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Destructive and Constructive Violence in Yvonne Vera's *Nehanda***Mansour GUEYE, Ph.D.***African and Postcolonial Studies Laboratory, Cheikh Anta Diop university, Dakar, Senegal***Corresponding Author***

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Abstract: This article addresses the issue of violence seen through the lens of colonialism and its impacts on the literary discourses African writers in general, and women writers in particular, use forward as a responsive “weapon” to fight back destructive violence. Given the scope of repressive colonial violence and its destructive side effects on the African continent, especially on the woman subject, the paper focuses on one of the pioneers of Zimbabwean literature, Yvonne Vera’s *Nehanda*. On the one hand, the study brings to light the extent to which the female voice is instrumental in the retrieval and reconstruction of women’s worth. On the other hand, it evidences the way in which the female body is essential in the construction of national identity, freedom, and unity.

Keywords: destructive violence- freedom- literature- voice- weapon-

INTRODUCTION

Africa is one of the continents that has experienced the most prejudicial violence, and Africans are often stereotyped as “uncivilized”. It is also portrayed as a backward continent in all sectors- political, economic, social, and cultural. But the awkwardness Western people generally hold for Africans is not accidental, it has occurred during and in the aftermath of colonial violence. In her essay, “The Nervous Collusion of Nation and Gender”, Heather Zwicker postulates that:

Because colonialism is violent, it breeds a violent response. This violence is not only destructive but also creative; it’s the second term in the dialectic that produces national identity. In other words, colonialism’s destructive violence calls for creative violence that will produce national identity. [Wicker, 2002:10]

In fact, Western researchers, who write from the outside, usually come up with a misinterpretation of Africa and judge Africans’ attempt to secure national sovereignty as disloyal and too ambitious of them. Recalling back Franz Fanon’s essay, “Black Skin White Masks”, Zia Uddin Sirdar talks about the pessimistic stance and violent attitude White people hold for Black people and puts that:

‘Whiteness, Fanon asserts, has become a symbol of purity, of Justice, Truth, Virginity. It defines what it means to be civilized, modern, and human. That is why the Negro knows nothing of the cost of freedom; when he has fought for Liberty and Justice ... these were always white liberty and white justice; that is, values secreted by his master. Blackness represents the diametrical opposite: in the collective consciousness, it stands for ugliness, sin, darkness, immorality’ [Sardar,2008: xiii]

Besides the naked truth of White supremacist ideologies, there is the historical heritage of colonial violence. This results in the invasion of the African continent by colonizers who have come to rob Africa of her wealth, which, once again, betokens the destructive dispossession. As a consequence, it engendered the rhetoric on the part of African intellectuals to get under way the fight for independence in order to gain their sovereignty and cultural revival. These two reasons, fully entrenched in an ideological battle and quest of national freedom, shoved some pioneers of modern African literature to satirize colonialism and celebrate African culture and civilization in their writings.

Moreover, the most crucial side effect of colonialism in Africa is the impoverishment of the continent that yields precarious living conditions. This social backwardness inevitably degrades women’s value who, then, become ostracized from policy-making and denied of their voice. This actual fact justifies the choice we confer upon Yvonne Vera’s Novel, *Nehanda*, to study the way in which African women writers take a side, at the crossroad of a double- colonization legitimated by social conventions and enacted by colonial officials, to retaliate and build up a “sword” from the prejudices of systematic and structural violence to fight for more social justice, national identity and freedom. Hence the female voice is used as *leitmotiv* in the framework of African feminism, and especially womanism which advocates equilibrium between the two paradigms and succinct complementarity of the two sexes. As a structure, the paper will be centered on two main points: the first point will be on cases of destructive violence that ignite reactions, and the second point spins around the reinvention of the female protagonist for the sake of the community.

