The Unheard Voices of Africa

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Abstract: This paper reflects on how the female subaltern constantly searches for a way to negotiate her repressive circumstances while she struggles against surrendering to a muted space. Different images of African women, as portrayed by two contemporary African female writers, namely Tsitsi Dangarembga (1959 – ) and Yvonne Vera (1964 – 2005), have been traced in order to depict these women's social realities. These authors present a critique of African societies that have been pushing women's voice into marginality. The paper argues that, contrary to Spivak's notion that the subaltern cannot speak, these authors present new and different subjectivities of women who challenge the myth of the silent subaltern.

Key words: African fiction, women, subaltern, Spivak, Dangarembga, Vera.

The representation of African female subjectivity and agency calls to mind the fundamental notion of the subaltern. Therefore an engagement with the Indian literary critic and theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak becomes indispensable. Although the term 'subaltern' was originally used by Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) to refer to the unorganized groups of peasants, based in Southern Italy, who simply had no political or social awareness, Spivak offers a definition of the subaltern 'which takes women's lives and histories into account'. Spivak's work focuses on the cultural differences between 'Third World' women and those living in the 'First World'.

As a cultural critic, Spivak thoroughly examines the influence and control of authority not just in society but also in written texts. In her well-known essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', she points out how the description of marginalized groups is somehow linked to the gendered, cultural, and socio-economic positioning of the Westerner. Spivak emphasizes how one cannot encounter the Third World without taking

into account already established ideas and concepts. Her concern is to highlight how Western intellectuals tend to employ general assumptions when speaking on behalf of indigenous minorities: the subaltern. Two Western intellectuals who did just this are Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze who cherished the assumption that, if given the opportunity, the oppressed can and know how to speak. In so doing, they do not take the interests of certain subaltern groups into consideration and even risk silencing the endeavours of Third-World people. Spivak questions whether the subaltern truly has the ability to speak, especially when one weighs the imperialist and patriarchal manipulations which are involved. Moreover, the gendered subaltern also bears the burden of her society’s patriarchal construction. Thus, the black woman is in a ‘doubly effaced’ situation, as a subaltern and as a gendered subaltern.

Spivak considers the ritual of sati, or widow self-immolation, which takes place in India. She discusses the rite of sati and how the British tried to eradicate this particular practice in order to save Indian women from their patriarchal society, without taking into consideration whether the Hindu women were willing to be immolated on their dead spouses’ tombs in the first place. Spivak translates this in the sentence ‘[w]hite men saving brown women from brown men’ and even refers to the Hindu nativist argument that ‘[t]he women actually wanted to die’. The British saw and described sati as a cruel and inhuman practice and so they defended the imposition of imperialist rules on such a ‘barbaric’ society. The white imperialists believed that they were ‘freeing’ Indian women from the rituals and customs of a patriarchal Hindu society, with the result that the Hindu woman came to be perceived as in need of ‘protection’ from her very own society and traditions. Spivak argues that the British simply disregarded the voice of these Hindu women which shows that the widow’s voice is completely silenced when both the social and political agendas of the subaltern woman are ignored. Spivak goes on to say that the female subaltern does not acquire subjectivity by following either the Hindu interpretation of freedom by immolating herself on her dead spouse’s pyre, nor through the colonials’ version of helping the gendered subaltern become ‘free’ from what they perceived to be an inhuman tradition. Hence, the female subaltern dwells in some kind of a displaced position, what Jean-François Lyotard has termed as the ‘“differend”, the inaccessibility of, or untranslatability from, one mode of discourse in a dispute to another’. Consequently, according to Spivak, even if the female subaltern tries to speak, it is almost impossible for her to be heard or understood.

The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labor, […] It is, rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow.

In a ‘Subaltern Talk’ interview carried out in 1993, Spivak further clarifies that, for her, the words ‘the subaltern cannot speak’ actually mean that ‘even when the subaltern makes an effort to the death to speak, she is not able to be heard’ and so the speech act remains ‘unfinished’.

