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# Subversive Narratives as Strategies of Resistance: A Critical Analysis of Yvonne Vera's Works

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## Abstract

The main thrust of the paper is to explore how women characters in Vera's works subvert the dominant masculine ideology on power by asserting themselves and resisting oppressive forces where dialogue spaces are limited for them. The study examines how characters attempt to challenge the existing norms in patriarchal societies through deviant acts such as self-immolation, infanticide, murder and any other actions to resist the hurtful happenings of the social order and how they disembark on their submissive social status and initiate a journey towards own space and autonomy. Using Foucault's perspective on power and bodies, the study sought to establish how women employ their power and status in the society to oppose the patriarchal injustices imposed on them. The study found out that, irrespective of their space and role in patriarchal societies, these women endeavour to develop a separate identity that enables them to resist and subvert patriarchal injustices. Further, the study revealed that through the women's unwavering thoughts and determination, they are able to get their imagined destinations and space for dialogue.

**Keywords**: oppression, patriarchy, power, resistance, strategies

## 1.0 Introduction

This research confirms that portrayed actions and behaviours emanating from the scarred hearts and traumatized minds of women in oppressive and violent environments are impulses of resistance, and so the stories they tell and choices they make need to be put in context. According to Vera (1994):

> She drew the bottom end of the tie across the baby's neck. She pulled at the cloth while the baby remained blinded and trusting. She strained hard and confidently though this pulling chocked her and blinded her and broke her back. It was bold, this pulling of the cloth, and she held on till there was no cloth to pull because the cloth had formed one tight circle, the smallest circle there was, and so there was no longer any use to her boldness. No use to her boldness because her boldness had brought a terrible silence into the room… she noticed first the stillness in her arms…bewildered and standing outside her own self, she remembered some of her action toward this child. She had managed a constricting knot from which the child could not survive. She felt the neck break and fall over her wrist. She felt the bone at the bottom of that neck tell her that the child had died. The head swung back and fell on to her palm, because she had broken it, she had broken the neck of her child (Vera, 1994, p.9).

World over, women confined in patriarchal systems tend to project voices of protest and resistance through what this study refers to as subversive narratives. The research understands the term as consisting of the social deviant acts that attempt to challenge the existing norms in patriarchal societies in which they live. These kinds of narratives not only exist in literary hypothetical worlds but also in the realities of our daily lives. Empirically it is not uncommon to witness or learn through media happenings such as a women killing her children and then killing herself, a woman executing an abortion which not only evacuate the fetus from her body but also endangers her life, a woman stripping to curse with her nakedness and, a woman who murders her husband for whatever reason among others. These are actions which, due to their dangerous nature, draw gasps from the spectators who either loathe the very women who perform the acts or empathize with them. Although against the moral fiber of the patriarchal society, such actions are considered by this research as the women's strategies to fight social injustices done to them since the dialogic space is not available to them. According to Adler (1972), women involved in such actions are neurotic and are protesting their oppressive situations in patriarchy. Reacting to Sigmund Freud's Concept on biological determinism in a woman's nature, Adler takes cognizance of a woman's mutations within patriarchal systems. For her:

> A woman who has suffered immensely can feel inferior and become neurotic. The women have been thwarted in their striving for superiority, the achievement of power by the "creative self ", and as a consequence have developed neuroses as manifestations of their dissatisfaction. Neurotic Women are actually protesting their situation under patriarchy. (Adler, 1972, p.147).

This research situates this chapter within the context of what Adler refers to as immense sufferings from patriarchal and colonial systems that have been experienced by women in Yvonne Vera's novels. Living in War torn patriarchal environments, the women's sufferings have reached the neurotic threshold from which they must disembark. The vehicles of choice available to them are the subversive narratives, which they use as strategies to resist the oppressions. The term subversive narrative is used in this research to denote a social mode of action that diverts the trajectory of the societal formal systematic discourse to suit the needs and the desires of the individual self. The focus of the research is on the women's deviant social acts such as self-immolation, infanticide, murder and any other action executed by women to resist the hurtful happenings of the patriarchal social order. This research argues that individual women, as presented by Vera, are inextricably part of specific patriarchal circumstances, which mould them into being neurotic and dangerous to both the self and those who directly share their spaces. As a means to self-ventilation and autonomy, the women revert to subversive narratives as their strategies of putting up resistance to their suffocating circumstances. Following the approach taken by Michael Foucault on the idea of power and various strands of feminist thought such as radical, liberal and psychoanalytic, this chapter interrogates the subversive narratives of Yvone Vera's female characters in her five novels. Through Foucault's ideas of power, the research examines how the women have used the power of their own bodies to put up resistances against Patriarchal injustices.

Foucault (1975), in Discipline and punish, talks of a direct relation between powers and bodies, which operate in two distinct ways: Power over bodies which has an immediate hold upon the body to torture it, force it to carry out tasks and to perform ceremonies. This is the kind of power that the Patriarchal cultures use on the women. This kind of power suffocates women, oppresses them, and pushes them to the level of neurosis so that they resort to painful actions and behaviours that subvert the societal norms in order to get their ways. The other way of power, according to Foucault, is the body's own power, the body's own force of will and desire. This is a kind of power of the body that opposes power over bodies and which for Foucault, represents the source of all revolution (Foucault, 1975:156). This study employed this perspective to interrogate how women in Vera's fiction

appropriate different forms of agency to subvert oppressive and violent situations. Feminist thought is equally useful to this research because it aids the interrogation of how women assume equal gendered status and fearlessly take action against what they consider social justice against them. A number of feminist critics, among them, Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millet and Alfred Adler, have come out strongly to encourage women to fight male control and oppressive systems in order to clinch their own spaces and autonomy. In her book, sexual politics (1970), Millett's thoughts give insight on gendered relations to make sense of Vera's portrayal of the reasons behind the subversive narratives of her female characters. I argue that through the deviant social acts, the women are able to disembark their submissive status and initiate a journey towards own space and autonomy.

## 2.0 Powers to destroy or empower; a case of Vera's female characters

The novels studied in this chapter trace both the physical and psychological development of the protagonist like Phephelaphi in Butterfly Burning, Mazvita in Without a Name, Zhizha and Runyararo in Under the Tongue, Thenjiwe and Nonceba in The Stone Virgins and Nehanda in Nehenda. These developments depict the characters' struggle through their subversive narratives to redefine themselves beyond the oppressive fun less worlds that their patriarchal spirited men have fashioned for them. In *Under the Tongue*, Zhizha's mother, Runyararo has committed murder to avenge her daughter's repeated sexual violation. Through the eye of young Zhizha, the victim of incestuous rape, Vera depicts a psychologically wounded woman who's suffering in the hands of a husband, coupled with the grief of discovering that he has been sexually molesting their young daughter, decides to kill her husband Muroyiwa. Through the eye of young Zhizha, the narrator describes the horrifying happenings at the murder scene thus:

> Mother is turning into a single horrid sound, her voice beaten and lost, her shouts cowering in the midst of her dying. Her voice is crushed, turns into dust, and rises in a piercing empty wail. The voice trembles with the end of life. A thin crying through dry crumbling leaves escapes toward me, calls desperately. The voice is wounded, limps sideways, hides. I remember the voice falling down twice before a final silence. A door closes very loudly. The voice gropes in futile weakened sighs, and fades (UT: 150).