1. Violence as an Incentive Pull-factor

Be it structural or physical, the woman subject is often seen as one who is exposed to pervasive violence. The violence inflicted on the woman is generally invented by society, say, men, to nip in the bud the raw nerve that should help her grow:

The social construction of gender takes place through the working of ideology. Ideology is that system of beliefs and assumptions- unconscious, unexamined, invisible which represents the imaginary relationships of individuals to their real conditions of existence. [Greene and Gayle, 1985: 1]

In the African context, there exists the same pervasiveness of violence perpetrated on woman but is purely grounded in the African social dharma and traditions that are contaminated by the Western cultural values. That justifies the portrayal and instances of all forms of violence in African women writers’ works. In the novel under review, this common violence is not downplayed by the Zimbabwean writer, Yvonne Vera, rather, it reverberates, from cover to cover, in the book under study. In *Nehanda*, the

violence is much more collective and nationwide than being typically gender-oriented. But however collective, the pivotal role of the heroine, Nehanda, is central in the representation of violence on the female body.

The most blatant example of violence injected to people in the novel is the presence of the White man on Zimbabwean soil and the collective restlessness it brings about. The presence of the missionaries in the country is foreseen as a rampant threat in the eyes of Nehanda. Vera depicts the female protagonist as the ancestral spirit that blends the two worlds together, i.e., the land of the living and the world of the departed people, and everything within. Given her real talent at foreseeing the future, the heroine carries in her “prophetic predictions” only sorrow, bad luck, and chaos that are attributable to the presence of White invaders on the African land. The threat attached to the destructive violence is visible as the White man’s mission on the continent is not void of interest but is rather fueled by civilizing and economic inclinations, to name but a few, he has come to materialize, *sub rosa*:

‘The stranger had decided to stay. Did you not hear me tell you of it? We discovered that the stranger had decided to stay among us. The stranger became a sign of our future. What does it mean to have a stranger, with unknown customs, live among you? To live I say, not to visit?’ [...] The stranger decided to stay among us. There was evidence all over the hill that the stranger was to be among us for a long time. He had built a home. Humans are not like birds, which build nests in trees only to abandon them in the next season. Humans make homes so their young may walk the same soil that they have walked. He had taken many cattle away from us. He had moved us into the barren part of our land where crops would not grow. [Vera, 1998: 11]

Undoubtedly, the presence of the White man in Africa is destructive. Worse, Vera hits the nail on the head when she juxtaposes the colonization of Africa with the economic and cultural destruction through the lens of the land issue. In fact, Land is epitomized as a symbol of continuity and peace, insofar as it represents the place where the departed people have taken up a position to rest in peace forever and watch over their progenies for any kind of jeopardy. If we read between the lines, it comes clear that contrarily to countless critics who blindly bring an indictment against the colonizers in the exploitation of Africa and the transatlantic slavery in Africa, the Black man has also contributed a lot to the enslavement and the emasculation of his people and to the fate of the continent. The ancestors watch over their progenies from above. When the former analyze the critical situation in which the latter find themselves, from their own perspective, they surely put the blame on “the strangers” but do not idealize the way in which the new generation has safeguarded the social integrity of the whole community, as some indigenous people team up with the “oppressor” in the dehumanization of their own people. This paradoxical situation embarrasses some pioneers of African intellectuals like James Nguigi who analyzes the issue of colonization from an auto-critic perspective and comes to the conclusion that: *some Europeans are better than Africans*. (Nguigi, 1964:24). But, in no way does the Kenyan writer legitimize or validate the supremacy of the White man over the Black man. In fact, the collaboration of some African people in the process of colonization should be interpreted as a negative economic side-effect of colonial violence

and the repressive power of the colonial system that compel the same Africans to conform with the rules and become accomplices or perpetrators of violence towards their own community.

