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The Nation and the Subaltern in Yvonne Vera's *Butterfly Burning*

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Yvonne Vera's death in 2005 brought to a tragic close the career of one of Zimbabwe's, indeed Africa's, more engaging contemporary writers. But her powerful novel, *Butterfly Burning* continues to mirror an aspect of Vera's enduring concern: the place of African women in the context of power both within the colonial and the postcolonial moments. This image of the "woman in shadows" also resonates in the kernel of the subaltern subject in Spivak's essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" I draw from Spivak's canonical essay, but simply as a critique of its notion of the burdened subjectivity of the colonized reified in the widow's self-immolation, and seen as a problematic condition of representation—a form of impotent silence. In contrast, I suggest that Vera's Phephelaphi directs our attention by a votive suicide that speaks. This essay thus proceeds from a re-reading of the discourse of subalternity to situate Yvonne Vera's novel as an act primarily of resistance against the situation of patriarchal enclosure under colonialism. **Keywords:** colonialism, melancholia, nation, patriarchy, subaltern.

Yvonne Vera belongs to that generation of Zimbabwean writers who emerged on the scene of African literature from the 1980s and the early 1990s following Zimbabwean independence in 1980 and the end of the second Chimurenga. This fact provides an important context to the shape of her imagination. Among the better known of this generation that includes Dambudzo Marachera, Tsitsi Dangaremba, Charles Mungoshi and Chenjerai Hove, Yvonne Vera's work navigates what might seem to be a fictional crossroads—what critics like Liz Gunner and Neil Kortenaar have described as anti-nationalist nationalism—a revisioning or a refashioning of history away from the nationalist historiography or ideology of much of Zimbabwean collective resistance aesthetics. "It is possible," they write, "to read this antinationalism as a feminist rewriting of patriarchal nationalist history" (2). For Gunner and Kortenaar, Vera's work transforms the dominant "African nationalist imaginary," the locus, in their reading, of much of Africa's literary and aesthetic production into a covert critique of Zimbabwe's post liberation situation—a sort of radical ambivalence.

While not necessarily disputing the validity of their claims, I wish to argue in this essay, for a more complex reading of Yvonne Vera's *Butterfly Burning*, by situating the central character, Phephelaphi in her subaltern location or role, and by suggesting that Vera envisions tragedy within a specific form of patriarchy—colonial patriarchy—

in *Butterfly Burning*. That dimension does exist certainly in Vera's interrogation, through Phephelaphi's tragedy, of the limits of female autonomy and the validity of individual action in the struggle against dominant systems of power. Phephelaphi's tragedy—or what Eleni Coundouriotis calls her “self-inflicted wounds” (64)—thus further opens the discussion about the nature of the female voice in modern African literature; about its possibilities particularly in closing or bridging the gap in the two dimensions of order between the public and personal spheres of the African experience where tragedy happens. This paper therefore raises a number of rhetorical problems: Does Phephelaphi's subjective reality and Fumbutha's obsessive possessiveness truly refract pictures or images of the subject of colonialism and neo-colonial machinations? Does Phephelaphi's tragedy mirror the larger tragedy of the subject of nation within the colonial and postcolonial context? Tragedy may after all be that quiet accident that happens in the quiet bend by the road in a vast and indifferent universe—a situation—according to Gyatari Spivak, of subalternity. In other words in her self-immolation, does Phephelaphi speak for the marginalized often rendered permanently peripheral and invisible by structures of power and mastery or does she act merely for her lone subaltern self? In fact, how precisely does that subaltern—the woman in the nation during and after colonialism speak? How does the urban lyric form—precisely Kwela music—provide that expressive voice for the subaltern?

This paper explores these issues by examining how Yvonne Vera's novel contends with the idea of the colonized female body. The paper reflects on aspects of what Grace Musila, writing in a different context on Vera, has aptly suggested to be the embodied ideological implications “between the corporeality of the body, the lived experience of discursive structures in women's lives, and how these frame women's agency” (50) in Yvonne Vera's fiction. Musila's perspective is particularly helpful here in the sense of its reflections on the materiality of the female body within a “gender exclusionary urban economy” (58) in which Vera stages Phephelaphi's tragedy under colonialism. Musila's position basically amplifies my own claim that what has been described as Vera's oppositional nationalism anchors itself against colonial surveillance and its regulatory capacity.