The tremors of Runyararo's voice mark the end of Muroyiwas life but do not end the traumatizing memories and scarred heart and body that would forever remain a constant reminder to Zhizha. Nevertheless, she has executed her revenge; the act of

getting rid of her daughter's rapist gives her satisfaction and a voice. For the first time in her marriage life, Runyararo has voiced the forbidden:

> Did he not teach me silence, this husband, that a woman is not a man? I am silent. Just silence to speak my silence against the husband who is not a man but a lizard with a rotten belly. Like a hen chasing its own shadow, he has left footprints which cover the homestead but lead nowhere. He has stolen the light of the moon and its promises of birth. He has thrown a handful of sand into the eyes of his clan as though they are nothing, turning them into insects, carrying everyone, the bone and the unborn, in a wave of shame. He has prepared his own burial ground, when ancestors have not called him. I will begin the spurning for them lest they mistake my silence for betrayal, so first I will bury him like a dog… I will not bury him but throw him away just like a dead lizard. …He has filled my mouth with decay, turning the tomorrow of my child into death, burying her in the middle of the night (Under the Tongue: 152).

Runyararo's action is a deviant social act because it deviates from the societal norm and contravenes the laws of nature and those of man. In so far as going contrary to the patriarchal canon of women submission and acting within the societal prescribed laws is concerned, Runyararo has acted in line with the feminist thought as postulated by Simone de Beauvoir (1949). Though she does not advocate for violence as a systematic method of gaining freedom, De Beauvoir encourages women to reject their subjugation by the dominant male and fight for autonomy and freedom. She maintains that:

> Women must reject societal construct that men are the subject or the absolute and women are the other. Embedded in this erroneous statement is the assumption that men have the power to control the dominant discourse and the power to define cultural terms and roles. Accordingly, women must define themselves, articulate their own social constructs of what it means to be a woman and reject being labeled as other (de Beauvoir, 1949: 13).

Against De Beauvoir's observation, I argue that women in Vera's fiction are presented as beings that are subordinate to men and exist at the margins as the 'Other'. They, however, are protesting this cultural injustice through actions that are largely viewed as against the social norms of the societies they live in. Their goal is to discover and change both themselves and their world; a world they feel, must learn

to validate all individuals, regardless of their cultures, as rational people who can contribute to their societies and their world. I further argue that Runyararo has rejected the culture of silence about her daughter's incestuous rape by murdering the rapist who is her husband, Zhizha's father. She has assertively exercised her motherly power within the space available to avenge her daughter's traumatic act of rape. Ironically, instead of enjoying freedom and fulfillment as a result of her actions, Runyararo is jailed for murder. This is a depiction of the elusive nature of power, what I refer to as the paradox of power in this research. The observation here is that power that is exercised with little regard to the consequences is hardly rewarding. Nevertheless, under the serious circumstances that Runyararo finds herself into, her actions should be understood within the context and the choices she has had to make. Runyararo's strategy to avenge her daughter's rape has given her some satisfaction but has further inflicted pain in the child because she suffers the loss of a mother's comfort and upbringing. Zhizha puts it rightly when she says, "the one who quiets me, the one who reminds me of sleep, the one who comforts…a lullaby for my sleep and my light…" (UT: 153). Zhizha's words are her way of expressing her fears for an empty world void of motherly love and care. While she is apprehensive about missing motherly nurturing, her mother, Runyararo is thrown at cross roads from where she can neither help herself nor her daughter. She carries the sorrows and pain of her heart to jail. Runyararo's actions have also affected her mother-in-law deeply. Through Zhizha's voice, the narrator describes her suffering thus:

> Grandmother….. her face broken, carrying the heavy things of life. A lonely exhalation, a deep silence. Mother has brought a lingering sorrow, a visit from yesterday… Grandmother cries into the night, she cries that the sorrow which has visited has no origins. It is sorrow which has no disguises. We are naked on this earth, she cries (Under theTongue: 153)

The two people most close to Runyararo, grandmother and Zhizha, are going through intense suffering because of her actions. It is quite paradoxical that her actions have brought more suffering than relief. These sufferings witness to the fact that Runyararo's deviant social act of murder has brought a lot of suffering to those closely related to her even as she gets some psychological satisfaction. The justice systems and patriarchal culture of silence have aggrieved Zhizha, her mother and grandmother. This is a clear depiction that the society in Vera's fiction studied in this chapter is not ready for a self-defined woman who seeks justice and self-emancipation. The story, Without a Name, depicts a murder most foul. An innocent baby is strangled in cold blood to clear a path for freedom and self-fulfillment. This is

the chilling story of Mazvita, a woman who has gone against the norms of the society and killed her innocent baby in cold blood, and journeyed with its cops in a passenger bus to bury it at the ruins of her rural village.

In the novel, Vera captures the painful traumatizing actions of a homeless orphaned young lady who has been raped and impregnated by a gorilla soldier, and rejected by a man she thought had loved her. The magnitude of Mazvita's suffering is so great that she becomes neurotic and confused. The pain she suffers emanates from different interlinked cruel events like the loss of her parents and a home to a devastating inferno, started by the rapist soldier. The memory of that incident is too painful for her to indulge in. This is evident in her hesitation to tell Nyenyedzi the truth of her past. "Why did you leave your home? We must go back to Mubaira". He wants to know about her, to know her better and to understand what compelled her to seek work at the tobacco farm. Mazvita, however, seemed to see through Nyenyedzi because she is aware of his limitations. He can neither change the past nor the future. She is in the know of the fact that her destiny is in her hands so she is not interested in divulging the information. Her negating answer was given with finality "I can never go back there. The war is bad in Mhondoro. It is hard to close your eyes there and sleep. It is hard to be living" (*Without a Name*, 29). Mazvita is determined to outlive the torturers memory and move forward; even her parents are now a part of that memory. Ordinarily, Nyenyedzi's wish to meet her parents would have thrilled her. Now she does not even respond to his statement about meeting her parents, instead she decides to move on. I argue that Mazvita has come to the realization that the power to change one's destiny resides in individuals regardless of sex. She has to use her own power to stop romanticizing her past misfortunes and live in the present if she wants a meaningful life for herself. She is traumatized at the thought of going back to her war ruined village but she is determined to depart from her perceived inferior space. She strongly desires to empower herself and get freed from the burden of fear which Vera reveals thus:

> Mazvita carried a strong desire to free herself from the burden of fear, from the skies licked with blue and burning with flame. She had not told Nyenyedzi everything. She had not told him about what that man who pulled her down had whispered to her, how she ran through the mist with torn clothes, with his whispering carried in her ears, how the sky behind her exploded as the village beyond the river burned, and she shouted loud because her arms reached forward, but not forward enough to rescue the people, to put out the flame, and she cried and ran with her two legs missing, buried, and she thought she ran with her arms because she saw them swing forward, swing back, swing forward, carry her through that mist toward the huts.. then she fell down,

> looked beneath the mist at the burning hut because the mist had lifted. (Without a Name: 31).

