested interest of any age, gender or group. In a collective manner, they face the challenges posed by the coming of the colonial forces. Collectively, also, the people make efforts to evolve or come up with their own distinguishing features of civilization.

This is the pervasive solid structure which Vera portrays so that even during the duration of the struggle, in the absence of the men, all the groups within the community are committed to the cause in their own unique ways. Vera narrates:

There is still some life around the settlement, even though most of the men have gone for months. [---] The children play beneath the *hozi* which is now empty of provisions, when they climb over the walls of the empty *hozi* and play inside, no one reminds them of the taboos that accompany such a transgression. (94)

It is here perceived that the men are patriots and highly responsible, fulfilling their traditional responsibilities towards their community and their families, primarily that of securing the lands and protecting the members of the community. They are conscious of the fact that they owe allegiance to both the land and the ancestral spirits. In the course of the war, even in their absence, the home front is properly taken care of by the women. The family unit is still fundamental, intact, and functional. More so, family relationships are still valid. Everyone, including children, is in tune with nature and with the traditional practices of the land as well as being cautious of the consequences of breaking the limits. Such early nationalistic tendencies of Zimbabweans as depicted by Vera can be understood better when we consider Bull-Christiansen's explanation that

The early nationalism has been described as a rural indigenous response to the colonial occupation of African land. Africans were being evicted from their land to make way for white owned commercial farms. This caused the Africans to organize themselves in defense of their indigenous rights to this land. Nationalism has as such been described as emanating from the issue of African rights to African land. (49)

He goes further to make this elaborate illustration concerning Zimbabwean nationalism:

Zimbabwean nationalism drew on three important points of identification namely: indigenous rights to the land, the historical myths of Great Zimbabwe and the mythic status ascribed to the first *Chimurenga*. A narrative of deep historical comradeship is established as meaning and identification is drawn from the ancestral land; the greatness of the past and the spiritual temporary of the first and second *Chimurenga*. *Nehanda* operates within this narrative framework. It narrates a nation as a people, who had cultural 'roots' in the land they occupy and in their original struggle to protect the sacredness of the land. These can be said to be the factors which propelled these people as well as account for the sustenance in their resolve to reclaim the disposed lands

With regard to the “historical myths of Great Zimbabwe,” Vera in this respect has in *Nehanda*, employed history in order to reconstruct what she perceives to be a glorious and great civilization that has regrettably been lost. Apart from its civilization, Great Zimbabwe is as well a country that was noted for its outstanding beauty – a beauty that has been embedded in the Shona word ‘Zimbabwe’ – meaning house of stone and from which the country derived its name. Garlake explains:

The Great Zimbabwe ruins were being advocated as a symbol of national pride and lent their name to the nation. [---] the people who had inhabited Great Zimbabwe were seen as highly skilled, socially advanced and governed by socialist principles without coercion. This society had been peaceful and united. (qtd in Bull-Christiansen 52)

Thus, Vera is revisiting the history of a people who were known for their great heritage. Based on the history of the country, the stones of Zimbabwe feature as testaments to greatness, they testify to a great country that was famous from earlier times essentially because of its cultural productions and its natural beauty. Pointing to this grandeur of an ancient and illustrious civilization, Vera tries, in the main, to bring to the fore this myth encapsulated in the notion of a great country which Bull-Christensen also buttresses “as the stone buildings that were discovered in the 16th and 17th centuries” and “which presumably were the centre for trade in gold [---] The conclusion of [these] investigation had been that Great Zimbabwe was the abandoned remains of what had once been a great civilization” (44). It is when we get to the subsequent novels that it becomes clearer why Vera has drawn the attention of her readers to this important historical background in *Nehanda* which she upholds as a glorious era.

Another vital aspect of the indigenous way of life which Vera depicts is the oral culture. The people represented have great respect for the use of words. Thus the character, Ibwe, remarks that, “our people know the power of words. It is because of this that they desire to have words continuously spoken and kept alive” (39/40). Essentially, the world that Vera explores in *Nehanda* is primarily oral world – a place where memory plays a predominant role. Through orality the people are able to recall their history. The women, for instance, through their voices, bear eloquent testimonies to the validity of this oral culture. We find them telling stories at different points in the novel; a vivid example being the delivery scene. By the voicing

of the stories, they transmit orally the myths and legends of the people. Achebe, buttressing the vital import of storytelling, states categorically through one of his characters:

Recalling-is-Greatest, why? Because it is only the story that can continue beyond the war and the warrior. It is only the story that out-lives the sound of the war drums and the exploits of brave fighters. It is the story, not the others, that saves our progeny from blundering like the blind into the spikes of the cactus fence. The story is our escort: without it we are blind... the story is everlasting. (*Anthills* 123-4)

Commenting on the role of the storyteller in a typical traditional society, Shreya Bhattacharji explains:

Storytellers/raconteurs are assigned and also self-assume conscious responsible positions as the repositories of ancient tribal culture and tradition. These chanters and story-tellers act as judicious custodians and also portrayers of authenticated versions of history. The role of the storyteller interweaves the best strands of communal and individual spirit (139)

She goes further to point out that “The story-tellers stress the need ‘to possess an uncluttered memory’ to prevent the inevitable distortion of African history...” (139). G.T. Couser further states:

...for groups whose traditional culture is primarily oral, the only history is memory. Not to remember is to accede to the erasure or distortion of collective experience; to repress memory is to re-enact and perpetuate oppression. (qtd in Vambe, 129)

Indeed, Vera had pointed out that “The legend, the history, is created in the mouth, and therefore *survival is in the mouth*” (my emphasis) (221).

Thus, with regard to the art of story-telling, Vera’s representations illustrate that it is the women who are repositories of culture; without them, whole cultures of peoples in the world would be lost. It is their exclusive rights to tell the stories particularly those stories that have to do with the past of a people since they serve as beacons of light that will show the people the way – leading them in the right direction so that they will not veer off – “blundering like the blind into the spikes” (Achebe, 124). It is in such ways that she tries to validate the oral tradition as well as keep it alive.

From another perspective, Vera tries to emphasize the superior nature of oral culture over the written one, and very significantly buttresses its durability “as a vehicle of historical memory” (Okpewho ix). The character, Ibwe, the chief, also explains that, “we do not believe that words can become independent of the speech that bore them, of the humans who controlled and gave birth to 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” (39-40). Hence, for Africans generally, words are more dynamic and alive when they are spoken. Therefore, to nail them to papers, divorcing them from the speaker that has given them life makes them lose their vibrant, powerful and fascinating qualities. To transmit words verbally is a fundamental human construct through which any human community acquires its identity, imbues her people with distinctive qualities and submerges them in the culture of the land. In essence, for Africans, Vera suggests, the print culture is an obnoxious Western innovation that is inhibitive and divisive as it makes the unfortunate distinction between those who are literate and those who are not.

It is to buttress this view that she represents *Nehanda* as a powerful oral communicator; one who possesses the quality of speaking to her people in the indigenous language and consequently, not only succeeds in identifying with them and sending across her message, but very importantly, making the language serve as a major source of bonding between her and her followers. Moreover, it is her capacity for oral communication that, essentially, marks her out as a true resistance figure that is able to lead her people in the struggle against the influence of the white man.

The initial dignified status and pride of the people in their community can be seen in the character Mashoko, servant to Mr Browning, whose indigenous name has been changed by his master to the biblical one, Moses, for the imperialistic reason that

...the new name is easier to remember, and more importantly, it is a step towards the goal of civilizing the country [---] Moses does not yet seem to understand much of what represents progress, but Mr Browning is confident that his effort will bear fruit. (44)

Mashoko’s status as a servant, notwithstanding, he still maintains a certain measure of dignity. We are told that he

...does not find his work interesting, in fact, when he is in the village he feels ashamed of it. If it were not for the hut taxes that he is being made to pay, he would not accept the work. His cattle will be confiscated if he fails to pay the money asked of him. (45)

Although he has accepted this job in order to shield himself from the exploitative tendency of the colonizers, it has not altered his perception of himself in relation to his community.

Thus, when he decides to leave, having earlier insisted to Mr. Browning: "I am proud of my people. I am going back to the wisdom of my people" (74), he appears before the latter exhibiting two vital cultural items that distinguish him clearly from the white man – "his traditional clothes" and his shield which he "carried ... under his arm" (74). While his clothes refer to his roots – bearing evidence that he proudly belongs to a place – the latter, the shield, imbues him with courage, equipping him adequately in readiness for combat. Magwanda expresses the view that "the traditional apparel and the weapons symbolize national identity and resistance respectively. Jones correctly reads this scene as indicating 'the liberation of the spirit of the people'" (149). Having been liberated from the slavery of the colonizers, the character performs his civic responsibility by joining his people to defend their inheritance and avenge the disgraceful experiences with his former masters. As we hear, "A man emerges out of the crowd bearing his shield, and carries a blood – curdling shout into the circle that the people form around Kaguvi. [---] He dances to the crowds, affirming the truth that has been spoken, shedding the humiliation he has suffered since the arrival of the white man. The man is Mashoko" (73). It is an explicit demonstration of his preparedness to fight for the fatherland and call the colonizers bluff.