In his novel, *Dew in the Morning*, the Zimbabwean writer, Shimmer Chinodya, bemoans the participation of some African indigenous people in the impoverishment and exploitation of other African people during colonization by means of the land issue grabbing he decries as destructive violence. To him, not only does colonialism mean economic dispossession, but also dismantles the family unit through the concept of *forced-displacement* or *dislocation* of people who are obliged to scatter about other places in their own country:

The term [dislocation] is used to describe the experience of those who have willingly moved from the imperial 'Home' to the colonial margin, but it affects all those who, as a result of colonialism, have been placed in a location that, because of colonial hegemonic practices, needs, in a sense, to be 'reinvented' in language, in the narrative, and in myth." [Ashcroft and others: 2008: 65]

Chinodya satirizes with the same energy the abruptness of colonial violence through the story of the *Derukas* from the South, who, under colonialism, are unwillingly uprooted from the fertile land they inherited from their ancestors to the peripheries to eke out a living. Their integration is not easy as the local people they intermingle with seek to secure themselves a decent life. In effect, that is what accounts for the crooked nature of the leading village dignitaries such as *Jairo*, who does not hesitate to tread on ethics and use his "power" against the *Derukas* in order to survive:

Here is a headman who spoke of prosperity, peace, and progress, and yet made not one positive effort to achieve these standards He spoke of honesty and decency when he stole eggs and failed to hand in the taxes to the district office. The shocking state of his household spoke against him" [Chinodya, 2001: 74]

Once again, Vera shows a series of violence in her novel that eventually leaves the victims in a hopeless situation they need to shake off to retrieve their identity, land, and thrive again. More interestingly, the author comes back with the most blatant side effect of colonial violence on Africa, the springing up of social classification. The violence is so fierce to such an extent that it gives birth to the organization of a society into a dominated hierarchy and class system with the establishment of the center, i.e., the posh places allocated to the White settlers and proxies and the peripheries, the unattractive and forsaken area, exclusively reserved for the *subaltern* or *the lowest strata*:

After a long and desperate wailing, Nehanda points in the direction of the hill, and stamps her feet on the ground: it is the hill that had been to be taken by the settlers.... The valley, however, is no longer green with birth. Its grass is dry, and the sediment of memory swallows boulders of grief. [Vera, 1998: 60]

The impact of colonialism and its destructive violence on the social stratification of indigenous people is so common that the Zimbabwean writer puts her finger on to trigger off a more-pronounced and constructive reaction from the oppressed people to restore peace and freedom:

This center-periphery perspective is based on homology between economic and cultural domination, and like the discursive structure of self and other, cannot but relegate the 'Third World' to the false position of a permanent yet desired challenge to (or subversion of) suffocating Western sovereignty. [Sangari, 1995: 146]

The nature of violence perpetrated on Africa is multifaceted and has boundless impacts on the continent. In *Nehanda*, Vera depicts violence as a real embodiment of alienation and destruction, especially for the female subject before it spreads its tentacles to nationwide:

The colonial world was definitely a man's world, and women were not allowed to play any meaningful role in it except as petty traders and farmers." [Boahen, 1987:107]

A close scrutiny of Boahen's point seems to view patriarchy as the unique account of female subjugation, but Vera's text spins around the national "theft" and the dispossession of the Zimbabwean indigenous people. The chaotic nature of White supremacy cuts deep that it cannot leave the oppressed struck dumb and just look at the situation unfolding before them without reacting. Violence has reached a certain scathing level that should ignite every man jack of them to take actions, outfox the colonial authority and turn destructive violence into constructive violence. This is the inner feeling of divine mission that fuels the female protagonist, Nehanda, to act as a catalytic figure to lift the indigenous people out of the misfortune that befalls them the White intruders have brought about. When the destructive violence reaches its climax, and that her community can count on nobody but their ancestral spirit, Nehanda, she plucks up the courage to challenge the furious force of colonial power. The abruptness and depth of the destruction on the oppressed people in Vera's novel have reached a turning point so much so that action seems the only choice upon which the community should restore to fire back and redeem themselves.