**African women writers**

This issue of the subaltern striving to speak up and be heard is also common amongst African female authors. Consequently, black women writers are visibly distinct from white authors not because of their race but because they have experienced, and still continue to experience, both social subjugation and control exercised over them by Western culture. The critic Ogunyemi aptly comments how this is everyday reality for the subaltern female writer: ‘If we review the constant attempt by Western feminists to run African women’s lives in conferences without hearing or heeding what we have to say, the other side of our burden becomes clear – Western women are as much of a problem to us as black men.’

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2 R.C. Morris (ed.), *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the history of an idea* (New York, 2010), 269.

3 Ibid., 273.


5 Ibid., 292.


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female writers have reacted against the fact that Western feminists do not address issues that affect African women directly. As a result, African female writers have done away with archetypal pictures of women in their writings by emphasizing what African women go through so as to survive in the patriarchal society which they inhabit.

By zooming into the heart of some novels by two African women writers, namely Tsitsi Dangarembga (1959–) and Yvonne Vera (1964–2005), typical examples of the above-mentioned issues can be found. Both authors try to portray women’s experience in society as realistically as possible. Their narratives present the question of African women’s rights by highlighting their on-going battle against cultural and social forces. At times they even allow their black female characters a positive role despite their oppressive relationships vis-à-vis African culture. The authors’ main concern is to give these women a voice so that they would be able to present the plight of African women to the Western world. These novels also stress the fact that women should not merely aim to survive in the patriarchal society which they inhabit. Instead of being completely susceptible to the manipulations of patriarchal and imperialist forces. At times they even allow their black female characters a positive role despite their oppressive relationships vis-à-vis African culture. The authors’ main concern is to give these women a voice so that they would be able to present the plight of African women to the Western world.

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Dangarembga’s figuration of women fighting back

The undoing of fixed and marginalizing patriarchal representation of African women is represented in T. Dangarembga’s Nervous Conditions through the portrayal of five women who struggle to make their voices heard. It is the men who determine the acceptable standards of propriety while the women play a subservient role so that they would be able to gain the favour of their men within their family, be it husbands or fathers. The women are made to submit to the men’s orders with unquestioning obedience. The paragon of an ideal African wife is represented through the figure of Ma’Shingayi, the mother of the protagonist Tambu, who constantly submits to patriarchal oppression without having a voice of her own. Although she is aware that her social condition is not a desirable one, she accepts her burdens and even tries to make her daughter Tambu assent to this pernicious female condition. The critic Pauline Ada Uwakweh argues that Ma’Shingayi prefers her daughter to bear the same “fate as the all-sacrificing, voiceless female rather than be assertive and rebellious.” However, this submissive attitude causes Ma’Shingayi to almost degenerate into nothingness and madness. She starts expressing her feelings by withdrawing from family life, even refusing to look after her youngest child.

Uwakweh describes voicing as being ‘self-defining, liberalational, and cathartic. It proclaims an individual as a conscious being capable of independent thought and action.’ The female subaltern has therefore to work against the patriarchal system which deprives women of their voice and the ability to reason things out. In fact, Tambu describes herself as ‘a paragon of feminine decorum, principally because [she] hardly ever talked unless spoken to, and then only to answer with the utmost respect whatever question had been asked. Above all, [she] did not question things’ (NC, 155). Tambu is simply afraid of making Babamukuru, her uncle and benefactor, angry and so she muffles herself into silence.

Like Spivak’s subaltern confronting the act of sati, existing in between digressive constructions of her deed which are not truly her own, Tambu’s effort to assert her ideas is susceptible to patriarchal proclamations. When her uncle Babamukuru enforces a Christian wedding on her traditional Shona parents, Tambu is not able to vocalize her objections to the wedding because submissive silence is deeply embedded in her behaviour. Instead of vocalizing her distress, Tambu becomes ‘anxious and sleepless without knowing exactly why’, and she starts experiencing her guilt as physical paralysis (NC, 150). The inability to speak out causes her to be torn between the fulfilment of a colonial discourse by

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8 T. Dangarembga, Nervous Conditions (London, 1988). Hereafter abbreviated NC and thus cited parenthetically in the main text. Nervous Conditions is set in 1960s Rhodesia. Tambu, the narrator, grows and sells vegetables to raise money for her own school fees. Her uncle Babamukuru, his wife Beatrice, and their two children return from studying in England. Babamukuru chooses Nhamo, Tambu’s brother, to go to the mission school where he is headmaster, but after Nhamo’s sudden death, he is replaced by Tambu who becomes absorbed in her studies. Later she is offered a scholarship to study at an esteemed convent school. She soon falls out of touch with her cousin Nyasha who by now is suffering from a severe eating disorder. Eventually, Tambu starts questioning the world around her together with the influences that it exerts on her.


