

The Weight of Trauma and History on the Silent Women in *The Stone Virgins* by Yvonne Vera

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Abstract

This research examines *The Stone Virgins*, by Yvonne Vera, focusing on the female characters of the novel. *The Stone Virgins* puts on display the many serious stresses placed on women. Women are victims of war, patriarchal societies, social abuse, colonialism, and cultural repression. In extreme cases, these forces can transform women, causing them to suffer serious mental disorders. We analyze the novel in the light of Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, especially with respect to her theory of "history and trauma", in an attempt to find the reason for Zimbabwean women's silence before and after the independence war. The author will apply the idea of history and trauma to the various female characters in the novel as well as to society as a whole, examining the changes to their lives and to the historical path of their nation to see whether the latent problems in a society force history to repeat itself in both their personal experience and their nation's experiences. We examine the ways that the patriarchal societies in which these women live belittle or ignore the suffering endured by these women because of their sex, and the ways in which this lack of acceptance multiplies the emotional damage suffered by the women, exacerbating the difficulties the women face in their attempts to reintegrate into society. The author concludes that the silence of the Zimbabwean women in the novel is caused by their history and the latent trauma of their past experiences.

Keywords: Trauma, History, Women, Silence

INTRODUCTION

The effects of war on the survivors and later generations in postwar societies still remain unresolved. The traumatic effects of war on women as the main survivors of war make them voiceless victims of the 'accidental' past. They are physically and psychologically damaged by the deep predicament and annihilation of war. In her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma,*

Narrative, and History, Cathy Caruth sets forth an idea of trauma theory. Caruth's theory deals with the common effects of trauma on its victims. Part of her theory is the idea of "history and trauma", the idea that history is often a reflection of the latent problems within a society, and that these problems often rise to the surface, causing pain and suffering, and then subside again without being

completely healed. "The story of trauma, then, as the narrative of a belated experience, far from telling of an escape from reality the escape from a death, or from its referential force rather attests to its endless impact on a life" (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 7).

An examination of trauma-related literature shows that Caruth's theory can often be

applied to trauma-related literature. This article will discuss Vera's *The Stone Virgins*, a story

of the civil war in Zimbabwe, and the ways that Vera's story of the personal and national history

of Zimbabwe exemplifies Caruth's idea of "history and trauma" on the female characters.

Zimbabwean women are silent, they do not speak and if they start to talk the forgotten history

arises and they will convert to a sacrifice. Their history force them to be silent and if they want to

talk a shocking accident converts them to a silent victim. The researcher does not want to talk

about women's victories in wars or make them into heroines who survived the war without

experiencing a sense of regret.

Caruth's theory of history and trauma has been applied to literary works in the past, but to

date, African war literature has been mostly neglected in its study.

Literature regarding the effects of trauma on African women is particularly interesting. Trauma is a universal human

experience, and our study of it shouldn't be restricted to only men of certain cultures. It's

important to apply the theory to all cultures and genders, attempting to measure its accuracy and

impact, in order to truly understand the literature of those cultures.

Trauma Theory

Trauma is a complicated concept. It has at its heart an occurrence that took place in reality. However, not all of the "reality of the reality" remains accessible to the victim of trauma.

The story of trauma is one of delayed impact- shocking and unexpected realities rising to

the surface long after the incident itself has passed. For instance, in the case of an accident, the

symptoms of the shock may manifest in the survivor several weeks after the accident. Trauma

tends to be recurring as the victim will often repeatedly relapse while recalling pain. This

recurrence of trauma is one of the most important parts of Freud's trauma theory. According to

Freud, most adult traumas are the result of childhood ones. Freud sometimes relegates such

traumatic memories to the realm of fantasy, considering certain memories as either

misunderstood or entirely imagined. Cathy Caruth's interpretation fills in many of the gaps in Freud's theory, but it also

criticizes it. Caruth declares, "trauma involves intense personal suffering, but it also involves the

recognition of realities that most of us have not begun to face" (Caruth, *Unclaimed* VII).