In addition, we find Vera's portrayal of the details to rituals which are equally anchored on the traditional spiritual beliefs of the people. As a champion of tradition, she employs both myth and rituals to such an extent that they constitute the foundational structure of the *Nehanda* narrative. With regard to rituals, she shows us a past society that thrived on ritualistic practices from which flowed the progress and development of the community and through which its members internalize their sense of being. Some of these rituals are vividly illustrated in the delivery scene, the naming

ceremony, in the later part of the novel, and the scene where Kaguvi kills the bull, drinks its blood and eats part of its heart. The last incident is narrated in this way:

On the first day of his séance, Kaguvi is led to the cattle-pen, where he is blindfolded, then handed a spear. With the spear he smites the bull which he has chosen in his blindness, the sharp weapon sliding soundlessly into the heart of the beast. The bull falls suddenly to the ground, blood spurting in crimson streams into wooden bowls which are brought by ululating women. The blood is life and death. The blood is given to Kaguvi to drink while the men dare him to drink it, and the women challenge him with songs of warriorhood. He does not hesitate. When he has drunk, he runs around the enclosure chanting messages to the bull, whose strength he has now inherited. (70-71)

It is through portrayals that the writer exposes significant aspects of the traditional culture. Here, she underlines the relevance of two ritualistic elements within the Shona world – the bull and the blood. Among these people, it is believed that the bull imbues one with great strength and makes one invincible, while the blood is essentially indicative of both “life and death” (70). Being a purifying agent, it is a source of life for Mashoko since he is a full-fledged indigenous citizen and a loyal adherent to the peoples’ traditional practices and beliefs. Vera admits in an interview that she deliberately allows this black character to perform such extra-ordinary human feats in order to illustrate that actions such as these can only be performed by one who has been designated as the “other”. That is to say, that such bizarre and out of place performances, including sexotic customs, are the exclusive preserve of the “other”. Moreover, the scene is meant to expose the outstanding spiritual quality of the character – having been duly initiated, he is now fully endowed by the spirits and consequently possessing immense powers with which he can perform super-human deeds.

This is another example of Vera’s ability to convey to us a lot of information concerning what constitutes, in actual fact, the African consciousness of pre-colonial times – an unadulterated consciousness. Vera believes that these are aspects of what make the difference; the distinctions between them and us – the colonizers and the colonized. In essence, here again, Vera fulfills her over-riding motivation of intimidating and

bewildering the White oppressors as she couches these rituals and practices in a mould of mystery and wonder. She, in a way, is telling her readers that what is done within African culture can hardly be comprehensible to non-Africans. She consistently upholds the view that it is a complex and superior culture that the whites have come to eradicate. In fact, it is one of her unique ways of 'writing back' to the Empire.

It is important at this point to bring into focus the probable reasons for Vera's choice of a female medium spirit. These questions may arise: Why this myth? What role does the myth create for the woman and what type of power does it endow the woman with? What is the implication of revisiting this myth for the woman, for the people of Zimbabwe and for Africans generally?

One of Vera's intentions was to counteract "European historical narratives of Nehanda" (Bull-Christiansen 22), which document the hanging of Nehanda and which implicitly shows that she, and by extension, the entire people were defeated in the struggle; that is, the first *Chimurenga*. Vera expresses the view that "our oral history does not even accept that she was hanged, [---] because she refused that, she surpassed the moment when they took her body, and when they put a noose upon it, she had already departed. Her refusals and her utterances are what we believed to be history" ("Interview" 221). This insistence on the continuing existence of *Nehanda* has been entrenched as a cardinal belief among the people and according to Vera constitutes "a concentration of all our beliefs and what makes up our identity as a people, how we create legends and even how we recreate history" ("Interview" 221). In other words, her 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. It is only on her and through her that the continuity of the nation rests and is assured.