10 Ibid., 75.
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punished for her disobedience, for showing what she truly felt about the position. This is corroborated by Charles Johnson when he states that expected of her or else Babamukuru would stop buying her clothes, stop attending the Christian wedding and the observance of traditionalism in the midst of constant obedience and muteness. During the manner: ‘watching and doing nothing, keeping quiet in a quiet watch’ those ‘who may speak are those who have power; the voiceless - be they her benefactor’s reply is a threatening one. She would either do what is expected of her or else Babamukuru would stop buying her clothes, stop her school fees, and even send her back to her rural home. She is later punished for her disobedience, for showing what she truly felt about the wedding, by receiving fifteen lashes. Consequently, the female subaltern who tries to ‘speak’ is subjugated to nothingness because of her powerless position. This is corroborated by Charles Johnson when he states that those ‘who may speak are those who have power; the voiceless - be they children against adults, women against men, or blacks against whites – by relinquishing speech, are reduced to commodities and instruments for those who may speak’.13

In the sequel to Nervous Conditions, The Book of Not14 (2006), this issue is also highlighted in Tambu’s struggle to attain subjectivity in the midst of constant obedience and muteness. During the ‘morari’,15 Tambu and the villagers observe Babamukuru being beaten in an unruly manner: ‘watching and doing nothing, keeping quiet in a quiet watch’

12 ‘The next morning, the morning of the wedding, I found I could not get out of bed. I tried several times but my muscles simply refused to obey the half-hearted commands I was issuing to them. […] It was easier to lie there on my back, apparently paralysed and staring at the ceiling’ (NC, 166).
14 T. Dangarembga, The Book of Not (Oxfordshire, 2006), hereafter abbreviated BoN and thus cited parenthetically in the main text. The Book of Not, set mostly at the school Tambu attends, tells her struggles in colonial Rhodesia with the backdrop of the rebel war and movement to an independent Zimbabwe. The story plots Tambu’s stolen achievements and destroyed hopes as she starts rejecting her village life and becomes embarrassed of her culture. She becomes aware that she cannot change the race politics of post-colonial Rhodesia. Her attempts to enter new socio-economic standing remain unfulfilled since she cannot change the fact that she is still black.
15 ‘Morari’ is a political gathering which aims to increase support for ‘freedom fighters’ while also attempting to instill loyalty in the villagers (BoN, 4).
attending the Christian wedding and the observance of traditionalism by refusing to consider such a ceremony. She ends up with a ‘fractured’ subjectivity, vacillating between ‘two disconnected entities that had long, frightening arguments with each other, very vocally, there in [her] head’ (NC, 167). Thus, Tambu finds herself in this muted space, in a position of non-agency which Jean-François Lyotard terms the ‘différend’.11 When she eventually uses a different way of speaking by reacting physically,12 her benefactor’s reply is a threatening one. She would either do what is expected of her or else Babamukuru would stop buying her clothes, stop attending the Christian wedding and the observance of traditionalism the midst of constant obedience and muteness. During the manner: ‘watching and doing nothing, keeping quiet in a quiet watch’ those ‘who may speak are those who have power; the voiceless - be they her benefactor’s reply is a threatening one. She would either do what is expected of her or else Babamukuru would stop buying her clothes, stop attending the Christian wedding and the observance of traditionalism the midst of constant obedience and muteness. During the manner: ‘watching and doing nothing, keeping quiet in a quiet watch’

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level of education (she holds a Master’s degree), she has the African culture and patriarchy so deeply embedded within her that she is forced into silence. She simply takes up the role of providing confirmation to whatever her husband says. When she decides to leave her home as a way of protesting against the way she is treated, she shows that she is able to act in ways which differ from patriarchal and socially imposed norms. The irony is that this change is short-lived since she returns home after just a few days. Although Maiguru ‘speaks’ out through her bold departure, her voice is only partially heard since, being a traditionalist female subaltern, she is made to shuffle back to her husband.