What emerges here is gender power play with regard to societal assigned social status. The culturally perceived inferior sex has been disadvantaged by the gun empowered domineering male. Both Mazvita's body and psyche have been violated to underpin her to her inferior social space on one hand, and to authenticate the man's authoritative superior space on the other hand. Mazvita rejects the inferior space and is determined to vacate it for a more significant space even if the severity of her suffering threatens her sanity. The painful experience of the village destruction and the perishing of her parents depict the trauma that she has had to endure. This initiates a stronger desire for freedom in Mazvita. Her emotions are in constant quest for an outlet. Mazvita is aware that only she can create her outlet and so she must decide on an action to propel her forward. She says with determination, "I must move on, I will move" (*Without a Name*, 31). I read Mazvita's determination as prioritizing a trajectory of change with little thought on the means. Her emotional saturation has clouded her reasoning faculties and so she has to act to resist getting consumed. Another painful event that left Mazvita's mind in chaos, and which provoked her subsequent cruel actions was the rape that defiled her very being and planted a child in her womb. The narrator recounts this ordeal in the most painful manner, clearly reflecting the excruciating pain and torture that Marvita had to put up with in the hands of the guerilla soldier:

> It was a man that pulled me into that grass. He held a gun, though I did not see it. He had claimed her, told her that she could not hide the things of her body, he whispered as though he offered her life, in gentle murmuring tones, unhurried, but she felt his arms linger too long over her thighs, linger searching and cruelly, and she knew that if there was life offered between them, it was from herself to him, not offered, but taken. She ran with the slipperiness pouring between her thighs. She longed deeply for the silence to be completed. She longed to escape the insistent cries of his triumph (Without a Name, 30-35).

In her reflections, Mazvita confidently acknowledges what had happened to her on that fateful day of rape. What was not clear to her then was that she not only suffered a humiliating rape at gun point, but also forcefully received life from the rapist. She did not only run away with the man's sperms pouring between her legs but also with his child growing in her womb. Though not aware of it at the time, the magnitude of the soldier's triumph was enormous and her longing for an escape would just remain, a longing no matter what she does. She has the rapist's child in

her own body, a permanent living reminder and an 'obstacle' to her freedom. Mazvita has confirmed the soldier's whisper "as though he offered life" and proved she was wrong by thinking that "it was from herself to him". She cannot freely engage in a meaningful relationship with Joel because she is haunted by her past. The presence of the child in her life has stigmatized her and has become a milestone to her progress. Joel's rejection of her, and his chasing her away with her nameless unwelcomed child, drives her psyche to a breaking point. Mazvita feels cornered into making a drastic decision in the hope of relieving herself of her problems. Her decision to castigate her child by refusing to name it is cruel and against the social norms of the society she lives in. The normal expectation is for a mother to name a child on its arrival to the world. In the contrary to this expectation, Mazvita declines from this noble activity because according to her, her body has betrayed her by allowing a child of rape to creep into her life and so she must reject the baby to get her freedom:

> She had no name for the baby; a name could not be given to a child just like that. A name is for calling a child into the world, for acceptance, for grace. A name is for waiting, for release, an embrace precious and permanent, a promise to growing life. She had no promises to offer this child. Mazvita could not even name the child from the emptiness which surrounded her. She simply held the child, and fed him from her breast. The child grew in a silence with no name. Mazvita could not name the silence (*Without a Name*, 85).

The rejection of the child and denying it a name is Mazvita's strategy to resist the hurtful oppressive issues in her life, and get her space and freedom. Ironically, the problems with Joel Persisted. He was not satisfied with the fact that the child was nameless and therefore unimportant in her life. He wanted her to leave with her child and her hesitation only made Joel more Jittery. His determination to push her away is further evidenced in his subsequent violent words which provoked her second strategy to free herself not just from Joel but also from the child whom she viewed as an obstacle to her freedom and progress. When Joel violently prompted her again," leave tomorrow "Her decision came to her slowly. When it did come, she was not sure that the decision had been entirely her own" (Without a Name, 95). She felt that the child had brought to her such powerlessness she could hardly move forward. It was an obstacle that had to be done away with. Mazvita suddenly became obsessed with the thought but she wanted the baby to close its eyes to make it easier for her to execute her plan:

> Mazvita wept silently because she knew that her desire for the baby to sleep was ill conceived and harmful. Her heart beat so hard at her

> effort to suppress that inclination, but the desire lingers forward like something sweet and secret. She thought of sleep. She thought of loneliness and sleep. The feeling was overwhelming. She trembled beneath that thought. She closed her eyes and felt a cloud rest over her shoulders. Her shoulders felt heavy. She opened her eyes and thought of the child. She wanted to forget the child and creep back into that billow above her shoulders, crawl into a lethargic sleep. She looked at the baby resting with its eyes opened. If only the baby had fallen asleep right then she would have recovered from the madness that made her press her palm down, again, over the baby's eyes. Mazvita was still aware of her danger (Without a Name: 106).

The premonition is becoming too strong for Mazvita to ignore. Though she is apprehensive of carrying out the action of killing the baby when he is awake, the desire to put an end to her suffering, to rid herself of the man's burden and free herself is driving her mad, madness from which she wished to recover. What Mazvita is not acknowledging is the fact that her guilt faculties are vehemently opposing the act she is about to execute. I argue that Mazvita's disturbing conscience is an indication that she is never going to recover from killing her baby and that her wish to kill will soon revert to a wish not to have killed because the magnitude of her suffering will outweigh her gain. In her present state of mind, Mazvita is not able to listen to her guilt warning, she only thinks of her pain and how to achieve her goal:

> She pressed her right palm softly, once more, over the baby. She felt the child's warm eyes under her palm. That pressing granted her an elaborate and fierce energy to free herself from this baby; it drove her into a violent but calculated trance as she moved forward toward the child and picked it up from the bed, picked it up slowly and finally, picked it up in sobs that rendered her body into half, in sobs. She picked up the baby slowly as though not to waken it. Her desire was to close the baby's eyes finally and truthfully. Mazvita sought her freedom in slender and fragile movements, finally executed (Without a Name: 107).

Mazvita is experiencing a split in her personality. A part of her is conscious that the action she is about to execute is cruel and so she is trying to avoid the accusing little innocent eyes of the baby. She wants to give him the last comfort of falling asleep, perhaps to lessen his pain and to rid her soul of any guilt. The other personality, however, is a ruthless irrational self-centered one which cannot wait to get rid of the baby, an obstacle to her freedom and self-fulfillment. This split of personality in

dealing with her baby as a problem is further revealed through her thoughts where she dialogues within herself:

> Mazvita sang slow and dear to the baby that she felt was hers, was not hers, was hers. She paused as though to comfort the child, touched it with one smooth gaze, as though to protect it. The child had deep bottomless eyes. She longed to close the eyes of her child, slowly and gently. The thought brought her an easy satisfaction, an exultant realization of a pleasure ephemeral put true joy beckoned in lilting waves of mercy and comfort. Mazvita took a soft thin cloth and wrapped it over the child's eyes. The cloth fitted across the child's head, and she was able to tie it at the back. She made the knot very softy, whispering to the child to keep still. She made a soft painless knot that kept the child free from harm…. When she had completed this task she felt sure of the direction in which she would proceed, she felt herself gifted and supreme, autonomous in all her decision, in her every gesture and action, and she breathed hard and inward and felt the air flow into her chest. She had closed the eyes of her child (Without a Name: 107-108).