To illustrate further, Vera as a feminist writer, has chosen this myth because it is one that endows the woman with a contributing and redeeming power. It is a myth that empowers her and assigns to her roles that are crucial to the development and survival of the community. We find that Nehanda's priestly duties are intrinsically tied to the culture of the land. For instance, she has this primary assignment to resist the imperialist subjugating power,

serving as the redeeming agent, who saves her people from the invading western colonial power. We should also bear in mind that the coming of the Whites and their occupation of the land was tantamount to a desecration of the sacred spaces since the people had inherited this land from their ancestors and therefore, have no power to relinquish it. Having been spiritually empowered, *Nehanda* assumes the responsibility of protecting the land from further desecration; and Vera expects us to accept that she has lived up to this onerous duty.

Added to this, it should be highlighted that in the historical narratives of the liberation wars, a major thorny issue has been who the real heroes are. Vera, in this regard, frowns at the way the men have projected themselves as the real and only heroes. She therefore debunks “male historiography” (Ranger 205) and the touting of their so called heroic achievements with which they continue to underrate, and in the process further subjugate them. She discloses this significant perspective of her work when she says in an interview:

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’s based on a spiritual belief arising from the words: ‘My Bones will rise’. It wasn’t 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’s this duplicity – people came back, and all the heroes are men all of a sudden. (Interview in Bryce 222)

Bull-Christiansen buttresses this point when he says that in history books that document the first *Chimurenga* such as Ranger’s *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia 1896-1967*, “...the leaders of the nationalists movement have been said to be inspired by the organization of the 1896-97 rebellions in respect of their use of the religious networks of the Mwari cult and the Chaminuka (*Nehanda* and *Kaguvi*) spirit mediums as described in Rangers account of the First *Chimurenga* in *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia 1896-7 (1967)*” (52). He

specifically makes the point that “The mythical figure of Nehanda was Vera’s choice for the novel because this highlighted the female side of the national struggle” (72).

In the same vein, Robert Mugabe, the Zimbabwean president, himself attests to the invaluable contribution of this figure as authenticated 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” (qtd in Bull-Christiansen 53). No doubt, Vera’s continuous insistence of the laudable role women have played in the development of the Zimbabwe begins with her Nehanda story.

She also pushes women’s contribution to stretch as far back to the very beginning of the history of the community. She wants us to accept that the crucial role they played during the birth of Nehanda cannot be underestimated. In gathering to receive this unique personality whose birth is synonymous with the birth of the nation, is a significant assignment coupled with the fact that her birth is a watershed in the history of the people. It should be seen that it is in their hands that the entire nation has been born into; and consequently, the fate of the whole people has been entrusted to them. We should also remember that they are equally harbingers of cultural knowledge and sustainers of tradition. It then amounts to great injustice if in the course of time, women have come to be relegated to the background as inconsequential members of the community.

Conclusion

In the novel, Vera begins by creating a background in which she tries to establish a context that both depicts “historical roots” (Bull-Christensen, 32) and the cultural supremacy of the pre-colonial and colonial Zimbabwean society, coupled with the impressive collective resistance of the people against the intrusion of the white colonizers. Like many other African authors, Vera makes a representation of an idyllic pre-colonial golden age as a time of prosperity “when the Africans lived in harmony with nature and the ancestral spirits” (Bull-Christiansen 52). It is in this light that writers often

present the colonial occupation "... as a disturbance of the natural balance between the Africans and their natural environment" (52).

As Vera retells this traditional myth, she essentially makes an appeal to historical precedents. In the process of reinventing the story, she invokes, exposes, exalts and endorses, in a spiritual and inherent mysterious manner, per se, the past civilized and holistic world of her people – a civilization she believes, had dignity and was equally authentic. Vera admits that "Nehanda is really at the centre of our spiritual belief as a whole nation" ("Interview" 222), and that the novel, "...concerned a myth, a legend, it was a story of spirituality, of ancestors, a mystic consciousness and a history. I wrote it from remembrance as a witness to my own spiritual story" ("Interview" 220). Wilson-Tagoe also buttresses the point that "constructed in the fluid immediacy of recounted stories, the novel integrates the past into a living imagined reality, giving itself the leeway to enlarge the specific into wider issues beyond its contexts, to suggest not only how things were but how they could be" (161). That is to say that the novel engages both "with the past in radical ways and envisions new possibilities in the present and future" (161). Hence, it is revealed that even in the guise of disorientation, the female protagonist, adroitly, focuses our attention to all the things lacking in modern Africa regarding the role of women in the new dispensation.

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