Chapter Eight

Cultural memory and the politics of remembering

*The Stone Virgins* and the creation of ‘illicit versions of the war’

The war that the opposition at Devil’s End in *Black Sunlight* wages against the unnamed black tyrant is largely depicted as being fought by male characters. It is an opposition that is led by males, with Chris as the leader of the opposition. Women in *Black Sunlight* are portrayed as part of the fragile humanity that provides the reason for fighting against the twentieth century dictator. Male characters including the narrator endure the experience of suffering under dictatorship in *Black Sunlight*. In contrast, *The Stone Virgins*, a novel by Yvonne Vera further complicates the picture of a post-independence Zimbabwean civil war narrative by refusing to depict it as a distinctly male affair that *Black Sunlight* by Dambudzo Marechera is guilty of. In *The Stone Virgins*, Yvonne Vera narrativizes the war of independence (1972–9) from the point of view of Zipra female guerillas. Through the memory of two Ndebele female characters, the author also recreates the civil war fought in Matabeleland from 1981–6, between the new black government forces and the so-called ‘ZAPU dissidents’. The novel is about two sisters, Thenjiwe and Nkheza, who become victims of the post-independence disturbances in Matabeleland. *The Stone Virgins* also gives voice to the ‘dissident’ war narrative as narrated by Sibaso, one of the ‘dissidents’ who after witnessing the betrayal of independence goals, returns into the hills of Gulati as a sign of defiance to the rule of Robert Mugabe, the new Prime Minister of Zimbabwe.

Conventional Zipra history begins with the formation of ZAPU in 1961, progressing linearly to how that Party was built into a huge guerrilla war machine, until the party began to train soldiers for a conventional war in 1978 (Dabengwa, 1995, pp. 24–35). This picture of ‘official’ Zipra history is confirmed by Jeremy Brickhill (1995, pp. 48–72) whose account of the Zipra war narrative dutifully follows ZANLA accounts in the way it underplays the role of black women in that war. In contrast, *The Stone Virgins* ‘remembers’ these two wars differently (p. 82). Vera engages with the question of ‘remembering.’ Her novel brings out
the politics of cultural memory that sustains itself through acts of amnesia that involves selecting and ordering particular events in a way that projects those events as natural and beyond contest. In *The Stone Virgins*, Vera suggests that the roots of ZAPU lay as far back as the 1950s in which African women struggled to maintain some sort of cultural space in the face of the threat from colonialism. The author registers the changing perceptions of women, showing how they became part of a new urban popular culture defined by ‘bottles of shield deodorant and Tomesai Shampoo and Ponds’ (p. 23).

In their struggles to domesticate the city and adapt to the new city culture, Vera’s women of the fifties display contradictory perceptions. They feel entrapped by the new culture of the ‘ambi generation’ and yet when the 1970s come, the women redefine that space, occupying it as guerrillas, to the perplexity of colonialism and the African patriarchs. Vera’s women of the 1950s reject the notion that African women were simply underdogs during colonialism. They were vectors in promoting some aspects of colonial culture even as the same women of Thandabantu fought the colonial system (p. 49) and challenged African male stereotypes that viewed the women as passive onlookers during the processes of creating history.

In *The Stone Virgins*, Vera deliberately searches for female heroines ‘because the country needs heroes, and flags, and festivities,’ (p. 4). That the author finds the heroines among black township women of Thandabantu validates the roles of women as significant during the struggle. This point has also been emphasized by Tsitsi Dangarembgwa in *Nervous Conditions* (1988) as well as Irene Mahamba’s *Women in Struggle* (1985) writing about Shona women in the struggle and is all the more significant because it has been consistently downplayed in male fiction such as *The Contact* by Garikai Mutasa and *Pawns* by Charles Samupindi respectively. In *The Stone Virgins*, Vera subverts both ‘official’ ZAPU and ZANLA war accounts, and the novel suggests a reversal of roles between African women and men. In her novel it is the historical agency of the African women, their memories of anger and pain and their desire for total freedom that is emphasized. The ways through which the war narratives, memories, and contribution of Vera’s female characters enter into the novel, becoming the text that interrogates the ‘official’ ZAPU war narrative, reveals the latter as fragmented (p. 82), fragile and one-sided.