Her focus is on the "enduring and ultimately unknowable and inexpressible nature of

traumatic wounds (Daoudi 47). A traumatized person is like a new human being whose

experiences have been built upon the trauma itself. According to Caruth's version of trauma and

literature theory, the historical, social and cultural circumstances of the victim are important

factors in the development of this new self. It could be said that she wants to change the

definition of trauma as a very general phenomenon and break the taboos surrounding the

acceptance of previous trauma theories by injecting the crucial role of history and the role of the witness into the theory.

Cathy Caruth's main concern in trauma theory is survival and her personal history that she refers to as an "enigma of survival". She notes that the complex, nearly incomprehensible relationship between destructiveness and survival is traumatic experience itself. In other words, traumatic experience is a name given to this relationship. Once the "enigmatic" nature of this relationship is realized only then might the observer appreciate the incomprehensibility of catastrophic experience as well. The heart of this human experience is unknown and indecipherable for the survivor. In her *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, and History* (1996),

Cathy Caruth analyzes literary works from the perspective of psychological traumas. This methodology will be used by the researcher in the present article. "The study of psychological trauma must constantly contend with this tendency to discredit the victim or to render her invisible" (Herman 5)

In Caruth's works, history, international history, the historical situation of the victim and the question of history are each basic elements of her theory. The survivor of trauma has at once encountered death and survived it at the same time. Not only the death of others but also survival itself and escaping death that result in flashbacks and repetition. If we consider history to be the history of trauma, it then follows that it is the survivor's eternal striving to understand his own survival. "for history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the

extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence" (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 18).

Trauma, History and Latency on Women

There exist in the human psyche disorders that history and latency bring into existence. The victim cannot escape them, she continues her life without knowing about residue of the traumatic situation in her mind. There are a lot of differences between Zimbabwe before the independence and after independence. Thandabantu Store was one of the most important places in the novel, and has vanished after the independence, there is nothing more than a memory of the store. So what will remain of the store and the people? What will the reader know about it? The only record of the Store is the narrator's speeches about it. This is so because there is no such place anymore. We have just a memory of Thandabantu Store, now "What is left of Thandabantu Store are the memories, now distant, though the stretch of time is brief; so much else has consumed memory, the present overwhelms the past and the future" (Vera, *The Stone* 90).

The reader does not know whether the memories are reliable or not. There is no trace of Kezi or Thandabantu store on the earth after the war. We just know them through the narrator's descriptions. They were just a part of a history of which no tangible trace remains. Perhaps it was all just a hallucination. "Kezi is a naked cemetery," she says. "Is this not what everyone is calling Kezi, a naked cemetery where no one is buried and everyone is betrayed (Vera, *The*

Stone 110).

Nothing is permanent as a matter of fact Vera says “dream begets dream” (9) and in the

following sentences, she says “Smoke burns on an evening and buries talk and blinds the view.”

Voices of black people are depicted as a “blue voice”. Overall they are sad, aimless and hopeless

people. There are masses who live in darkness and silence in the novel. “In *The Stone Virgins*,

Vera represents a historiography that has marginalized and erased women’s histories from the

patriarchal grand narratives of their national liberation history” (Armstrong, 245). This

novel exposes the hidden reality of Zimbabwean war or, perhaps more accurately, she rewrites

Zimbabwe’s liberation history.

Women do the same things after the independence as before the independence and

although they strived hard to have an independent country, there is no special change in the

society and people’s personality. They continue to live their previous life.

The choice of the

author to describe the flag as “flapping” rather than simply “moving” is telling: The sentence “a

flag for a new nation” could be read as meaning “a flag fit for this new nation”, in other words,

that the flag’s condition reflects that of Zimbabwean society itself, insecure,

unstable, dithering

and unsure of itself.

The Stone Virgins has two main female characters who both live with traumatized minds.

The novel is about Zimbabwe, before and after the independence war. The characters of the

novel are victims of English colonizers’ authority. They cannot find themselves and

although their bodies become free after the independence war, their minds remain colonized. The

colonizers instilled a deep sense of inferiority in the Zimbabwean people’s minds which echoed

for many years after they gained their independence. The lasting ramifications of the

psychological damage suffered by the characters of *The Stone Virgins* are rooted in their culture

and historical background: the independence war is not the only war that Zimbabwean people have experienced.