Though determined to proceed with the task of killing her baby, Mazvita's thoughts are in conflict just like her emotions. Mazvita feels like protecting her child from harm. She is soft, gentle and careful with the baby yet she is brave and courageous enough to rehearse blindfolding the child in preparation for killing him. These activities are a clear depiction of a disturbed traumatized mind. This is the kind that Alfred Adler (1972), in Understanding Human nature, refers to as neurotic; a condition brought about by a lot of suffering. Mazvita's suffering culminates in the killing of her baby, an act she perceives as the springboard to her freedom. Though Mazvita is proceeding with her strategy to protect herself from the obstacle which is the child, she is already suffering the guilt of her actions. Her subsequent move of trying to detach herself from what she calls "a ritual of separation" confirms her discomfort with her planned actions. The reference to "her forehead broke into ripples. Water fell from her forehead to her eyes and blinded her" (Without a Name: 109). The emotional turmoil Mazvita is going through interferes with the coherent judgments of her intensions. In her precarious emotional state, Mazvita allows her body to be the focal point where power assumes its operation in either of two ways; power of and power over (Foucault, 1972). Convincing herself about her impending actions, she gathers her strength, what Foucault calls the way of the body's own power, the body's own force of will and desire to perform this blood chilling heinous task. Mazvita has assumed authority over the body of her child, what Foucault refers

to as "the power over bodies" and she is ready to perform the torture ceremony on her child and carry out the task of killing him (Foucault, 1972). Ritualistically Mazvita eliminates the obstacle to her success. Killing the baby has been a traumatic experience to Mazvita. The dialogic voice of the baby's own power of innocence forces Mazvita to apply Robert Greene's 12th law of power, "use selective honesty and generosity to disarm your victim (Greene, 1975) to appease her own guilt by covering the child's accusing eyes before killing him. This does not work for Mazvita because the cruel act has chocked and broken her psychological backbone so that the guilt is imprinted in her psyche. Mazvita's subsequent behaviours and actions should reflect her satisfaction as she sets off to the path of freedom. Paradoxically the opposite is evidenced. Her memory defies her subsequent actions where she tries to normalize things without success. The reference to the "sound lingering long after she had heard it" is clear indication that Mazvita's strategy will not propel her forward. Her psyche is pricked with the guilt of killing her baby. She feels responsible for the horrible irreversible truth of her actions; this feeling traumatizes and tortures her:

> She held her breath tight, within her chest. There was a burning on her tongue. Her tongue seemed to grow in her mouth, into something large and unrecognizable. She could no longer breathe clearly and regularly. The bitterness spread to her face, into her face, into her eyes. She closed her eyes and tried hard to collect her thoughts concerning the child. She did not want to think about the child. She thought of the child. She sat still and wondered. She stood up. Her feet felt heavy but she took a step forward, dragged herself back toward the child. She slumped onto the bed, reared her neck forward, and raised her arms. The action was unbearable. She untied the cloth from the child's eyes. The eyes were closed peacefully in sleep. She felt almost joyous because she recalled a moment when this was the simple fact she sought (Without a Name: 110-111).

The reactions preceded by the killing of the baby clearly demonstrate that any action taken purely for self-benefit is bound to elicit a counteraction and thwarts the intended goal. The pain born of the guilt of killing the baby mars Mazvita's envisaged freedom. The guilt felt by Mazvita is described as" flashes of a fathomless heavy guilt". To no avail she tried to close out the thought of the child from her mind. She has become bitter with herself and wishes she never committed the act, that her child was still alive. Mazvita becomes more traumatized and confused. Her mind has become what Foucault (1973) would describe as "wondering mind or derangement of morals" (Foucault, 1973:65). For Foucault, this is a kind of mind that is plagued

with guilt due to lack of reason. I argue that Mazvita's predicament did not permit any contrary reasoning. Since her actions were motivated by selfish emotions without logical considerations especially of the child, its counter effect on her is far reaching. The silent nameless being that was Mazvita's child, and whom she unscrupulously murdered in order to succeed in life has come back to haunt her; what I refer to as the paradox of power. Though the child is dead, she begins to behave in a manner that is not clearly defined. Her mind has refused to accept the reality. This is depicted in the way in which she treats the dead child. The thought that the child is alive fills her mind:

> She carried the baby on her back. The child liked to be carried on the back. The child remained silent while Mazvita moved in guilt footsteps across the room. She sang in mute tones, in muffled and confused cries, pleading, hoping the child would stir. She felt the small head slide down toward her left shoulder and the down toward her left shoulder and the move was silent and familiar. The child had fallen asleep. She had to hold the child up because it had fallen asleep in that awkward position so she bent her back, leaned, rearranged the baby, and supported it with her cloth. She held the child's head up along her back with the cloth and went around the room because she wanted the child to sleep. She sang a faint lullaby and released the cloth (Without a Name, 111).

The selfish act of killing the baby has made Mazvita's situation move from bad to worse. Her behavior is a reflection of a sick mind. This is further concretized by the bus trip that she takes with a dead baby on her back. She plans to bury her child back home in Mubaira and then die there, perhaps to atone her guilt. Unperturbed with her strange action of travelling in a passenger bus with a dead body of a child, Mazvita settles in the bus with her ears and body consciously alert. In her deranged state, she imagines, and painfully listens to non-existing sounds and eloquence of her body's silence:

> Every sound seemed to listen for her, though she was the one who listened in a rare painful listening that crept across her back, kept still so painfully still the stillness made her sob, a heavy sob that broke over her shoulders, trembled down to her feet, and she felt her toes turn cold, turn cold still. She entered a bottomless ache that left her perspiring and gasping for one slice of moon, to heal her not regretfully, but with a brimming ululating sympathy. It was the stillness on her back, cloying and persistent, which bothered her, chocked her, sent a small

> painful echo tearing across her breast, turned her lips bursting black clay, clinging and cold. She felt her eyes sink into the darkness, gathered somewhere beneath her forehead, beneath the eyebrows, a still cold darkness in which she was sure there was no-recovery (Without a Name, 113).