**Memory, female ‘remembering’ and subversion of official male war narratives**

Remembering the war narrative from the position of ZAPU women constitutes an act of subverting the claims of the official ZAPU mythological version of the war. This revisionist sensibility in *The Stone virgins* is effected so that it would take on board what the narrator describes as other ‘illicit versions of the war’ (p. 53). These illicit versions of the war are the novels’ inchoate but probable narratives that deny the novel interpretive closure. As the omniscient character says, to acknowledge that there are other narrative versions of the war is itself an act of refusing to bury the memory ‘[of] the bones [of Nehanda] rising ’ (p. 59). This statement connects
The Stone Virgins to Bones by Chenjerai Hove in which Nehanda prophesies that even when the colonialists kill her, her ‘bones’ shall rise to avenge her death in the name of African women and men.

In a sense then, remembering and cultural memory are critical survival tools for forging a new identity for the black women of Thandabantu and by extension of black women in post-independence Zimbabwe. In fact, one could further argue that in The Stone Virgins, Yvonne Vera evokes a female Ndebele counter-memory so as to disrupt the hegemony of both the officially sanctioned and male dominated accounts of ZANLA and ZIPRA concerning the liberation struggle in post-independence Zimbabwe. In the process, the author of The Stone Virgins manipulates the memories of her female characters, elevating their deeply personal memories to the status of the historical. What is implied in that process of rewriting the war narratives that are authored from the vantage point of Ndebele women is that the narratives lay claim to being credible and truthful narrative accounts of the war and the narratives demand to be recognized as such. This denies post-independence conventional history the power to ‘speak for’ women and also the power to monopolize telling the story of the war. In fact, the female memories are depicted as introducing the quality of contingency and contradiction to the historiography on war in Zimbabwe. David Palumbo-Liu further supports this observation about the capacity of individual memories to fracture unitary modes of narrating the black identities within the nation and the discourse of nationalism when he says that ‘through memory alone, as the repository of things left out of history, the ethnic subject can challenge history’ (Palumbo-Liu, 1996, p. 212).

Nevertheless Vera’s womanist war narrative is not without its own ‘undisturbed histories’ (p. 50) and ‘burnt portions of . . . memory’ (p. 71) of pain and anger. When civil war breaks out in 1981 and curfew is imposed in Bulawayo (p. 59), black women suffer from the new government’s desire to extend its hegemony over the people of Kezi. After the civilian population of Kezi refuse to submit and confess where the ‘dissidents’ are ‘soldiers shoot them, without preamble – they walked in and raised AK rifles: every shot was fatal (p. 121). And in the process, Kezi is reduced to ‘a naked cemetery’ (p. 143). In this account of how the new government transgressed, violated and killed its own people, with women suffering the most, the triumphalism and celebrations that mark the new leaders’ rule in the new nation is radically subverted and ridiculed. In fact, in The Stone Virgins Vera refuses to describe the war of 1981 to 1986 as a civil war, or ‘dissident’ menace, because to have done so would have confirmed the official account of the disturbances in Matabeleland as a product of Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZAPU) ‘malcontents’ who, as the government controlled media suggested only deserved to be treated like beasts (The Herald, June 28, 1984).

Vera also refuses to explain why that war took place because that would have locked her novel within the ‘social science paradigm’ which emphasizes causation, continuity and closure in the explanation of social reality. This conscious way of withdrawing knowledge that the novel effects, denies conventional historians the
opportunity to confirm their conclusions and prejudices that it was simply the new government’s brutality to blame for that war. Instead, it could be said that Vera is not concerned with apportioning blame but with the desire to open channels for fruitful dialogue. She too, it is averred, is aware that there are dangers in consolidating subaltern memories and representing those memories as uncontested truths, especially when she begins to destabilize dominant ideology ‘via a discourse that is equally, if not more, stable (Palumbo-Liu, ibid., p. 212).