Colonialism does indeed assert, as does Fumbutha in *Butterfly Burning*, an obsessive claim and mastery over the female body. It is a point which Cheryl Suzack particularly emphasizes, and from which we can draw a useful analogy for Vera's casting of Phephelaphi in *Butterfly Burning*. Suzack prefaces her essay “FAS and Cultural Discourse: Who speaks for the Native Women?” with an interesting story of the restraint imposed upon the female body by colonial law. The judge, Justice Perry Schilman of the Manitoba Court in Canada, had given orders forcing a “native woman” from the poor neighborhoods of Winnipeg city into a substance abuse treatment program. According to Suzack, the five-month pregnant woman, who already had three children, refused to enter the drug treatment program on her own volition in

spite of the efforts of officialdom, and the pressures exerted on her particularly by the Manitoba Department of Child and Family Services, who were worried about the safety of the foetus: “How many badly damaged children does a person have a right to bring in this world?” (145), they had reasoned. Using the aspect of the law called *parens patriae*, the judge—a male judge of course—ordered the “native” woman “into a drug treatment center for her own protection” (145). The issue raised in this narrative, far beyond the question of female autonomy and voice is for Suzack “a reminder of the implications of imperial governance” (Suzack 145) of the female body, or what could be considered the body politics implicit in the use of patriarchal law to regulate female autonomy.

In an important way, the theme of Yvonne Vera’s story, *Butterfly Burning* finds close connection with this example that Suzack’s narrative provides on the demands on the female body in Canada—which incidentally shares a colonial past or history with Zimbabwe. It raises the important question particularly of how the female body becomes the site of the anxieties of appropriation—both by nature and by patriarchal dimensions of order. It also raises the question of how narrative offers resistance—and by narrative here, I propose the forms of actions and voicing that resonate and emphasize the power of the female subject to exert mastery over the realities of her condition, either by telling her story or by acting out in resistance to the condition that circumscribe her in bold ways, as does Phephelaphi in her use of abortion and in her eventual suicide in *Butterfly Burning* (1998). Yvonne Vera’s novel locates the anguish and trauma of a young woman’s search for personal meaning and for a sense of her autonomy in colonial Rhodesia. The story details her “painful isolation” and her struggle to overcome the historical and emotional obstacles that undermine her humanity. *Butterfly Burning* indeed opens with a sense of the city; its colonial forced labor:

In the air the sound of a sickle cutting grass along the roadside where black men bend their backs in the sun and hum a tune, and fume, and lullaby”; and its Kwela music—“Kwela means to climb into the waiting police Jeeps. This word alone has been fully adapted to do marvelous things. It can carry so much more than a word should be asked to carry; rejection, distaste, surrender, envy. And full desire (6).

The connection between colonial labor and the city is inseparable as a metaphor of subjugation; it also organizes the necessary experiential bifurcation which is central to Vera’s narrative aim: Vera’s language is dense and allusive, wrought almost to the point of abstraction. But we can still peel through the nuance and layers of her narrative and thought. She accounts for Bulawayo as a city divided by its colonial history, and by desire; in which music becomes the trope of narrative memory. The connection to Bulawayo is important here, for within its context is the ultimate contradiction of the colonial state. Life is difficult, and the choices are limited for the blacks, the subalterns of Makokoba:

Bulawayo is not a city of idleness. The idea is to live within the cracks. Unnoticed and unnoticeable, offering every service but with the capacity to vanish when the task required is accomplished. So the black people learn how to move through the city with speed and due attention, to bow their heads down and slide past walls, to walk without making the shadow more pronounced than the body or the body clearer than the shadow. It means leaning against some masking reality—they lean on walls, on lies, on music. (7)