Mazvita is conscious of the fathomless pit of misery and suffering she is in. Her suffering has stretched every fiber in her body and mind. The ache in her body, the weights on her back and the pain in her mind are all unbearable to her. This informs my argument that the magnitude of the reverse effect of Mazvita's actions has exposed her to so much suffering that her entire body has become conscious of pain. Ironically the pain is not just hers but also that of the dead body she carries on her back. Its weight weighs on her conscience with coldness that "burns through the skin" is depicted through the reaction of her body. Even in the crowded bus, Mazvita feels alone with her dead baby on her back. She is tormented and traumatized more by the present than the past. She has broken down under the weight of her dead child on her back, and the guilt that has overtaken her mind and soul. The Magnitude of her suffering makes her hallucinate. In her world of hallucination, Mazvita imagines that some being, larger than her, was listening to her:

> Something larger than her listened to her, heard her, scorned her suffering. The something was mocking and spirited, she dared not find it out; it was something haunting and triumphant, enormous and penetrating. It was not possible that she had just suffered like that, without an audience. She deserved at least one ear into her secret (Without a Name: 113)

In her pain, Mazvita is reaching out. She needs a being that can understand her predicament and her pain. She does not wish to be judged by her outward action but rather wishes for "an ear into her secret". It is paradoxical that the child who had been the seed of patriarchal oppression and trauma, a physical obstacle to her freedom and success when alive, is now a psychological obsession and obstacle to the wellness of her whole being in death. It is not a wonder then that in her guilt, she wildly imagines that she is being judged both by the physical and spiritual worlds. I am arguing therefore that despite the brief experience of triumph and freedom after the act, the killing of the child has brought more pain to Mazvita, and has become a bigger obstacle to her betterment and freedom. This is a demonstration of the complex nature of power. I argue that the liberation value of power actions that are exercised with disregard to inclusivity and compassion is bound to be low. Mazvita's self-centered actions that disregarded the plight of her child is now hurting

her more. In Butterfly Burning, Vera presents women who view children as products of male oppression, and obstacles that must be done away with if women are to realize their freedom and self-fulfillment. A liberal feminist critic, Jean Bethke Elshtain (1982) who believes in the complexity of mothering, fore grounds Vera's line of thought. She postulates that:

> Mothering is not a 'role' on par with being a file clerk, a scientist, or a member of the Air Force. Mothering is a complicated, rich, ambivalent, vexing, joyous activity which is biological, natural, social, symbolic, and emotional. It carries profoundly resonant emotional and sexual imperatives. A tendency to downplay the differences that pertain between, say, mothering and holding a job, not only drains our private relations of much of their significance, but also over-simplifies what can or should be done to alter things for women, who are frequently urged to change roles in order to solve their problems(33).

Reading after Elshtain above, I argue that Phephelaphi, the protagonist in Vera's Butterfly Burning, committed an act of infanticide two times, literally killing two sinless babies inside her womb because she realized that a mothering role is an obstacle to a woman's professional transformation. Coupled with the immense suffering she has endured since childhood and the fact that pregnant women are not allowed to train for nursing, a course Phephelaphi craves for more than her own life, she resolves to painfully kill her unformed babies to clear her path for success. Phephelaphi's move is a contravention of societal norms as well as laws of nature, nevertheless, she is able to exercise her right in decision making and putting up a resistance. Phephelaphi's decision to repeatedly terminate her pregnancies, killing the innocent beings through self-inflicted abortions, is informed by the many injustices she has suffered since child hood. Born of a prostitute mother with no fixed aboard, phephelaphi's child hood was very difficult. She tells Fumbatha:

> My mother named me Phephelaphi because she did not know where to seek refuge when I was born. She slept anywhere. She had no food in her stomach, but her child had to sleep under some shelter. She had hard times. As soon as I was born she had given me another name, she called me Sakhile. Then she discovered that Makokoba has no time for a woman who was raising a child on her own, so she renamed me. I was six years old by then. She still called me Sakhile but she sat down often with me and said that Phephelaphi was the name she had now found for both of us. She had struggled (29 – 30).

This traumatizing child hood memory lodged itself in Phephelaphi's psyche. She has no fixed identity and is ready to adapt to any other name. Phephelaphi's desperation for a name symbolizes her intense quest for identity in order to belong and gain her worth as a human being with exercisable full rights. She is ready to do just anything to get out of this enclosure of power. It is therefore not a wonder that Phephelaphi literally begs for another name but Phephelaphi. She tells Fumbatha, "You could give me another name. I do not mind being named by a stranger. I do not mind being renamed if it makes the present clearer" (Butterfly, 30). Phephelaphi is tired of the struggle that she seem to have inherited from her mother. Her heart desires a life with promising present and future. She loathes the past life that she lived with her mother. The double abandonment and rejection by her biological mother left scars of agony in the heart of Phephelaphi:

> Phephelaphi had finished school. She had no relatives. Her 'mother' Getrude was dead. When the decision was shared with her, Zandile was relieved to watch Phephelaphi pack her suitcase, carry it onto her head, and leave the one –room house they had shared only briefly (Butterfly, 31)

This was the second time Phephelaphi was being abandoned by her biological mother. Though the first time she was just a baby and very helpless when her biological mother got rid of her and placed her under the care of a 'mother'; now her own mother under the guise of a friend prefers to let her go live with a man in order to have her freedom. Phephelaphi is grateful to go but cannot shake off the haunting memories of the death of the woman she thought was her mother. In a flashback she recalls the events surrounding her mother's death and burial. She remembers how one night a stranger shot her mother by the door way and how she witnessed her arm and body fall with a scary thud. The memory depicts Phephelaphi's intense suffering. She is traumatized by the memory of her mother's death. The colonial authority did not even have the courtesy of extending a burial invitation to her. She feels dejected. Phephelaphi feels empty because pain has stolen a lifetime from her and left her as an unproductive shell. To leave this empty confinement, Phephelaphi is prepared to undertake any actions within her power. She therefore moves in with Fumbatha, not because she loves him but for a convenience of her escape. She hopes that her living with Fumbatha would lighten her burden in life.

Phephelaphi's decision to move in with Fumbatha, a man whose interest is his own healing and not love is her strategy to propel herself forward. A midst the turbulence, instability and the uncertainties in her past and present life, Phephelaphi dares to risk and venture into a new life with Fumbatha whom she thinks loves her.

He is a generation older than her and is nursing psychological wounds from Chimurenga war. Using love as a guise for his obsession for Phephelaphi, Fumbatha uses her to mend his broken connection with the land. Evoking the meaning of her name, he regards her as a 'shelter' to dwell in. "He wants to 'hold her', never wanting to let her go. Fumbatha had never wanted to possess anything before, except the land. He wanted her like the land beneath his feet from which birth had severed him." (BB, 28-29). Phephelaphi is the medicine Fumbatha needed to cure his nightmares. She is a special woman who was not like many:

> Deliwe Knew Fumbutha, and had seen how he treasured Phephelaphi above every other woman he had known. He claimed he had pulled her out of the water like a fish and there was every evidence to prove that this story was true. Phephelaphi did not possess a single blemish, a woman whose body was all promise, breasts firm and rounded, a voice so soothing soft no other woman could exceed its charm and no men ignored its plea (Butterfly, 63)

Ironically, Fumbatha, just like Phephelaphi is looking for an ideal strategy to propel him forward. Phephelaphi soon realizes that her advancement would not come from Fumbatha and looks for an alternative strategy. Having failed with Fumbatha, Phephelaphi is more determined in her quest. Propelled by desire for a new identity, to find herself, Phephelaphi applies to a nursing school despite Fumbatha's attempts to prevent her. He tells her, "We are happy together. I work. I take care of you. It is no necessary for you to find something else" (Butterfly: 70). Fumbatha's reply to her initiative shows that he has turned into an obstacle that she must put behind her if she has to succeed. Her application to the nursing training college is a move towards finding herself, a move that is very timely according to feminist thoughts. In The Second Sex (1949), Beauvoir suggests that women must break the bonds of their patriarchal society and define themselves if they wish to become a significant human being in their own right, and they must defy male classification as the "Other" (Beauvoir 1949:173).