In actual fact, the character of Nehanda embodies hope in the sense that she is the medium through which her people reconcile themselves with their ancestors to defeat the oppressors. This evidences Vera's astuteness of juxtaposing the binary of silence and voice. In other words, the long silence of Nehanda and passivism in front of the devastating violence of the White missionaries foretells her imminent awakening and retrieval of her voice on the eve of a declining community. When all is said and done, Nehanda has to take a stand on her community's side to give them a glimmer of hope by whispering the right words and reviving the courage in them and the spirit of togetherness to ward off the colonial power:

Her tongue will not rest and fills the forests with echoes of her being. After she has drunk water from a stream she sings. She fights the silence that the strangers have willed upon her [...] There were no witnesses to her second birth, only the spirits that send elegies to those who have been sacrificed in the fight. [Vera, 1998: 92]

The passage provides useful information regarding the stance and the strong mindset the female subject should come up with to promote social cohesion. Vera insists on the fact that, for women to fight, whatsoever injustice, they have to resort to the power of their own voice and show courage in front of the oppressor, for as long as they choose to remain silent, their devaluation and unrecognition will always

be lingering. This sends us back to the story of Young Zhizha in another novel by Yvonne Vera, *Under the Tongue*. The young female protagonist is raped by her own father. The violent experience spoils her life as she comes out of it with a severe mental breakdown. The trauma Zhizha carries is a mere side effect of her unrest mind which vacillates and is torn between the true figment of the rape her people try to cover up, to say nothing of the insanity and ferocity of the deed itself.

I bite hard on my tongue, hold my breath deep in my chest. My voice is sinking down into my stomach. My voice is crumbling and falling apart and spreading through his fingers. My voice hides beneath a rock. My voice burns beneath my chest. [Vera,1996 :16]

The woman needs to reinvent herself to voice the impediments she comes up against and fulfill herself. It is challenging for her, as her voice is buried in the cultural dharma that governs society. Vera highlights this reality through *symbolism*. The existence of a *rock* epitomizes patriarchy, i.e, traditions, cultures, myth, and colonial power. Nevertheless, in view of the importance of the violence inflicted on the woman, she cannot offer to acquiesce it coldly, but to drag herself out of this trap by means of her sole tongue. Besides, Analyzing Vera's work in her paper, "A River in My Mouth: Writing the Voice of Under the Tongue", Meg Samuelson gives prominence to the voice as an instrumental weapon in women's struggle :

Silence is posed as the standard response to the trauma and national rape....
This silence operates most fully under the restrictions of taboo, which mute the cry of pain from the female body. [Samuelson, 2002:15]

The emancipation of women remains a difficult task in the sense that there are always restrictive powers that overshadow the female voice. This justifies the reason why men commit the most insane violence towards them- incest, rape, harassment, emotional blackmail, and lynching that end up without a trial. With colonialism, patriarchy empowers the male subject through taboos to validate dehumanizing inflictions upon the woman subject who generally stands mute. In her paper, "Procreation Not Recreation: Decoding Maman in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*", Marie Umeh puts under the spotlight a breach of morals in the Igbo society through the issue of sexism and the "objectification" attached to it for the sake of male supremacy.

In Igbo society (...), to prevent female rebellion, which would lead to a complete disregard for tradition and the ways of the ancestors, various methods have been devised by patriarchy to control Igbo women's sexuality: clitoridectomy, rape, incest, sexual deprivation, ostracization, fear, humiliation, and the psychological sexual blinding of women. Generally speaking, the only time a woman is regarded as being chaste and pure is when the sex act is performed by her husband for his recreation, and for her procreation. [Umeh,1996: 911].

On top of the gender issue the Zimbabwean writer addresses in her works, Vera's novels, especially in *Nehanda*, entails the concept of nationalism and the struggle for African sovereignty as a whole. In fact, in the novel under study, Vera's ploy is unique in the sense that she detaches her story from the traditional plot of African women writers which generally revolves around the pervasive quest of freedom of the

heroine. In *Nehanda*, she intertwines the two categories, i.e., the vicinity between nationalism and female leadership. She astutely imagines the survival of oppressed people with the rebirth of the prophetic daughter who has come to wrench the freedom of her community from the White settlers. To realize such an ambitious literary feat, Vera digs deep in African orature she steps in traditions. This ambition is unrealistic and unachievable, on the part of the community, without a policy of appease towards the ancestors. If not, any attempt of redemption will be void.