However, in contrast to the submissive role of the female subaltern, Dangarembga’s text also offers an alternative to Spivak’s notion of the speechless subaltern. Through the character of Lucia, Ma’Shingayi’s sister, Dangarembga manages to depict a subaltern woman who breaks away from the male oppressive system and even speaks her mind. Lucia does this by recognizing the existence of a weakness within patriarchy and uses it to her own advantage. She highly praises Babamukuru’s power so as to manipulate him into getting her a job at the mission school where he is the headmaster. She gives the males within the patriarchy an illusory sense that she is in awe of them while she works to escape their control by achieving her own financial independence in a society which gives importance to male dominance. In spite of her subaltern position, Lucia, therefore, reverses Spivak’s notion that the subaltern cannot speak since she manages to violate the paradigm of male authority and even becomes a threat to male power. She does not hesitate to barge in and voice her opinion during a patriarchal family meeting in which decisions which concern women’s lives are taken. Lucia feels free to voice her discontent with any decisions taken and so she manages to resist oppression. According to Spivak, subalternity is ‘oppression itself’ and so it is questionable whether Lucia remains a subaltern, in Spivak’s terms, the minute she is able to confront oppression. Nonetheless, it could be argued that Lucia succeeds in resisting male oppression not oppression in general. In fact, she still has to endure the way she is viewed and treated in society, where she is regarded as some kind of ‘witch’ (NC, 126). Hence, Lucia is a sort of a ‘newly’ created subaltern and so, since she remains a subaltern, it could be said that Dangarembga, in her portrayal of Lucia, goes against Spivak’s aspect of the female subaltern as a non-speaking subject. Elisa S. Thiago consolidates this view when she argues that ‘Dangarembga demystifies the concept of the silenced subaltern when she gives Lucia an authentic, reliable voice. Lucia’s authenticity […] relates to her achieving voice and agency while preserving her own African identity.’

While Lucia speaks out throughout the text, the protagonist of Nervous Conditions, Tambu, is voiceless until she grows up and becomes capable of attaining a voice through the narration of her own story, ‘an act that gives her liberation from her patriarchal-imposed silence and offers hope in the resilience and success of female challenge’. When the plot of the novel is resolved, Tambu comes across as a confident person, someone who is ready to speak out the truth about the lives of the people around her. The old Tambu turns out to be an efficacious narrator who turns Dangarembga’s text into a convincing alternative to Spivak’s view of the female subaltern who does not have the ability to chronicle her story. Commenting on the ability of Tambu to narrate her own story, Linda E. Chown notes that ‘Dangarembga’s novel gradually spins a context other than Gayatri Spivak’s well-known “the subaltern cannot speak”. In contrast, Tambu speaks, remembers; she revels in the story, her story, what she has told, said, thought, and written.’

Women as victims and agencies of change in Yvonne Vera’s novels

While Dangarembga deals with the problems that the female subaltern faces in order to speak, Yvonne Vera makes an effort to break the silence surrounding disturbing painful memories and taboo issues. Vera’s work unfolds the language of trauma that the female subaltern has to endure as a result of male oppression and how this translates into a space of muteness which the female victim constantly has to drudge against. This is because trauma, which is present in most of


19 Uwakweh, 77.
20 L.E. Chown, ‘“Two Disconnected Entities”: The Pitfalls of Knowing in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s Nervous Conditions’ in Ann Elizabeth Willey & Jeanette Treiber (eds.), Negotiating the Postcolonial: Emerging Perspectives on Tsitsi Dangarembga (Eritrea, 2002), 238.
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Vera’s novels, 'robs the main characters of the power of the spoken language'.

When talking about the effects of trauma, one has to mention its 'devastating and decomposing effects on language and communication' since it is able to eradi cate the ability to speak out and have a voice. The critic Muchemwa gives three isolated meanings of voice: 'speech', 'the power to articulate', and 'authority to speak oneself, others and the world'. He goes on to clarify the first two terms by claiming that 'speech' signifies 'the possession of language that allows characters to engage in significant speech acts' while 'the power to articulate' is what 'denotes the ability to protest and indict'.