The title of the novel *The Stone Virgins* is related to women’s sacrifice in pre-colonial

times in Zimbabwe. There are the images of the sacrificed women in the rock paintings of a

cave in Kezi. Vera believes these women are not different than the women who sacrificed their

lives in the liberation war. This is a product of the history of Zimbabwean women for they just

sacrificed themselves for a king or a war or whatever else rather than living for themselves.

They do not consider themselves as a part of the world. And it continues until the present where

we have only the repetition of these sacrifices. It is a part of the forgotten history of Zimbabwe.

This is the collective history of the Zimbabwean women, a history which causes dissociative

disorders in the women’s memory and does not allow them to have a connected memory,

identity, and agency in their everyday lives. The belated effects of trauma control their

lives.

Women are victims and they do not have the ability to resist the cruel master in *The*

Stone Virgins. This could only have this ability if a new culture and values took root in their

society. “Indeed, in all of Vera’s novels, death is determined by the colonial, patriarchal structure

of culture and stylistically transformed into what we may describe as a groundless foundation for the possibility of life and a culture otherwise" (Topper 29). According to Vera black

female characters can only have one form self-representation, namely one which is dominated by death.

The title of the novel is inspired by an ancient Zimbabwean history in which young

women were sacrificed to accompany a king into his afterlife. The image is present in the stones

of caves that Vera speaks about several times in the novel. The images on the stone show the

women who were in the same position as that of the women of sacrificed in the war. female

sacrifice is rooted in their tradition and their society accepts it and lives with this way of

thinking. Even when there was no war Zimbabwean women were sacrificed for the dead

king. In *The Stone Virgins*, when Sibaso killed Thenjiwe near the hill, her blood floated

on stones. Stone plays a prominent role in the novel because they symbolize the masses of

women who were sacrificed for the pleasure of a man. Their blood, Her blood, has shaped the

new pictures on the stones. The writer speaks about the hill and the stones in this part of the

novel with intensely. Vera writes the history of the wretched women here and the latency that

the women experience at the time of rape and death.

In previous centuries, women were sacrificed for the dead king. But time has caused

those memories to fade to the point where the sacrifices are all but forgotten. Now, centuries

later, the cave again seems to demand the sacrifice of women. The suffering of the people never

disappeared- it only became latent, sleeping for a time, until it again woke.

The suffering of

Nonceba and Thenjiwe isn't an isolated incident. It is a reflection of a kind of institutional

trauma, a suffering which is never completely eliminated, in which society pushes aside the

memories of suffering, burying them and trying to forget them, only for them to rise again,

tormenting it forever, much as an individual's trauma cycles endlessly, allowing no respite.

Nonceba's name is reminiscent of the name Nehanda - the symbol of Zimbabwean

resistance against the English colonial power. Is Nonceba a new version of Nehanda in the

novel? The author seems to draw a deliberate similarity between Nonceba and Nehanda as two

Zimbabwean women who are victims of war. Although Nehanda was hanged by English

colonizers in 1898, she is alive in the mind of the Zimbabwean people. They are fully aware of

her death and her sacrifice. After many years she begins her life anew in Nonceba. Vera seems

to intend that Nonceba be a new Nehanda for the reader.

In the case of some women, who are alive but they reproach themselves for being alive

and the death of others. After independence the role of women changed in the society. There

were female soldiers in the independence war of Zimbabwe. Vera is aware of the contradictions

between these females and the others. She speaks about some women who want to do certain

things, but cannot and know not what to do. She says "The women want to take the day into their

own arms and embrace it, but how? To embrace the land and earth, the horizon, and triumph?"

(Vera, *The Stone* 39)

They were once resigned to despair but can now taste hope again. "The women

want to take the time of resignation, of throbbing fears, and declare this to a vanished day"

(Vera, *The Stone* 39). These women want to forget their indecision and doubts. The question that

Must be asked is about what were indecisive and doubtful? From where did these stem? Did they

have before? Hesitancy about what? They are witnesses to the war, they witnessed death, so how

can they be expected to continue experiencing life after death? Are they still alive? Or did they

die while undergoing their ordeal? Is it even possible for them to live the lives they once had? So

they cannot have the life they had before. They think back to years when they were deaf to cries

for help, killing actively while not realizing that they themselves were being victimized

passively.