Phephelaphi has turned down Fumbatha's offer to take care of her instead of going to the nursing school. Her attempts to break away becomes a night mare when she discovers that she is pregnant, a condition that would disqualify her from the training programme. Phephelaphi had wanted this training so much that she agonized for it because it would be the springboard to her future success:

> It is not the being a nurse which matters but the movement forward- the entrance into something new and untried. Her heart rises in an agony of longing. She is going to be the first one to train. If the occasion

> allows her, "No one will come knocking on my door telling me to apply"…. Fumbatha could never be the beginning or end of all her yearning, her longing for which she could not find a suitable name. It was a feeling rising like tears. She wanted to do something but had no idea what it could be, what shape it offered for her future (Butterfly, 71, 75).

Phephelaphi's jubilation at securing herself a place at the nursing collage was short lived. Her dream- come true that was gradually transforming her life into the reality she has always yearned and longed for, came tumbling down in pieces. The smartly dressed young black woman who had walked into the general mission hospital two weeks ago as the hospitals first black nurse trainee, is now a very worried pregnant woman, full of tears, confusion and regrets:

> Phephelaphi had not known where exactly she was heading when she opened the door and entered Sidajiwe E2 but next she was standing, sitting, standing again with Deliwe, muttering incoherently and moving in circles on the porch, refusing to sit on the stoop, threatening to return with the tears still crushing her eyelids, the drums beating in her head like a storm, her temples burning and everything about her frozen or dead…. Finally, she was able to look up at Deliwe and tell her all her shame. Phephelaphi could barely breathe as she staggered back along Sidejiwe E2. She heard her own door creak to a close behind her (Butterfly, 103 – 104).

Symbolically, Phephelaphi's door to freedom and betterment was shut with her pregnancy, she became bitter and frustrated. She felt her life had lost meaning and would rather die than continue in her present predicament. The pain she felt for losing the chance to train, and the desire she had to transform her life and get her reality converged to force her next action. Different thoughts of the child she was carrying in her womb raced through her mind. A part of her wanted to have the child while another totally rejected it. It is then that she made a decision that would fix her destiny:

> Something raced toward her, an emotion with no shape that she recognized. It was a current of grief and regret larger than her own mind, stronger, and more decided. The emptiness had decided all there was to decide about her insignificance and her lack of wisdom, and she was nothing but a shallow substance (Butterfly, 110).

Though not in the right form of mind, Phephelaphi has made the decision that would decide her fate. She is ready to get rid of the fetus in her womb. In an agony of the action she is about to execute and a heart pounding so fast, Phephelaphi chooses a solitary space with little human disturbance. The description depicts a place where:

> The land is bare and sparse with a lot of just dots of short bush. Here a thorn, here a bird. Just dots of living across this stretching flat land. Then further, field and field of dry waving grass, and no trees. On the other side, beyond the stunted, bushes, is makokoba within it is Sidojiwe E2, Jukwa road, Bambanani, L. Road, D square, and Banda Road, and many more. A black location. The houses tiny shelters, like the shrubs. Around them, tall trees introduced one by one after each row of houses, standing on guard against an anticipated accident, some incident of fracture, like braking bone… sturdy thorns with dry and cracking bark, and long narrow fingers, firm with a colour of tan like darkened glass (Butterfly, 114 – 115).

Phephelaphi's choice of place to kill her baby ensures privacy from human eyes. She is surrounded by nature with birds of air witnessing her heinous action abortion. Using sturdy thorn as the necessary instrument, lying on her back with Legs apart to allow efficiency, and feet firm on the ground under the tingling sensation of sand for support, Phephelaphi had no fear, only the desire to do away with the obstacle to her success, the baby in her womb:

> Push. She has pushed it in. Sharp and piercing. No fear. No excitement. This must be. In and out of a watery sac, slowly she receives it as though this motion will provide an ecstatic release. Her hand is steady inside her body. Her own hand inserting an irreversible harm. Her right arm is supported by the inside of her thigh, which is carefully raised from the ground. At the wrist, her hand turns sharply inward, as though broken. Her hand moves and beats in rapid motions. She keeps her head on the ground, away from her thighs. Her left leg is lowered on the ground and stretched out. Her hand slips past her left thigh. She is full of tension. Her fingers held firm at each frantic pierce (Butterfly, 115).

Phehpelaphpi's determination and concentration depicts the importance she attaches to this abortion. The baby in her womb is an obstacle that must be removed for her to achieve her reality and self-fulfillment. Her focus is on the anticipated tremor that is supposed to usher in the evacuation of the unwanted baby. The process she has

chosen to execute her strategy is unscrupulously painful. Blinded by the need to positively transform her life, Phephelaphi does not take into consideration the significance of the fetus in her womb and the risk involved in the method she has chosen to terminate its life. Phephelaphi performs her second abortion in the most crude and painful manner. The physical and the psychological pain she is undergoing is too excruciating for her to bear. Nevertheless, she perseveres knowing that her freedom from the 'obstacle' is very near. The hope keeps her from giving up though she has realized the shortfalls of her strategy.

This realization notwithstanding, Phephelaphi holds on to the process for she desires desperately what is beyond the pain. Paradoxically Phephelaphi does not live to experience what is beyond the pain. She passes into the oblivion as a hopeful woman. She is an example of women who are ready to fight for what they believe in; even to death. The very strategy she had chosen to liberate her has mercilessly claimed her life, destroying both her physical body and her hopes. This is typical of power that is inconsiderately utilized. Phephelaphi's abortion and her subsequent death are clear depictions of the ills of colonial rule in Zimbabwe. In the late 1940s, nurses could neither get married nor become pregnant. Desperate to know herself, to be more, and mad for having been spurned by her lover and betrayed by her body, she sinks into deep madness, she becomes neurotic. The horrific description that marks Phephelaphi's second abortion as an irreversible event in her life is a clear indication of a trapped being whose only escape is death. Through her abortions and the eventual death, Phephelaphi has put up resistance to both colonial and patriarchal entanglements of her society. For Vera, Phephelaphi's desire to know the self and become a significant being in her own terms is re-directed to her deviant act of self-inflicted abortion that ends in death. This provokes a critical question in the reader's mind, "what went wrong?" and then we are reminded of the complex nature of power, what I refer to in this thesis as the paradox of power.

### 3.0 Loneliness, Torture and Murder

In The Stone Virgins', Vera tells a moving story of 'incestuous' relationship of a young orphaned rejected school dropout living with her dead sister's fiancée. This kind of action is outlawed by the norms of the society in which she lives. Nonceba, feeling trapped in deep traumatizing problems, has to brave this move to rediscover the self and chat a new path towards her goals in life. The story is told through the experiences of Thenjiwe and Nonceba, the twin sisters rejected by their mother and abandoned through father's death. Coming from an equally war-torn village, the two girls are alone and only draw strength and comfort from each other. Sibaso, an ex-soldier who murders Thenjiwe, rapes and mutilates Nonceba, exploits their vulnerable situation. The horrific manner in which these heinous acts are committed

is mind raking and traumatizing. The beheading of Thenjiwe is described from Nonceba's point of view:

> His head is behind Thenjiwe, where Thenjiwe was before; floating in her body; he is floating like a flash of lightening. Thenjiwe's body remains upright while Sibaso's head emerges behind hers, inside it, replacing each of her moments, taking her position in the azure of the sky. He is absorbing Thenjiwe's motions into his own body, existing where Thenjiwe was, moving into spaces she has occupied (Stone Virgin, 73).