Two narratives are embedded in Vera's novel: the public—the narrative against colonialism—and the private: a love story in which the female character, unable to endure the restrictions placed upon her by traditional conventions or expectations, takes the path of resistance—by suicide. Each of these stories is connected by the dimension of *a priori* experiences which mark, or define, or shape the action of the novel—first, as a narrative of subjection and marginality, and secondly, as a psychological exploration of feminine abjection. In both contexts, the subaltern female voice seeks to assert and claim authority over her body. Phephelaphi's decision to pursue her ambition, to enter the nursing school, as the "first native" trainee nurse is the subtext of a broader narrative in which her lover, Fumbatha, sees her choice or decision as a rejection not only of his authority, but also of the land; as a compromise with the colonial system against which he too resists:

Fumbatha does not encourage her, instead, he reminds her of what they share. "We are happy together. I work. I take care of you. It is not necessary for you to find something else." He insists on her unwavering loyalty. He mistrusts the city which does not understand the sort of triumph a man and a woman can find and share in their solitude. Does no one know that he is willing to die on the palm of Phephelaphi's hand? (70)

But for Phephelaphi, who had received colonial missionary education, the issue is different, even complex; "it is not the being a nurse which matters, but the movement forward—the entrance into something untried" (71). It is about a complicated notion of progress which in itself is a form of resistance against colony; it is escape from the squalid confinements of colonial Bulawayo.

Phephelaphi grows up in the Makokobo township of Bulawayo and struggles within the limits imposed upon her by colonialism to apply, and to train as one of the first African nurses. Her ambition is thwarted by an unforeseen pregnancy on one hand, and by the colonial law that regulates the female body, as well as by the rejection of her lover, Fumbatha. But ultimately, as Ranka Primorac notes, in her search for freedom and agency, it is not Phephelaphi's mind, already "fully formed and free as a butterfly" (107) that betrays her, it is her body, that commodified and objectified site of pleasure and anxiety which betrays her. In the end, unable to overcome the rejection

both by the colonial state and by her lover, Phephelaphi first aborts the unborn child, and then subjects herself to immolation before Fumbatha who is forced to become the inexorable witness to her excruciating death.

Writing on African women's use of narrative, in that regard, to respond to the conditions of their historical subjection, Jane Bryce notes that the feminist voice is deployed principally as "an implicit assertion of distance from the nostalgia of origins, a recognition of the need for a revisioning of culture and their relationship to it from a postcolonial perspective" (620–21). In other words, the African feminist narrative becomes a tool not only for interrogating practices that marginalize or undermine women, but it also serves as a means of unveiling the silence placed upon the female voice through taboos, through technologies of power, and through the frequent representations of the anti-colonial movement as an epic of male heroism.

Yvonne Vera's story challenges this, specifically in the ways it enters into these realms or domain of the tabooed to speak out, and explore those areas that have usually remained uncharted and silenced in the narration of nation and national belonging. In her explication of the condition of colonial women in Zimbabwe, she affirms an alternative narrative. "She urges her readers to consider different forms of marginality, silencing, and violation, and insists on the need to hear the voices of those that are powerless and victimised [...] Her writing therefore opens up expansive visions of freedom and ever-widening paths of resistance" notes Desiree Lewis (73). The postcolonial feminist novel as a subaltern narrative is thus constituted as a representational discourse, which marks a canonical departure. It enables the female subject of the novel to speak for herself, against the codes of law, convention, culture, and other forms of authority which makes the subject unable to be fully symbolically constituted, in what Spivak calls "subject-constitution" (276). The Feminist novel affirms the condition in which a woman is finally able to represent herself "as an autonomous subject" who does not "self-efface to avoid emerging as the subject of imperial law" (Suzack 146). At this point I should enter a cautionary note that much of this engendered discourse flows from mostly European and American critiques of the postcolonial African female subject. It is important to see some of the unquestionable ironies in the representational politics or aesthetics of feminism as Desiree Lewis notes in her own critique of its implications:

The mainstream literary tradition in which many African women writers are read and marketed usually places undue emphasis on the difficult circumstances of their lives. Reflecting stereotypes about hopeless victimisation of marginalised people, this tradition also fixates on the tragic circumstances of their deaths. This is well illustrated in the case of another southern African woman writer, Bessie Head, whose writing is often believed to testify straightforwardly to her painful exile, illness, social alienation, poverty and early death at the age of 48. In the wake of Vera's death, it is disturbing to consider that this writer too might be popularly cast

mainly as a poignant victim of Zimbabwean politics, of patriarchal nationalism, of disease. While Vera's writing strongly condemns gendered, racial and postcolonial injustices, her literary vision has always been richly productive. In paying tribute to an artist whose work demonstrates such breadth, I want to recall the enduring power of her work and ideas about artistic creation. (Lewis 72)

I quote Lewis at some length here to underscore the danger of over-emphasizing and particularizing female subjectivity in postcolonial narrative over the more important condition of the material history from which that experience flows. It is a point which Julia C. Wells makes equally well when she writes on the representation of African women in the historiography of empire. Wells argues for an alternative view that registers the agency of African women in their resistance or "sabotage of patriarchy" in Zimbabwe, against more popular notions of their powerlessness: "A much stronger sense of women's rebelliousness appears in studies from Zimbabwe," she writes, "which suggests that women actively *accelerated* the processes of change, motivated not only by socio-economic context, but also by negative reactions to facets of the patriarchal order" (102). Wells's study clearly illuminates the social context that generates the topos of *Butterfly Burning*. Rebellion by Zimbabwean women against patriarchy under colonialism was clearly active and self-conscious and may as well have given rise to Vera's reconstruction of Phephelaphi's fierce rebellion and acts of defiance. It is in that sense that I find Chidi Okonkwo warning of the danger of the "crippling baggage of ethnocentrism, and the [...] shibboleth (that) marks feminist discourse in Africa as part of a 'neo-colonialist aggression'" (11) valid. In some ways, Okonkwo's statement is both a critique and an adumbration of the point made by Spivak that "western intellectual production is, in many ways, complicit with Western International Economic Interests" (271) in its critique of non-western forms of production. Spivak suggests that the "first world intellectual"—in this case the feminist scholar, or theorist, or writer, especially of the west or trained in the west is unable to fully, and authentically account for, or represent the subaltern subject of the colonial or postcolonial periphery. In short according to Spivak, "the first world intellectual masquerades as the absent non-representor who lets the oppressed speak for themselves" (292) while in actual fact, Spivak declares, "the subaltern cannot speak" (308).

The Subaltern subject, the embodiment of "desire and power" like Phephelaphi in Vera's novel, is thus maintained discursively in Spivak's terms as "the exemplum of the woman-in-imperialism" (307), muted and confined within the metaphor of intolerable silence, because "there is no space from which the sexed subaltern can speak" (Spivak 307). Subaltern silence, in Spivak's term, and in the sense in which many western critics of the African feminist novel see it, occurs largely because of that space of historical denegation in which they place the subaltern. Spivak indeed says that, "the figure of the woman disappears into a violent shuttling which is the displaced

figuration of the “third-world woman” caught between tradition and modernization” (306). There is slipperiness in Gyatari Spivak’s theoretical reevaluation of female agency as subaltern. The slipperiness resides in what I sense to be its strategy of deliberate theoretical inversion of the figure of the “Third world woman.” In a fundamental sense, Spivak misreads Bhunaveswari’s action, blinding in its symbolic fury, and in its forceful and equifinal choice unveiled in her letter or suicide note, as both an act of resistance and autonomy; a willingness to speak by signifying, as does Phephelaphi, through recourse to ritual suicide. Such an act is a full statement in itself—it is her defiance of patriarchal and colonial law. The subaltern speaks, after all, symbolically.

Phephelaphi’s choice of death thus resonates in Spivak’s question in her essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988). Beyond the significant question of how to “render visible the mechanism through which the “Third World” is made “recognizable” and “assimilable” to a first world audience” (Suzack 147) which Yvonne Vera’s story obviously raises, there is the other equally important challenge of how female subjectivity is enacted in the novel, and how Phephelaphi’s tragedy is made visible by both the narrative act and by the blinding act of the self-willed seppuku. Yvonne Vera’s explorations—her questioning of the colonial situation, and the ways in which this condition affects her femininity approximates the conditions so admirably conveyed in Spivak’s figuration of the subaltern figure. Phephelaphi’s experience within the novel set against the condition of colonial Bulawayo is thus interwoven, and connected to a thorough critique of colonialism, especially in its context as patriarchy. She casts a harsh and penetrating gaze at colonial and postcolonial female subjectivity by exposing the challenges of subalternity in the vivid and unstable lives of the main characters, the drama of whose tragic inscription in that condition of history is heightened through a highly experiential narrative voice. We feel the brutal dimension of irrevocable consequences powerfully conveyed by Phephelaphi’s will to death.