Unfortunately, this refusal by Yvonne Vera to dwell on the ‘historical causes’ of the civil war in post-independence Zimbabwe in The Stone Virgins does mean that Vera runs the risk of dehistoricizing the dissident war fought by the black government against the so-called dissidents between 1981 and 1986. This technique of withholding information on the causes of the disturbances portrays the new government as extremely xenophobic and tribalist which might not be the whole truth about the complexity of that war. Non-disclosure of the possible historical causes of the civil war pushes the female war memories, as narrativized in The Stone Virgins, into the grey zone of doubt. This forces the reader to conclude that for Vera, to revise official history is a process that does not necessarily involve stepping outside the ‘dominant mode of thought’ even though some elements of discontinuity with that dominant sensibility are introduced into the novel. None the less the technique of non-disclosure of the historical causes of the civil war significantly allows Vera to concentrate on describing the intense brutality meted out to the people of Matabeleland by the ZANU government, the murder of Thenjiwe as well as the rape and mutilation of Nonceba by Sibaso who is the new ‘bandit’ who emerged out of the ethnic conflagration of the early eighties.

Put differently, the triumphantalist ZANU war narrative and the myth of post-war stability in Zimbabwe is put to severe test when Robert Mugabe’s government sends the North Korean trained fifth brigade to quell the Matabeleland disturbances. Vera captures this tragic moment in the new nation’s history in the desecration of the cultural life of Thandabantu by the soldiers of the new government. In the novel the violation of Thandabantu is in fact the violation of Matabeleland, the attempt at ‘burying of memory’ (p. 59) of the war narrative of Zipra women. It too, is the metaphorical gagging of the voice of the black women in post-independent Zimbabwe that was manifestly dramatized during ‘Operation Clean Up’ when the government ordered the police to arrest black women walking alone at night. They were perceived as prostitutes even though the government did not have proof in all cases.

For Vera, the new black nationalists turned out to be rogues or a ‘gang of bandits’ because they used coercion to define the cultural life of the new nation. By forcing people to consent to his rule, Vera depicts the new prime minister, Robert Mugabe, in the novel as seeking to maintain his legitimacy in Matabeleland. This suggests that although the new Zimbabwean nation was initially considered by many ordinary people to have a new and viable identity, it nonetheless repressed the dissenting people of Matabeleland. The banality of the new leaders’ power is
depicted through the black soldiers who in the novel carry out systematic torture to ‘intimidate, to kill, to extract confessions, to resurrect the dead’ (p. 124) upon the people of Thandabantu. In *The Stone Virgins*, two black soldiers chillingly force a wife to hack her husband to death in order to save her two sons (p. 80) from death. The brutal torture of Mahlathini (p. 123) to death by the soldiers is described in the novel in a way that suggests that it is the new government that is ‘illegitimate’ and consequently is made up of a ‘band of bandits’.

Actually, Terence Ranger (2002, p. 209), a trained historian of the First Chimurenga believes that in her descriptions of the torture of the people of Thandabantu in *The Stone Virgins*, Yvonne Vera has severely restrained her pen. According to Ranger, what happened in Matabeleland was grotesque and more than what fiction could imaginatively handle. This view, coming from a conventional historian, suggests that Yvonne Vera’s female accounts of the fifth brigade’s brutality in Matabeleland in *The Stone Virgins* have coincided with what is believed to be the truth about torture in the historical accounts of the civil war in post-independence Zimbabwe. To this extent, Yvonne Vera might be said to have wittingly or unwittingly used her literary tract to sub-serve the conclusions of conventional history (Alexander et al., 2000).

In other words, what Vera is doing in recreating the war narrative of Matabeleland in terms that seem to confirm the uncritical assumptions and conclusions of conventional history, is suggesting that the war was planned, atrocious but purposeful (p. 124) ethnic cleansing of the people of Matabeleland led by a predominantly Shona government. This mode of depicting the conflict is actually meant to challenge the ZANU government’s claims that it was dealing with bandits and not dissidents, because, as is sometimes erroneously depicted, bandits lack coherent political motivation. This fact is used to justify dealing with dissidents as one would deal with beasts.

**Memory and the construction of a ‘new Ndebele historiography’**

A portrayal of the new Mugabe government in negative terms also enables Yvonne Vera in *The Stone Virgins* to create and validate a new official ‘Ndebele historiography’ that is predicated on what the author perceives as violence instigated by Shona people against the Ndebele people. In her depictions of what she perceives to be the injustice done to the Ndebele people of Thandabantu, Vera participates in the reinvention of tribalism and unfortunately, at this point in the narrative, the author’s mode of revising the official ZANU war narrative is not to step outside stereotyping the new government as callous, through and through. A broader strategy embedded in *The Stone Virgins* that represents the ZANU government in grotesque terms partially manages to dismantle what Terence Ranger has called ZANU’s patriotic history, which according to the historian, conceives itself as the only credible narrator of the war. For Ranger ‘patriotic history’ is different from and more narrow than the old nationalist historiography, which celebrated
aspiration and modernization as well as resistance. It resents the ‘disloyal’ questions raised by historians of nationalism. It regards as irrelevant any history that is not political (Ranger, 2003).