The magnitude of the horror scene and its traumatizing effects are too much for Nonceba to bear. Since she is too weak and too confined to put up any resistance, she allows herself to disappear into the stupor of unconsciousness rather than let the painful horror fill her mind. She passes out after the mutilation. In her hospital bed, she wakes up in a confused, shocked and wounded state. The boundaries of her psyche threaten to collapse as the previous scene comes back flooding her memories. Nonceba is not ready to accept that her sister Thenjiwe has been murdered. She fights the memories of this painful reality by imagining of her sister's presence among her fellow patience. She objectifies this imagination and uses it as a strategy to resist the trauma of the murder. When consciousness brings her back to the reality she is not ready for, Nonceba's fragile psyche joins that of the neurotic woman and hallucinatively commit murder alongside the imaginative actions of the woman so that she murders Cebaso, her sister's murderer in the person of the neurotic woman's husband. Even after this imaginative subversive act of resistance, Nonceba's trauma is further stretched when she re gains her consciousness in the hospital only to encounter screams from the neurotic woman:

> Her voice sweeps down the corridor like a hot liquid. Her voice is high. Something pitiful is pouring out of it, something unstoppable. Her voice is muffled, suddenly held down. Many people are holding her down. The woman is destroying a thought in her mind. She is getting rid of something only light and sound can cleans a mind not touch. She is cleansing her mind (SV, 87).

Yvonne Vera seems to believe that women are trapped in some patriarchal oppressive memories from which they try to exert their own will over their bodies to escape to a self-defined space. Like Nonceba, this woman is trapped in some past ugly memories. Her suffering has blown the threshold of her psyche. She is a woman who lived in the unbearable traumatized past and would do anything to unlock her

mind and get freed. The narrator comments that the woman's voice is in Nonceba's mind. Nonceba hears voices asking the length of time the woman have been dying, buried in her voice:

> She has killed her husband. Two soldiers walked into her house and sat her husband on a stone. They landed her an ax. These men were pointing guns at her two grown sons, threatening to shoot them if she did not listen. She fell on her knees and begged them to let her sons go. One soldier pushed her away with the butt of his gun. She fell down and wept for her sons as though they had already died, and for the heart of the soldier, which she said had died with the war. Her husband raised his voice toward her and said, "Kill me… kill me" he pleaded. He was desperate to die and save his two sons. She stood up, silently repeating what her husband had said, with her own lips, with her own arms. She opened her eyes and raised the ax above her shoulders till he was dead (StoneVirgin, 88-89).

For Nonceba, the desire to avenge her sister's murder is so great that she visualizes the woman and her actions as if it has just happened and mixes this vision with that of Thenjiwe. Nonceba's trauma reaches a point of no return. She turns violent, fighting unseen forces; forces that only exist in her psychotic mind. She is mad and the hospital is her place of confinement from which she must disembark, means notwithstanding. Trying to save her from herself, as she tries to save the woman with the ax; the hosp ital attendants have tied her to the bed:

> She knows about the ax, which is in the air, higher than her head, higher than she can reach. The ax is now falling through the arms of the woman. Nonceba moves her arms forward to protect the woman to remove the ax from her hands (StoneVirgins, 89).

Though the threshold of protecting herself and her sister is very high, Nonceba is determined to go through with it, however, with her arms tied to the bed, Nonceba cannot move. She is immobilized and only stares in silence. Even in mind she has been subdued. She sees the woman standing in a pool of blood without the ax. She can only watch because she is no longer a part of the fight. After leaving the hospital, Nonceba goes back to her old haunted destroyed house in Kezi. She reflects that "Kezi is now only a place for those who were born here and have nowhere else to go" (153). Nonceba feels trapped at the Kezi ruins that once served as her home. Her path to self-fulfillment is now hampered by many problems including the termination of her academic endeavors that would have been her springboard to her

freedom and independence. In her desperation to a better destiny, Nonceba hesitantly accepts to move into a flat in Bulawayo with Cephas, Thenjiwe's lover, under undefined relationship of both shared and separate lives based on everyday practicalities because they "cannot yet discuss matters that concern the cause of their despair, Not yet. Not together."(Stone Virgins, 171-172). By accepting the uncommon terms of their relationship, Cephas, to some extent allows Nonceba to begin fending for her; a sure path to independence and a resistance to male subjugation under incestuous relationship. On The subject and power' (1982) Michel Foucault equates a struggle similar to that of Nonceba with struggle evolving around the question of self-discovery. Nonceba, like other female protagonists in Vera's novels, is using whatever agency available to them, even if that agency is against the society's social norms, to resist the power of domination and dependency in order to find her true self. Vera's protagonist in Nehanda is a woman who defies patriarchal order that expects a young adult woman to get married and have children. According to this order, a woman who refuses to get married is viewed as a social outcast and abnormal. Nehanda has chosen to remain a spinster and live according to the dictates of her ancestral spirits. She is totally silent about it and instead does whatever she can to be in communion with the dead ancestors. As a young woman, she spends most of her time sitting on a mat behind her mother's hut, oblivious to women's social activities:

> The women rise before the men to make the morning fires and prepare food. A woman who slept till the sun went into her month would be considered incapable of raising her household. Nehanda, who sits on a mat behind the hut, does not notice any of these activities. She sits with her legs stretched in front of her, and her arms folded across her chest, but often she releases them into her lap (Nehanda, 34).

Normal young woman who are yet to marry are expected to join in the women's activities to help their mothers as preparations to their future chores. Contrary to this expectation, Nehanda insensitively sits, leaving her aging mother to do all the house chores. This is a deviation from the norms of this society. Nehanda has chosen this path to set her apart for a different life style that she believes would lead her to a self-defined type of freedom. Nehanda's lack of interest in cultural socialization of gender and their roles is depicted through her insensitivity to her mother's toil to keep pace with grueling chores that threaten to break her down. The mother's trauma of failing to understand her is the least of her concern. The mother is said to have grown significantly old and even neurotic due to worries over her defiance against the norms of her patriarchal society that requires a woman to be voiceless and totally submissive. Nehanda is, instead working on controlling the village's

psychology and space. "In her desperate silence, Nehanda longs for a new language to seek wisdom, and ways of seeing" (Nehanda, 35). She does not make efforts to explain herself to anyone including her mother. Nehanda's mother is therefore very uncomfortable with her daughter's way of life. Nehanda has become the object of gossip in the village and though the mother spends time silencing the gossip, people view her as a letdown. When Nehanda refused to honour the marriage institution by failing to get married, she became a disgrace to the women and of course, the society. The women, including her mother, find her strange. They are at a loss on how to approach the subject with Nehanda. The mother says, "I dare not talk to her about such matters (Nehanda: 48). She braces a long distance walk to her maiden home to seek advice from her kin. As a mother, she is forced to look for solutions, to rescue her daughter from being an outcast in her own society. In her old age, she braves the long distance to her village to unburden herself. With tears streaming down her eyes, she tells her relatives. "My daughter is not my daughter." What has she done, has she said anything to her mother that her mother finds hard to forgive? "My daughter is no longer my daughter" she looks down to the ground and weeps (Nehanda, 49).