Vera’s fiction attempts to search for a language which would break the silence around disturbing memories in order to reclaim the suppressed voices of women. Her novel *Without a Name* (1994) is a taboo-breaking text which violates the silence and gives fictional voicing to repressed experiences. The meanings that Muchemwa attributes to voice are all lost on Mazvita, the protagonist of *Without a Name*, since she cannot engage in speech acts or voice her pain in any way. Mazvita finds out that she is carrying a baby after being raped by a freedom-fighter. Throughout her pregnancy, Mazvita tries to 'bury the child inside her body' in an attempt to forget about her traumatic past. She eventually strangles the baby in an attempt to bury her traumatic event. However, as the narrator states, recollections of trauma should be voiced not muffled: 'she needed to tell of her own suffering [...] to hear her own suffering uttered, acknowledged' (*WaN*, 36).

Although Mazvita longs to forget, she is aware that if she had to find a voice with which to share her traumatic memory, she would start to feel better but, nonetheless, she remains enveloped in silence for '[w]here will I speak this tale, with which mouth, for I have no mouth left' (*WaN*, 98). Vera’s Mazvita therefore resembles the Spivakian subaltern who cannot speak because she has lost the ability to do so. When eventually Mazvita goes back to her village in order to bury her baby, she wanders back to her past, to her origins, thus indicating that the possibility of a new start is futile by now since 'the silence is deep, hollow, and lonely' (*WaN*, 116).

Vera tries to construct a feminine voice that challenges cultural silencing. Her novel *Under the Tongue* (1996) reveals the search for a language with which to retrieve the suppressed voices of women. The opening of the novel instantly points out the quiescent voice of the protagonist, Zhizha, and her attempt to forget personal suffering: 'A tongue which no longer lives, no longer weeps. It is buried beneath rock' (*UT*, 121). The young Zhizha is raped by her father. Her mother, Runyararo, and Grandmother try to help her surmount the voiceless trauma that she suffers as a result of the incest. In her reading, Nana Wilson-Tagoe considers that incest is an exploitation of women's powerlessness within a world constructed around their silence; on
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24 Ibid., 4.

25 Y. Vera, Without a Name and Under the Tongue (New York, 2002), hereafter abbreviated WaN and thus cited parenthetically in the main text. Without a Name ’charts the course of a young woman, Mazvita, as she journeys from rural Mubaira to the chaos of late 1970s Harare, a hotbed of violent political action and revolutionary social change. After collapsing from mental and physical exhaustion, Mazvita moves in with a young man, who, when it becomes evident that she is pregnant, turns Mazvita out of his home. Destitute, she is led by fear and desperation to commit an unthinkable act.”


27 Y. Vera, Without a Name and Under the Tongue (New York, 2002), hereafter abbreviated UIT and thus cited parenthetically in the main text. With Under the Tongue, Vera became the first Zimbabwean writer to deal frankly with the problem of incest that plagued the country.
another level it is a negative symptom of a construction of masculinity embedded in the community’. 28 Zhizha’s rape, therefore, represents the patriarchal power of the father to circumscribe female sexuality and voice, causing Zhizha to lose her speech: ‘My voice is sinking down into my stomach. My voice is crumbling and falling apart and spreading through his fingers’ (UIT, 123).

This type of patriarchal rule simply takes away the right to speak as is reinforced in what Grandmother is told by her husband Va Gomba: ‘a woman cannot speak’ (UIT, 165). In spite of pleading to talk about the family’s past such as the death of Tonderayi, the son who was born with an accumulation of fluid in the brain, Grandmother’s voice is repressed because silence has been forced in their marriage:

I have asked, is it well if I speak the heaviness on my shoulders? I have asked if my woman’s voice can be heard, small as it is, is it not your voice too, does my voice not belong to you as I do? Can a woman not speak the word that oppresses her heart, grows heavy on her tongue [...] Will my word grow into a tree while I water it every day with silence? (UIT, 165–6)