The irony is that in *The Stone Virgins*, Vera’s retrieval of the memories of Ndebele women of how they experienced war and ‘peace’ in Zimbabwe is distinctively polemical and hence political. It is a creative process through which her construction of a new ‘Ndebele historiographical war narrative’ fails to renounce the lure of the habit of objectifying other narratives. The political unconscious of Yvonne Vera’s creative design in *The Stone Virgins* is to inadvertently fan the ghosts of ethnicity in Matabeleland between the Shona and the Ndebele people. This goal manifests itself in the author’s desire and fascination with exposing carefully selected episodes that depict the new government’s heavy hand on the Ndebeles who are depicted as the victimized minority people. What the novel elides in this counter-narrative is that some Shona people also suffered in the Matabeleland disturbances. In Vera’s novel, Thenjiwe, Nonceba, Mahlatini and Sibaso who bore the suffering in the hands of the new leaders are all marked out by their Ndebele names. One could argue that the author actively constructs a new mythology that casts a picture of total neglect and of lack of development in Matabeleland, something that can be contested by concrete evidence of progress since the war of liberation in Matabeleland.

In *The Stone Virgins*, the process of destabilizing ZANU political hegemony also involves subverting what Vera perceives as errant Shona cultural nationalism. For Sibaso, the Matabeleland debacle is a result of a hegemonic but delinquent Shona cultural nationalism that has been allowed to suppress other cultural memories. It is for this reason that Sibaso rejects *Feso*, a Shona novel that has been used by nationalists to contest colonial hegemony (p. 109). What Sibaso and by extension, Vera rejects in *Feso* is, firstly, Solomon Mutswairo’s claim that Zimbabwe historically belongs to the Shona people and secondly, *Feso*’s projection of the First and Second Chimurengas as distinctly Shona discourses of cultural nationalism.

The participation of the Ndebeles in the First and Second Chimurengas in Zimbabwe modifies the picture often painted in some novels, such as *A Fighter for Freedom* (1985) by Edmund Chipamaunga, that portray the liberation struggle as a Shona fight against the white settlers in Rhodesia. In *The Stone Virgins*, the existence of female Ndebele guerrillas strutting at the Thandabantu township is provided as evidence that Ndebele women gave shape to the new nation that is Zimbabwe, where, according to the novel, their new rulers persecute them. In addition the novel’s bold step in giving voice to the muted ‘dissident’ narrative is the process by which the author transfers spiritual anchorage of the new nation to Bulawayo. The new nation that is to be installed at Lobengula’s kraal (p. 165) needs to restore the past and the cultural symbols that will give this new nation form are depicted as coming from Matabeleland.
Memory and the deconstruction of the ‘dissident’ war narrative

But it needs to be pointed out that Vera is a clever writer who realizes that the ‘new Ndebele Historiography’ is equally a social construct and as such is not foolproof since it cannot remain uncontested even by the ordinary people from within the Matabeleland constituent. The challenge that Yvonne Vera in *The Stone Virgins* had to come to terms with is that her novel could not destabilize Shona/ZANU’s triumphant narrative of war and peace via a recreation of a ‘stable’ Ndebele account of the war. It is to Vera’s credit that she registers an acute awareness of the fragility of the ‘Ndebele’ war narrative from Matabeleland that she has constructed in the novel through her descriptions of Mahlathini’s death at the hands of the Zimbabwean National Army.

The literary strategy that Yvonne Vera adopts to deconstruct the ‘new Ndebele historiography’ is that the author does not write *The Stone Virgins* as if she was present during the political disturbances that rocked Matabeleland between 1981 and 1986. This is clear in the way the author resorts to reported speech in describing the murder of Mahlathini. For example, there are different accounts—potentially conflicting as well—of what actually happened to the people of Kezi during those fateful days:

some of the men who are missing in the village *are said* to have certainly died there, the others, *it is said*, walked all the way from Kezi to Bulawayo . . . having managed to escape, carrying with them the memory of a burning body and an impeccable flame . . . *Others insist* that nobody fled to Bulawayo . . . (p. 123–4)

(italized, my own emphasis).