The interstice between patriarchy and colonialism is therefore clearly established in the discourse of nation in Vera’s novel, in so far as the colonized is seen as the metonym of marginality inscribed in the powerlessness of the feminized body in *Butterfly Burning*. The novel very consciously shows how a postcolonial feminist novelist like Vera, uses her profuse narrative power to reconstruct the experience of women under colonialism. It is necessary certainly to situate colonialism as a repressive order defined by 19th century patriarchal nationalism. Colonial discourse theory is useful in so far as it provides us with a discursive tactic in grasping the narrative situation of *Butterfly Burning*. My main concern however is to briefly outline colonialisms conceptual and operative principles as both a spatial and psychic phenomenon, rather than generate any deeper analysis of colonialism and colonial theory. The discourse of colonialism has been framed variously as a form of hegemony (Mamdani 1996, Chatterjee 1989); as a form of psychal displacement—with its interstitial,

liminal and hybridizing potentials (Bhabha); as an imperial discourse of power and domination (Said), and even as a form of colonial desire (Young). As a form of patriarchy it reifies a territorial condition of which Foucault writes, is “absolutely incompatible with the relations of sovereignty [...] and is more dependent upon bodies and what they do than upon the Earth and its products” (104). This colonial fascination with the subaltern body is regulated by its coercive laws, and not only produces the “heterogeneous other,” the “subsistence farmers, unorganized peasant labor, the tribals, and the communities of zero workers on the street or in the countryside” (Spivak 288), but also “the woman [...] doubly in shadow” (Spivak 307)—who is the subject of desire and power. We see all these in *Butterfly Burning*, set in colonial Rhodesia of the 1940s, now Zimbabwe, in the black township of Makokoba, the ghetto section of segregated Bulawayo.

Phephelaphi’s self-directed act of highly ritualized violence compels us to examine the historical condition, which forces her to her choices. William Connolly especially notes the visible connections between the subject and the nation in his *Political Theory and Modernity*, and as noted by Schultheis, how each is constituted in modernity as “the privileged site of agency” (3): “The constitution of subjectivity and national identity though a shared symbolic order and their dependence upon one another keep their competition in check in order to maintain ideological continuity” (Connolly 3).

This inseparable matrix between the nation and the subject furthered by the desire to shape a “discourse of nationalism that generates newly imagined communities” (7) provides us with the discursive tool to examine the postcolonial subject such as Vera’s characters in *Butterfly Burning*. Schulteis discloses two processes by which we can examine this subject: one is to look at the historical and political dimension which shapes the colonial subject, and the other way is to examine the psychological distinction which frames the subject of the colonial and postcolonial novel. From the political imperative comes the question of how the “state experienced as an external entity, understood to act upon the self, but not yet understood to enter internally into the very constitution of the self and the ethical life which holds the totality together” (Connolly 118)—constructs the site of identity to which the colonial/postcolonial subject relinquishes “a measure of their intrinsic sovereignty” (12). For example, Phephelaphi’s body (pregnancy) is controlled by the colonial state, in that sense of Gramsci’s description of hegemony, which circumscribes the subaltern subject. The psychoanalytic imperative on the other hand, produces the internal disruptions often expressed in the subject’s recourse to idealizing the body image as a form of self-identification. In *Butterfly Burning*, Phephelaphi, the subaltern subject under that condition of segregation yields to melancholia, which produces schism and leads, inexorably, to her suicide.