Consequently, they feel guilty for being alive and want to forget everything. Vera says

they want to "forget the hesitant moment, death, the years of deafness and struggle?" (Vera, *The*

Stone 39) They have also "the memory of departed sons" (Vera, *The Stone* 39) these

have haunted them and they cannot get free themselves of them, despite their wish that they

would vanish as surely as night turns to day. They buried their sons, how can they endure this

life?

After all the events transpired Vera believes "nothing moves. The rocks remain

solid as ever; the boulders are still. Not different." (Vera, *The Stone* 39). Rocks symbolize

women in *The Stone Virgins*. The narrator displays an aversion to the silent personalities of the

women in the novel. These traumatized women are silent, muted and this silence does not allow

them freedom. Vera describes an unnamed woman who lives like a robot and engages in

automatic behavior. She says:

A woman tugs a short skirt downward to cover her knees. Her panty hose is laddered

nylon all the way to the heels, but who is checking in this kind of half dark, half love;

she just wants the feeling of panty hose, if nothing else. She moves her waist, and the

nylon stretches from her waist all the way to her toes (Vera, *The Stone* 9).

She is concerned only with her appearance, but she wants to think of herself as a person who is

not. Like many other victims of war, she has lost all of her relatives and friends. This loss of

personal connection leaves some people unable to love and to make new friends. This woman

is such a person. Since our only insight into the woman's thoughts is through the eyes of the

narrator, we know little about her other than that "she just wants the feeling of panty hose." But

this is hardly a uniquely identifying description- there are a lot of women desiring panty hose in

her society and she is not the war's only victim. Indeed, there are many poor people in her

world, and the presence of traumatized people in such a society is not rare. Vera uses this

nameless woman as a stand-in for the many people who have suffered similarly- people who,

through the loss they have experienced, have lost the ability to feel and have become

automatons. Vera does not sugarcoat their situation- she makes it clear that these people are

damaged and will likely never recover. She "refuses to romanticize the past or to underwrite its

ability to provide full recovery to traumatized subjects. And then into her complex treatment of time are so intermingled regional, social, and cultural diversities” (Driver & Samuelson 177).

Nonceba lives with her dead sister. She sees her face. She believes nothing can separate them from each other. “She is whispering to Thenjiwe, waking her, telling her that she is not alone; they have died together; they are sisters.” (Vera, *The Stone* 69) Nonceba cannot

determine whether she herself is alive or dead. She cannot recognize the boundary between her and her dead sister. She cannot believe she is alive. She encounters death and cannot live after

the occurrence. How is it possible for a dead person to continue her life? At other times,

Nonceba thinks that Thenjiwe is alive and they both live together.

Nonceba’s dazed mind cannot comprehend her own existence. Is she dead or is she

alive? Nonceba says: “I am alive: I will bury my sister with my own hands. I will live. I crawl. I

look for Thenjiwe. I scramble across the ground” (Vera, *The Stone* 79). She wants to talk about

the reality of her sister’s death, but she feels confused. She is not certain even about the reality of

her life. She thinks of Sibaso as the darkest creature in the world. She lives with him at all times-

she thinks about him constantly. While Sibaso does not physically live with her, he dwells in her

memory and causes deep stress for her. Nonceba cannot allow herself to believe that she has rid

herself of him while remaining alive herself. In her mind, she dies several times each day. She

says, “I hear him throughout this journey, and underneath it all, a part of me wants to stay awake,

and hear him. It is a long time before I realize that I do not need to keep on saying quietly to

him, “Let me go . . . Let me go.” (Vera, *The Stone* 81-82) During those times when she believes

that she is alive, she speaks to Sibaso. “Psychic impact of rape and violence, especially as

manifested in the suppression of the female victim’s voice and memory” (Nyambi 1) is a

problem shared by the female characters of the novel.

Stone and Silence

According to a clinical professor in Yale University’s Department of Psychiatry, Dori Laub,

speaking about a traumatic situation is an important part of the process of healing the

traumatized survivor. In the psychoanalytical system, silence and muteness are part of the

negative sphere. Most researchers argue that silence aggravates the impact of trauma, so patients

should “break the silence”. Various reasons for victims’ silence exist, a sense of moral obligation

being prominent among them.