Concerning the killing of Mahlathini Vera does not want to write and appear as if she was present: ‘those who witnessed the goings-on at Thandabantu on this night said Mahlathini howled like a helpless animal’ (p. 123).

Vera deploys the genre of reportage in her novel because of reportage’s ability to unravel potential discrepancies between facts outside the text (memory) and ‘reality’ imaginatively constructed in the novel. Reportage also introduces into her novel, the multiplicity of narrative voices, all vying to capture the problematics of re-presenting a civil war narrative that can never be complete when uttered from one side or position. The frailty of memory is a permanent feature of the oral mode within which reported speech is inscribed. Included in the instability of the ‘oral memory’ suggested through reported speech in *The Stone Virgins*, is the desire to represent ZANU/Shona ‘violence’ on Ndebele as absolute and natural. This is not achieved because seemingly full, collective as well as individual memories are always in flux. The result is that there is no single memory but multiple memories all battling to fill the cultural space that defines the nation.

To the extent of possessing knowledge of the fluidity and instability of cultural memory, credit is due to Vera. She is aware that counter-histories of the official war narratives in Zimbabwe aspired to become the dominant narrative and thus were
caught up in the desire to represent themselves with all the coherency of stable narratives. Furthermore, in *The Stone Virgins* Vera is keenly aware that individual oral testimonies from the ‘dissidents’ like Sibaso contained potential distortions of the truth of what actually happened in Matabeleland. This is so because these stories were edited and are products of reordered facts during the process of narration. Sometimes the stories are consciously created in order to produce preferred interpretive meanings that might be different from the actual events of the war. It is for this reason that the novel refuses to endorse Sibaso’s claims as a helpless victim of what in Matabeleland, is largely perceived as the brutality of the new Shona leaders on the Ndebele men, women and children.

The ‘dissident’ war narrative is denied the privilege or monopoly of absolute ‘truth’. Though a product of a brutal history the novel rightfully insists that there is no justification for Sibaso to murder the innocent Thenjiwe (p. 73) or to rape and mutilate Nonceba (p. 62). The inconsistency of Sibaso’s war narrative, as well as its inherent instability as a credible source of the meaning of ‘history’, is metaphorically hinted at when he, Sibaso looks at himself in the mirror. What he sees is not a neat, incontestable identity of the self but ‘an apparition’ (p. 71). As Sibaso himself says, ‘the mirror looked cracked. I could see my own broken face behind it’ (p. 76). Sibaso is thus implicated by his own confession. Through him, Yvonne Vera is commenting on the predatory nature of Ndebele men on Ndebele women when the author links Sibaso to a ‘post-war spider, a hungry spider’ [that] is fragile like the membrane around dreams’ (p. 76). To this extent Vera’s depiction of Sibaso recalls Marechera’s portrayal of urban guerrillas. In both accounts dissidents are denied success and shown as growing anti-democratic tendencies. What is also implied in Sibalo’s narrative is that the politics of resistance of the subaltern do not always lead to emancipatory discourses of freedom.

Associating Sibaso’s war narrative with a ‘cracked’ mirror, ‘broken face and ‘fragile’ dreams is Vera’s way of casting doubt on the authenticity of that narrative. For Vera, writing or interpreting the war is highly problematic because of the affiliation of the process of narration to specific ideologies. These perceptions threaten to impose stability and closure to narrative whereas in the real life of memories of people and through which people forge new identities, ‘history has [no] ceiling’ (p. 74). In and through the cultural prism of memory, the meaning of history is subjected to constant surveillance and critical interrogation.