In her sorrow, mother disowns her daughter because she is not able to understand her queer actions. She suffers the deep pain that only a mother knows. Nehanda is set to follow a path that contradicts the societal expectations. With resolve and determination, she chooses to communicate with the underworld spirits and lives her life according to their commands. This self-asserted subverted way of life gives Nehanda a unique visibility that propels her to a position much higher than everyone in her community. She adorned herself with spiritual regalia which enable her to exercise leadership, power and dominion over her community. She leads political and spiritual life which puts her in direct control over her people. Under the muse of Mbuya Nehanda, a legendry spiritual woman leader, Nehanda passes as the spiritual leader of the first Shona liberation struggle. Like female protagonists in Vera are other novels, Nehanda faces several difficulties in the course of self-assertion and control of power. She enjoys neither her childhood nor adulthood. When the attention of other girls turns to courting and marriage, Nehanda is silent and withdrawn, awaiting her spiritual powers. When she receives her prophecy, Nehanda becomes an old woman, unable to bear children. Nehanda chooses to define herself differently and walk the path of the patriarchal male. To her, the life of child bearing and motherhood is an obstacle to societal service and self-assertion. Nehanda's way of life seems to get support among some radical feminists. When reassessing the pros and cons of biological motherhood, the radical feminists remain unconvinced that there is a safe form of biological motherhood for women to experience, that is, a form of motherhood that does not change both a woman's priorities and narrow her already limited range of alternatives. Jeffner Allen (1998),

for instance, urges women to "evacuate" motherhood to focus not on the power "to have" children but rather on the power "not to have" children. She argues:

> At present, and for several thousands of years past, women have conceived, borne, and raised multitudes of children without any change in the conditions of our lives as women. In the case that all females were to decide not to have children for the next twenty years, the possibilities for developing new modes of thought and existence would be almost unimaginable (Allen, 1998:91).

For Nehanda, virginity is handmaiden to spirituality, power and resistance to colonialism. She has defied traditional patriarchy through her rejection of all forms of male dominance. Rather than leave behind children to survive her, Nehanda lives on in the legends and history of Zimbabwe.

**4.0 Sex as a strategy of self-assertion**

Dictionary of Contemporary English defines prostitution as "to put a dishonorable use for money". It goes on to expand and specify the definition as "a person, especially a woman, who earns money by having sex with anyone who will pay for it" (833). Alison Jaggar (1983), views prostitution as an act of selling oneself. According to this view, prostitution alienates one from one's work. This is because what a woman sells in the case of prostitution is what is closest to her:

> Her body, her sexuality. So, under capitalism, a woman's sexuality becomes a commodity…The wife-prostitute and prostitute proper become dehumanized, and their value as persons is reduced to their market value (Jaggar, 1983).

In the patriarchal society, according to empirical experience, the act of prostitution has always been looked at as a deviant social act, and the prostitutes as outcasts due to their "shameful" actions and behaviours. Reading Vera's fiction in the light of the above postulations, this research views Vera's female characters as engaging in deviant social acts, primarily to resist male's exploitation and misuse of their sexuality, and instead give it out under their own terms. In Vera's novels, city women who free their sexuality from domesticity and male dominance do so at the cost of their reputations, their motherhood and sometimes their lives.

These women would rather abandon motherhood and marriages; roles exploited by men to dominate women, than endure male dominance. They have chosen to use their own bodies to create alternative narratives of resistance against subjugation even if it cost them their dignity. Getrude, Phephelaphi's mother-nurturer, strapped

her (child) on her back and took her "to every possible appointment with every possible male stranger" (Butterfly, 35). Phephelaphi's birthmother gave her up to pursue her illicit trade and pleasures. After a jealous lover murders Getrude, Phephelaphi destroys her mother's dress that was the symbol of her mother's prostitution. She recalls with shame and disappointment: "That dress, a hugging sort of dress which pronounced the ooze and low of all her energy" (Butterfly, 65). Not long after her mother's death, Phephelaphi helplessly goes to live with Zandile, her birth mother, but whom she knows only as her mother's friend. Zandile's code of dressing is the hallmark of her life as a prostitute. She is notoriously described as a woman "with earrings dangling down to her shoulders, her fingers glazed with nail polish and her lips coated with ambition. She is a woman who makes no distinction between white and black men when it comes to pleasure and exchange (Butterfly,33). Zandile has buried her conscience as far as prostitution is concerned. What matters to her is her kind of freedom to manipulate men for her pleasure and their money. An act of giving away a child to prostitute one's body is against the norms of the patriarchal society, yet Zandile is not about to abandon her trade any time soon. After she takes in her daughter as a young adult, Zandile is once again faced with the dilemma: should she have sex with her lover while her daughter lies awake behind a makeshift barrier" she does and immediately decides to have Phephelaphi move out. That night, Phephelaphi listened to the lovers:

> As she listened, Phephelaphi wondered where hope begun. With a sigh that was longer, louder, more satisfied than anything the two could ever have anticipated, she rolled over and turned her back to the moon (Butterfly, 83).

Twice rejecting her daughter, Zandile has chosen to use her body as a stepping-stone to her freedom in her own terms with the power of her body. Zandile is able to play superior with both white and black men dancing to her tune. The prostitute and the men are involved in complex power relationship. While the men imagine they are exploiting a woman's body to fulfill their sexual desires, the prostitute uses her body's power to manipulate the man to follow her dictates. In her analysis of prostitution, Simone de Beauvoir argues that; like the man who purchases her services, is an exploiter so is the prostitute who, does not simply prostitute herself for money but also for the homage men pay to her otherness (Beauvoir, 1949:208). Thus, prostitution, as depicted in Vera's novels, is the women's own agency of resisting men domination and colonial discipline. They use prostitution as a springboard to freedom and independence to do as they wish with their own bodies.

## 5.0 Conclusion

This chapter has explored the women's subversive narratives in Vera's fiction. The subversive narratives have been understood in this research as the deviant social acts such as prostitution, murder, infanticide rejections and gnawing silences that have been employed by the women as modes of resistance. They are acts that are influenced by mental impulses due to a lot of pain and suffering. Their desire to become significant human beings in their own terms and rights seem to push through to the conscious domain of their thinking faculties thus creating unwavering thoughts and determination to get to their imagined fulfilling destinations no matter what. Since the women have no access to dialogic space that is primarily theirs, they unwillingly enter into self-destructive mode because their attempts to free themselves are usually counterproductive. Although psychologically they do succeed to some extent, their newly reconstructed space in patriarchy is not ready for them, so it destroys them. The analysis therefore reveals how the writer has used the women's various modes of resistance to demonstrate the elusive nature of self-centered power. The writer's style shows that power that is wielded against another for self-elevation feeds on negative energy and occasions reversal destruction; what the research refers to as the paradox of power. This calls for an examination of the patriarchal society and its attendant players. The next chapter looks at the man and the force behind his appropriation of power. It interrogates the connection between men's aggression towards women, and the colonial administration in the society Vera writes about.

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