Butterfly Burning is indeed a powerful critique of colonialism and its regulatory power over the subaltern subject, whose subjectivity is made profoundly vivid in the

links between the colonial state and Phephelaphi's tragedy. Yvonne Vera powerfully examines the defiance against the colonial economy, and its forms of order and authority. Phephelaphi's unwillingness to succumb to the regulatory codes of colonial power, or live with her rejection by Fumbatha demonstrates the will to sabotage colonial patriarchy. To Fumbatha the aborted child is more important than the white man's career with its sources in the missionary school. Yet the narrative enacts potential sites of ambiguity—for instance in the difficult choice that Phephelaphi is forced to make between a traditional relationship and domesticity, and advancement within the colonial public order: subalternity is thus constituted as the disruption of forms of stable female identity (the impact of the city on women made lonely by war). In short, the colonial encounter is a destructive encounter in *Butterfly Burning*. The social and historical context of Bulawayo as Vera's mirror of colonial society yields her notion of the subaltern subject—the silence that defines the figures in the novel as well as their struggle to establish agency beyond the invisibility imposed on them by colonialism—which Vera tries to unveil through her searing narrative.

In the end, Phephelaphi embodies this struggle in an important way, especially in her confrontation with both the public and the private spheres of her marginality. Through Phephelaphi's tragedy Vera discloses the ambiguity of Zimbabwe's colonial and postcolonial situation: the powers of regulation, the question of subaltern resistance through both public, and private and deeply symbolic acts of affirmation and rejection; the bifurcation of the self-aware life and the governing laws and motions of history contained within the pneumatic force of the colonial experience, so powerfully conveyed in the train scene, and in the scene where children re-enact through play, the symbolic elements of colonialism: "An empty matchbox. A single leather shoe with laces still attached. An inkstand says London. A magnificent metal spoon with a dove embossed on it. Selborne Hotel written along the broken handle of a ceramic pot." Vera's style, her poetic and highly particularized mode—the rhythmic and repetitive contours of her language contain a purposive symbolic ritual—a performance of agency. James A. Snead in fact notes the centrality of the trope of repetition in black literature and culture, which beyond marking polymetry, also enacts history with "the precision of ritual." In Snead's words, "Repetition in black culture finds its most characteristic shape in performance: rhythm in music, dance and language" (220). Phephelaphi ritualizes death—the traumatic abortion of the fetus and her own death by fire. Vera enacts this through transcendent language which contains the "symbolic ecstatic"; and which Eva Hunter notes appropriately, unifies the signifying symbolism of "the singing of a road gang, Children at play, and Kwela music" (105) into a compelling act of speech and protest:

The aesthetic power of the passages in which women kill (in Vera's novels) [...] raises a disturbing question: is Vera shaping an aesthetic of violence, as do many Hollywood films, such as those of Quentin Tarantino? [...] Phephelaphi's self-

abortion and self-immolation in *Butterfly Burning*, which are described in passages that are replete with both repetition (that suggests ritual and profundity) and with images that evoke transcendence (flying, wings, purification), may be read as an achieved act of protest and self-assertion. This is comparable to the female protagonist's choice of death in Nawal el Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* ... (Hunter 105)

As Michelle Cliff equally suggests, Phephelaphi unifies the elemental forces into her single being: She comes to Fumbatha from the river as a gift of water, becomes the earth by spilling foetal blood, and becomes the butterfly burning, not as an act of purification, but as an act of protest and release. In the background of this ritual drama music plays: It is Kwela music which connects personal memory with the collective unconscious, to experiences rooted in the agony of interrupted lives who gain meaning and autonomy only by seeking liberation through acts of resistance. As Lizzy Attree notes, "The presence of the rhythms of Kwela punctuates the narrative of *Butterfly Burning*, as does the inventive transformation of the 'wasted this and that' of poverty. The creation of musical instruments from junk is a metamorphosis of the ordinary, transforming everyday objects into intangible music, which when it floats into the air, transcends space and cannot be suppressed" (71). Kwela in that sense embodies or encodes the narrative of liberatory sounds; of cultural autonomy faced with subaltern silence or the possibility of erasure imposed upon the blacks of Bulawayo by colonial racism. In *Butterfly Burning*, therefore, Kwela becomes another means by which the subaltern speaks.

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