Silence of female protagonists is a sophisticated and complicated binary construction.

“an impossibility to express the experience, coupled with a psychological and moral obligation to

do so.” (Horowitz 16). Defense mechanisms of survival like introjection, projection and

states of drive are the fatal fruits of cultural, social, spiritual paradigms and history. Indeed,

silence is a type of self-repression and denial in facing the traumatic situation. The prevalence of

repression and denial is indisputable in many mental patients.

The demand for women to be silent is a part of society’s framework. Women are

expected to keep quiet, and breaking social norms invariably results in some sort of punishment for the women- either directly, through aggression, or indirectly, through isolation and lack of support. In Nonceba's case, the assault is direct and brutal: she studies and tries to learn to speak as an educated person, and for her trouble, she is raped by Sibaso. The experience crushes her forcing her back into the role of silent victim that society demanded of her. The silence forced upon female characters in the novel exacerbates their mental disorders. The characters are victims of both physical violence and emotional oppression. Throughout her suffering, Nonceba never resists. She "Does not look at him. Her face is turned from him. She is silent, without worth, with nothing precious but time. She is nothing to him. An aftermath to desire" (Vera, *The Stone* 51). A man raped her, but she remained silent. The numbing suffered by victims of violence can leave them devoid of will, unable to move or even speak.

She suffers through the two wars depicted in the novel: the war of Independence and the war of her patriarchal society against women. Nonceba is the victim of both, and ultimately more object than obstacle and never a person. She feels nothing but insignificance. To Sibaso, "she is only a dot in his mind. Something that can vanish" (Vera, *The Stone* 52). When she is raped, her "memory slips; red, mud, dead" (Vera, *The Stone* 55). Nonceba says "he cut smoothly away. He had memorized parts of me. Shape and curve; lips unspoken" (Vera, *The Stone* 58). She cannot speak: she is becoming numb. She is silent because she believes that speaking up will only make

things worse.

The feeling of suffocating helplessness overwhelms Nonceba. "She is mute. A voice dying. Unable to shape words into language, to breathe freely. She will have to find the sources of sound inside her, a pure and timeless sound. Then she will open her mouth and let the sound free. Words will flow, then language" (Vera, *The Stone* 65). She feels dehumanized, accepting herself as an animal. She "thinks of the language of animals, which has no words but memory" (Vera, *The Stone* 65). She loses all of her volition, becoming nothing more than a collection of her traumatic memories. Although animals do not suffer traumatic memories in the same way that humans do, *The Stone Virgins* makes it clear that victims have been made to seem less than human. Though the traumatic situation itself has passed, the memories remain, their haunting immediacy rendering her mute, isolating her to the point where her trauma cannot be treated.

Nonceba wants to speak, but she cannot overcome the habit of a lifetime of being silenced: "I try to speak. I try hard to move my lips. I want to tell them everything I have seen.

The water falling from the bucket that Thenjiwe was carrying. The sliding mud, red with blood.

The man, Sibaso. I do not know. I want to describe him, each word he spoke, each strand of hair, his violent contempt of the living. I want to speak (Vera, *The Stone* 80) Nonceba knows it is

good for her to talk, but she cannot. The eternal and dark silence is the reason for her mental problems. Sihle helps Nonceba to understand "she is safe" but Nonceba is not able to speak. She

says that although there are a lot of words in her mind she forgets the names of things, people and objects. She feels numb. She says "my entire face is swollen, and it throbs. The skin on it pulls down and tightens; then my words quickly withdraw. My mouth has no words, shriveled.

The thread going in and out of me will eventually fall off (Vera, *The Stone* 87).

She is silent, she does not have any voice. She cannot hear even her own voice. This voiceless character is the victim of her own muteness. She says "I test my ability to speak. I have not heard my own voice for so long. A sound moves from the bottom of my chest, rises to my throat. A grating, flaking sound, like a cough. I close my mouth, breathing deeply in, till my words dissolve" (Vera, *The Stone* 87). The silence of women is sometimes the product of the values of their societies. Women who live in traditional societies are more affected by traumatic situations because the forces of society do not allow them to talk. Their society does not accept the reality of women's problems, so women prefer to be silent rather than condemning themselves to a lifetime of derision from their community. "In order to get over the traumatic experience, both individuals and communities must engage in a process of mourning. Voicing the trauma and accepting it as an undeniable part of the past is the only way out of the paralyzing suffering" (Toivanen 5).