She has aged dramatically, as though overnight she has inherited the wisdom of all her departed. At these signs the crowd continues to sing as though to teach her the meaning in her voice, encouraging her to speak. Her body breaks into spasms and her face bears the pain of her struggle. After a long and desperate waiting, Nehanda points in the direction of the hill. And stamps her feet on the ground: it is the hill that had been the first to be taken by the settlers.[Vera, 1998:60]

It is clear enough that the community has turned Vera's female protagonist against the White usurpers, and she means to stand on her community's side to right the wrong. A mere glance at the landscape and the architectural occupation of the space betokens the class divisions and the blatant racism that prevail in the country. In other words, *the hill* epitomizes the center, the dwelling place of the White settlers and the peripheries are all left to the desperate and hopeless indigenous people. This validates Nguigi Wa Thiong'o's cry for Africans to dislocate themselves and seek for more opportunities and better lives, if need be to *the center* for the celebration of cultural and economic diversities: *In that sense, shifting the focus of particularity to a plurality of centres, is a welcome antidote.* (Nguigi,1993 :43)

It is sure that someone's misconception of the concept of center evidences their pessimistic vision of mankind. Thus, oppressed people need to unshackle the chains that subdue their freedom and calibrate their struggle to the direction of a more optimistic geographic zone. For Vera's heroine, freedom is here, i.e., on their ancestors' land and it beats time. From now on then, the destructive violence her heroine is known for exceeds all bounds. As the traditional gods, spirits and ancestors are on the same wavelength with the living and the dead, the community, under the leadership of Nehanda, sees nothing other than wage war against the oppressors. Firstly, they start by razing to the ground the two paramount operating institutions, the church, and the school, the White missionaries have counted on to indoctrinate the African in order to turn him into a mere puppet void of culture, civilization, and religion. Then, the violence reaches a crescendo with a heavy death toll on the White settlers' side, which explains the responsive-bloody resistance the oppressed people lead towards the White people who explore and exploit the rich land.

Our ancestors say they have been abandoned, and when we worship, our voice can no longer reach them.

‘We extended too long a hand to the stranger. Now there is much work to be done, and it must be done quickly. Together, with our spears and our hard work, we must send the enemy out of our midst’...

‘The Land must be cleansed with your blood. You must fight for what belongs to us, and for your departed...’ [Vera, 1993:61]

It is certain that the responsive counter-attack of the community has resulted in bloodshed as Nehanda has sacrificed her own life to give birth and hope that reconciles her with her own community, ancestors, the living, and the dead. And this, of course, is a follow-up of destructive violence on them emanated from the White man, she helps outfox through constructive violence.

Conclusion :

Colonial violence in Africa has occurred with open wounds, emotional and physical side effects on the subject, to say nothing of the cultural and economic damages. In her novel, *Nehanda*, Yvonne Vera provides a vivid portrayal of destructive colonial violence that vows to disown the Shona community of their land and impose upon them a new cultural mindset. From then on, the White settlers rake up the wrath of the ancestors whose link with the community is established and vehicled through the symbolic medium of the Land. Vera explores the negative effects of colonial violence on the indigenous people and their responsive attitude regarding violence which appears as a snowball that brings about constructive violence. The novelty Vera comes up with here lies in her astuteness to play down the female experience women writers are generally encapsulated and to put under the spotlight a more nationalistic struggle, i.e., the chimurenga known as the guerilla war, while pushing her heroine, Nehanda, to the highest level of male writers’ usual heroic characterization of their protagonists. The literary comeliness resides in the blend of history, orality, myth, folklore, and symbolism (*the arrival of the bird of light, the forest, the sky, the moon, the wind*), to literature but mainly in the contribution of women to guerilla war, as some Kenyan women had their share in the *mau-mau* war to say nothing of the underneath link between the spiritual, the divine, the religious resistance, and the armed resistance raged against oppressive colonial violence.

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