**Memory and the retrieval of love**

It is for this reason that *The Stone Virgins* concludes by narrating a different kind of war. One of healing and ‘delivery’ between Cephas Dube and Nonceba. In this new war of healing, the two are supportive of each other. They both avoid defining each other. Even in this new war, *The Stone Virgins* insists on the open-endedness of historical processes and underlines the contradictions inherent in any act of representing the multiplicity of human identities that emerge from war narratives in Zimbabwe.
The final recognition of the narrative that urges tolerance between people deserves quoting at some length because the new ideology of humanism that it accommodates is, according to the novel what is absent in post-independence Zimbabwe:

Nonceba is here, with him…. She trusts him. He dares not compare them; the living and the dead. He dares not choose. He need not choose nor even imagine what sort of love he prefers, the image of one is safety in the other. He dares not question his continuity of emotion, of love – a form of incest, loving two sisters. Is this a love born of hurt, of despair, in a terrain of tragedy and disbelief? Is it a kind of salve, an emotion to heal his fractured being, and if so, is it enough, can it contain and sustain him? (p159)

That the novel ends with these unanswered questions about memories on love suggests that Vera is aware of the possibility of a romance relationship transforms into a battle field where couples struggle to control each other.

**Conclusion**

Yvone Vera’s *The Stone Virgins* expands our notion of the role of cultural memories in constructing national narratives of resistance. Unlike the male writers considered in this study, Vera used spirit possession in *Nehanda* and extended female narratives of pain and emancipation in *The Stone Virgins*. In the novel, Vera is concerned with deconstructing the ‘official’ war narrative and the dissident narrative of Matabeleland. These narratives have been shown to be inadequate in accounting for the reality of the national war of liberation and the Matabeleland disturbances. *The Stone Virgins* uses cultural memories to construct female-centred meanings of war and independence. This process of manipulating cultural memories to represent gender politics in post-independence Zimbabwe suggest that Zimbabwean authors are aware of the potential of orature to be used to imagine a multiplicity of versions of Zimbabwean nation-ness.
Chapter Nine

Conclusion

African oral storytelling tradition and the Zimbabwean novel in English has analysed the different ways in which the African tradition of oral storytelling is used to construct and represent forms of resistance to colonialism in the black novel in English. The book identified some distinct and yet overlapping tendencies in the use of orality in the novel. Mutswairo in *Feso, Chaminuka: Prophet and Zimbabwe* and Ndhlala in *Jikinya* use allegory, the folktale and spirit-possession so as to depict Africans as heroic fighters against colonialism. As foundational texts of African nationalism in Zimbabwe, the novels revealed the inevitable demise of the imperial narrative of political control in its colonial phase. On the other hand, *On Trial for my Country* and *A Son of the Soil* initially used the discourse of classical realism to depict African resistance as a stable narrative without its own internal contradictions. But the presence of the folktale and fantastic modes in *A Son of the Soil* and *On Trial for my Country*, respectively, insisted on leaving the signature of instability, a fact that ensures that the novels could be reread in other ways.

In *Waiting for the Rain*, African myths of origin, legends of national resistance and folktales contest the validity of western realism whilst Africans fight colonialism. Some negative aspects of African culture are also included. In the novel, African women struggle to be heard in a largely male-dominated society just as some African men such as Kwari, Magaba, Makiwa and Lucifer fight to be incorporated in the new capitalist dispensation. In *Waiting for the Rain*, radical traditionalism, pseudo-liberal sentiments, Christian modernity and nationalist resistance define narratives. By alluding to these potentially contradictory African narratives within the colonial space, Mungoshi reveals that the African experience during and after colonialism cannot adequately be captured in the two words, resistance and collaboration. Mungoshi suggests that Zimbabwean nationalism was characterized by a constant trafficking of conflicting values of resistance against and complicity with the dominant colonial culture.

*Bones* and *Nehanda*, use spirit-possession to construct a viable national identity for Africans in the period after independence. In *Bones*, Hove interrogates the construction of the narrative of national resistance as coherent, single and linear
by inserting the voices of Marita, The Unknown woman and Janifa. The female narratives reveal that there were various internal struggles against the male-dominated constructions of African womanhood as being inferior to men. Hove’s awareness of the complexity and instability within female narratives of resistance can be measured against Vera’s *Nehanda*, a novel that imposes a uniform post-colonial female narrative of resistance using spirit-possession. In Dambudzo Marechera’s *Black Sunlight*, no particular ideology is left as an incontestable social construction. In the novel, allegory is used to generate and depict fluid cultural identities. In particular, *Black Sunlight* uses allegory to criticize and ridicule colonialism as well as African nationalism, especially that brand of cultural nationalism associated with a single ‘African image’. The novel also problematizes both the discourses of classical realism and orality.