This cultural dynamic of society is the reason for many women's silence. If Nonceba wants to talk about her rape, the taboos of the society do not let her do so, so she suffers in isolation after her rape, deprived of a network of emotional support. This inability to share their PTSD makes

women's experience very different from that of men. Women's biological systems are not comparable to those of men. Here Nonceba is a female victim who is the victim not just of war, but also of the culture in which she finds herself. If she were to speak about her issue, she would not suffer the same stifling numbness. When the society she came back to after the war still treats her as a soldier and not as an

ordinary member of the society, she will never break her silence. Her new society she came back to after cease fire does not consider both genders as equal members of society and with equal roles. Her new society treats men and women differently although they are all human beings who should be treated equally. Without focusing on the gender of the victim, as a society we should listen to the individual who is in this case is traumatized and a survivor of the war.

Thenjiwe, who in the past has always been silent, breaks her silence for the first time by crying hysterically. Thenjiwe is a passive character, passive not only after her death, but also in her romantic relationship. While alive she is voiceless, but after her death, she speaks with Nonceba frequently. At one point in the novel she decides to speak to Nonceba about her relationship with Capes, but before she can do so, Sibaso brutally murders her. The murder occurs near the cave and the Kokhe river- exactly at the place that virgins were sacrificed for the pleasure of a dead king in previous centuries. She is haunted by her impotence as a black woman, as a virgin. She is killed by Sibaso for no reason but his pleasure. After Zimbabwe achieves independence, the role of women changes in their society.

Women fought in the independence war. Vera is aware of the contradictions between these women and the women who did not fight. She talks about female soldiers, saying that they “expect sudden and spectacular fissures on the rocks” (Vera, *The Stone* 39). They are different women now. They are not solid stones anymore. Vera describes how they are different:

They will not die from the accumulation of bitter histories, the dreams of misfortune, the evenings of wonder and dismay, which should have already killed them. The echoes from Gulati, which should have already killed them. The despondency, to tremble when a door is tightly shut, when it opens wide. A door, a mind. The dust turning into vapor above the distant rocks, which should have destroyed their minds but did not (Vera, *The Stone* 40).

They are the positive characters of the novel and the symbols of resistance and hope.

They are people of strength. They question things around them because they do not accept the so-called norms of society. They are women who are not afraid of anything. They are the only characters of the novel who can do whatever they want without any fear.

These women are fighters. There is no difference between them and the men around them. Their behavior is in contrast to those of the silent, traditional women. They perform all the roles which are traditionally not the province of women. These women continue to wear their military clothes- including the boots- even though there has been a cease-fire. They move around with their guns. Vera describes them as soldiers who still live in the bush, although no

one is fighting anyone anymore.

After the war, each of these women returns to a society which still treats her as a soldier rather than an ordinary member of the society. She feels set apart from other people. She will never break her silence. She is unused to this new community which does not consider both genders as equal members of society and with equal roles. Her new society treats men and women differently, although now she sees that they are all human beings who should be treated equally. Without focusing on the gender of the victim, we as a society should listen to each individual person who is suffering- in this case the traumatized survivor of the war. Without listening, without communication, it is difficult for these women to become part of society again.