The *Stone Virgins* by Vera exploited the figure of cultural memory to retrieve various narratives of the Zimbabwean war. The novel suggested that fiction has the capacity to produce credible, truthful, and meaningful war accounts. These war narratives are represented by images, metaphors and metonyms associated with growth, disruption, continuity and discontinuity. *The Stone Virgins* narrated actual memories of the war from the viewpoint of Zipra women. This gave Vera the opportunity to show the underside of African nationalist texts that underplay the role women played in securing independence for Zimbabwe.

Sometimes in *The Stone Virgins*, however, Vera participated actively in creating a male ‘Ndebele’ war narrative in post-independence Zimbabwe. This war narrative is shown as sustaining itself through acts of internal amnesia especially in the multiple ways it, too, curtailed the material interests of Ndebele women. Fortunately, in *The Stone Virgins* Vera is aware that even this version that puts all the blame of the disturbances on the new government cannot be sustained. Individual stories by ‘dissidents’ such as Sibaso cannot be accepted at face value. They have inherent internal instabilities that arise from the fact that they too, are ordered, rearranged and narrated in ways that make them become texts that are influenced by social ideologies meant to satisfy certain aims that might or might not coincide with the goals of Zimbabwean nationhood. It is also suggested that the picture of Ndebele women as perpetual sufferers tended to gloss over the class differences between Ndebele women. This dimension was not explored in *The Stone Virgins*.

Notwithstanding, *African oral storytelling tradition and the Zimbabwe novel in English* has represented the various aspects in the use of orality in the novel. These are simultaneously neatly demarcated and overlapping. Each of these ideological tendencies in the use of allegory, folktale, spirit-possession, mythic-legend, the fantastic, the fable and memory contains internal fractures, fissures and contradictions that can help the readers to interpret the novels analysed in the book in other novel ways. In allowing orality to be accommodated within the novel, the African tradition of oral storytelling is rejecting the binary divisions implied by such terms as ‘high’ culture and ‘low’ culture.
Since orality is a volatile cultural space, its incorporation in the novel ensures that the novel can no longer be interpreted with a single focus. What is guaranteed with orality in the novel is the refusal by it to allow the 'canonization' of the novel as the literature or the resistance narratives within the novel as constituting the sole truth about reality. In other words, orality’s inherent quality of instability disrupts the notion of uniform communal memories because it introduces into the novel elements of contingency as well as the interplay of contradiction within narratives of resistance. Because of this, the novel is forced into imagining a diverse audience, bourgeois, peasant and working class. This ensures that although the novel is bourgeois in origin, it is reabsorbed into the African tradition of oral storytelling and to that extent rendered performative. Also, by coming into contact with discourses within the novel such as realism and stream of consciousness, orality ensures that literary syncretism or hybridity is the condition of possibility found in the modern African novel.
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African Oral Story-telling Tradition and the Zimbabwean Novel in English presents a break from the previous literary works that vilified orality in an attempt to understand the interface between orality and the black Zimbabwean novel. Orality was seen as an art form incapacitated from within, hence unable to handle themes of history, culture and the politics of resistance to colonial values.

The book traces the ways in which the African oral story-telling tradition survived in several forms within the narrative interstices of the Zimbabwean black novel in English. The author critically analyses the works of eight well-known Zimbabwean writers and reveals ways in which they use Zimbabwe's oral story-telling traditions to inform their creative works. Writers studied in this book reveal in different ways that during colonisation, the liberation struggle and in post-independence Zimbabwe African orature communicated and continues to communicate views on resistance to authoritarian ideas.

The author argues that the use of allegory, spirit-possession, dreams, fable, folktale and communal memories in the novels confers novelty and semantic instabilities. The book challenges critics to view orality in black Zimbabwean novels in English as a tool to express a social vision rather than as a mark of authenticity.

This book is useful to the general public, and to university students of Zimbabwean and African literature, history, politics and culture.

About the Author

Maurice Taonezvi Vambe is with the University of South Africa (Unisa). He is the editor of *Orality and Cultural Identities in Zimbabwe* (2001) and the author of numerous articles on Zimbabwean literature.