The returned soldiers have become accustomed to a military way of life. They cannot live as they did before they joined the war. They are changed- they expect freedom and equality, but also, they have experienced deep sorrow, and their eyes view the world through veils of profound sadness. They are no longer models for other women to follow. They say very little and do not condemn or discuss anything. They shy away from people. The ceasefire which brought them home from the war and the bush has left them between worlds, neither part of a war nor part of the peace, and they drift, unanchored, through the world. Although women soldiers are free, but they are silent like the other women. Although the female soldiers are free, and they are changed, they are still silent like the other women. The reader does not hear voices from them. They walk about in their army

uniforms, trying to speak to the normal people, but they are rejected and ostracized. They do not complain. They just go away. They have fought for their country, but now they are surprised to learn that they are not part of its society anymore “The young women abandon their age mates who are afraid to be with them in quiet places” (Vera , *The Stone* 40). Men look at them, wondering, considering them strange. The men stay away from them, but it seems that nothing disturbs them. When they go to the Thandabantu Store, they smoke under the marula tree. They sit on empty boxes like men and look at the sun. Being in the Thandabantu Store is different from being in the bush. Yet their reaction to the sun is the same. They even forget whether they are female or male. They know they are wounded, but they do not know about the essence of their wounds.

The men who shop at the Thandabantu Store have seen the sun rise and set for several years, and now they hear some things about the bush war. They now watch these women instead of the sun with wonder. The men know that these women are not the same as the other village women. These women can do anything necessary to hold a gun in their hands. Their breasts belong to the gun, not a baby. The women have survived darkness and its threatening emptiness. The women are alive after the war and now they are the key witnesses of the war, the war which made them courageous. They are alive and now think about the past and its secrets. The way they look at the world is different since they suffer from many invisible wounds. They are no longer easy with men, and often, there is dead silence in men’s company.

“The women of color have challenged the assumptions held by white feminist theories”

(Brown 59-60). Zimbabwean female soldiers are black women who break the authority of white dominant masculine society. They are doubly disrespected, as blacks and as women, yet they have resisted with determination. Their reaction to the war has been influenced by two major factors: the first, gender, and the second, skin color. They defeated the white authority, but the patriarchal system remains and as black women they continue to be marginalized. Even they are outcast from society.

The relevance of these black women is ignored not only by society, but neither also by trauma and PTSD studies. In fact, most investigations have been focused on white, middle class, male soldiers, and there are few traces of black female soldiers in the research. Culture is a very important factor in the survivor’s reaction to a traumatic situation. Although the black female soldiers are free from the traditional roles of women in the society, they, too, have been silenced.

They are witnesses to the war, but we do not know what they did in the war. Even the novel’s author never shifts her focus to the point of the view of the female soldiers. None of their names are mentioned. The author describes them there, continuing to wear their military uniforms in public and lacking all sense of femininity, but provides the reader with no insight into their feelings and memories.

After all of the events of the novel, Vera believes that nothing has changed. She sums it up thus: “Nothing moves. The rocks remain solid as ever; the boulders are still. Not different.”

(Vera, *The Stone* 39). These rocks, which symbolize women in *The Stone Virgins*, are silent and unresponsive. The narrator does not treat such silent personalities kindly in her novel. These traumatized women are silent, muted, and this silence does not allow them freedom.

Conclusion

Vera's depiction of females in the Zimbabwean civil war in *The Stone Virgins* "explored the histories of physical and sexual victimization reported by women and sought to identify the survival strategies women activated at various points in their lifespan" (Postmus and Severson

3). The female characters are examples of the treatment of women in the war. The

aftermath of war on women shows how the pressure of history weighs upon them. In *The Stone*

Virgins women are silent, prevented from expressing their trauma by the expectations that their

society has on women. Their history and their society turn them into lonely outcasts, unable to

find a place in the world. The novel focuses on these two transforming factors, history and

trauma, especially as it weighs upon women.

The change of women's place in society due to their experiences in war causes some

difficulties in a world which is inflexible about women's roles. "As in all wars, many women

during the war were the victims of rape. Their numbers are estimated at several tens of

thousands, and ... these crimes made headlines less often than the mass murders" (Bayard 117).

The changes in national borders and values have already been well-documented in

other literature, but Vera helps focus on how women, a crucial component of society's fabric,

have changed in a way which forces changes to society itself. These changes can often go unnoticed, but Vera draws attention to the very real changes in these women through her frank

and touching narration. The trauma suffered by women and the damage to their psyches result in

dramatically changed personalities, making it difficult for them to fit into their previous gender

roles. But at the same time the inertia of history and society expectations make it impossible for

them to accept the changes to themselves. The way that the weight of their personal experiences,

national history, and societal expectations scar their personalities informs all of Vera's writing.

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