However, in spite of the silence that Grandmother herself is made to endure, she manages to help Zhizha regain her speech loss. Zhizha communicates her feelings through the voice of her grandmother as ‘only Grandmother’s voice remembers me. Her voice says that before I learned to forget there was a river in my mouth’ (UIT, 121). With the help of Grandmother, Zhizha is able to overcome the effects of being unable to speak out about her trauma due to the dominant culture of silence. The consequences are horrendous: ‘I feel my eyelids fall while my tongue grows thick and heavy, pressed between my teeth. My tongue is hard like stone. I dare not cry or breathe’ (UIT, 229). Vera abominares this loss of speech. This is embodied in Ifeyinwa Ogbazi’s remark that Vera ‘condemns the state of being voiceless because for her, survival is in the mouth. Redemption can only come from an individual’s ability to speak out. She believes that men’s suppression of the female speech has heightened the suffering of women’. 29


When Zhizha’s mother, Runyararo, discovers that her husband raped their daughter, she kills him in an act of revenge. Ironically, the name Runyararo means ‘silence’. 30 This typifies male domination which silences women but Runyararo manages to transform her silence into a ‘speaking act’ by murdering her husband. Hence, on a symbolical level, what she is not allowed to voice out, she articulates through her exertion of agency. Runyararo kills him and through her crime she also breaks her silence but she still remains oppressed by being locked up behind prison bars.

This reminds one of what Spivak argues in her discussion of Bhubaneswari Bhaduri’s suicide, a middle-class, Indian woman who hanged herself in her father’s apartment in 1926 during her menstruation. 31 As Spivak contends, Bhubaneswari was an active militant: ‘a member of one of the many groups involved in the armed struggle for Indian independence’. 32 Spivak goes on to point out that Bhubaneswari tried to conceal her association with the resistance movement through her ‘elaborate suicide ritual that resembled the ancient practice of Hindu widow sacrifice’ even though she was not a widow and she did not kill herself on a funeral pyre. 33 Spivak interprets the fact that she hanged herself during menstruation as a ‘reversal of the interdict against a menstruating widow’s right to immolate herself’. 34 However, Spivak argues that in spite of being courageous, Bhubaneswari’s act was ‘unemphatic’ since the ‘subaltern as female cannot be heard or read’ in the male-centred concepts of the struggle for national independence. 35 Spivak goes on to state that her point ‘was not to say that they couldn’t speak, but that, when someone did try to do something different, it could not be acknowledged because there was no institutional validation’. 36 Hence, their speech acts and efforts at insurgency cannot be heard because subaltern women are not represented within influential political systems.

In this context, the subalternity depicted in Vera’s text through the fictional character of Runyararo makes an attempt at insurgency, as in the 

30 Muchemwa, in Muponde and Taruvinga (eds.), 11 and Samuelson in Muponde and Taruvinga (eds.), 21.
31 Bhubaneswari Bhaduri was Spivak’s grandmother’s sister. Spivak learned of Bhubaneswari’s life and death through family connections.
32 Spivak, in Morris (ed.), 282.
33 Morton, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 64 (emphasis in original).
34 Spivak, in Morris (ed.), 282.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., 228.
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case of Bhubaneswari, but she remains unheard because her bold act of killing her husband is even silenced by her own relatives: ‘Grandfather says we must not talk of mother’ (UtT, 194). Zhizha herself is made to forget her own mother and eventually, it is Grandmother who becomes mother to Zhizha: ‘I have my Grandmother, she is my mother’ (UtT, 207). Yet, when Runyararo is out of prison, she helps Zhizha recover from the trauma of rape by re-teaching her how to speak since as Runyararo tells her daughter, ‘we live with our voices rich with remembrance. We live with words’ (UtT, 203). By re-acquiring her language, Zhizha recovers her identity. As Muchemwa argues, speech is associated ‘with presence, life, affirmation, and freedom’ and so, the minute Zhizha confronts the taboo of incest through the help of her Grandmother and mother, she regains her voice and acquires a presence. She manages to overcome the ‘patriarchal world that has organized a world around women’s silence’. Zhizha, as the critic Wilson-Tagoe concedes, ‘finally transgresses the incest taboo to unleash the potential for change and power’. However, this can only take place by the involvement of her female relatives who help her confront the silencing taboo through a recollection of memory and a language with which to narrate the trauma and prevail over the perpetrator.

As in Without a Name and Under the Tongue, Vera’s The Stone Virgins (2002), deals with the problem of verbalizing the trauma that the female protagonist endures. This novel examines the cruel acts organized by the state in the 1980s under the regime of Mugabe. Vera describes how Sibaso, a liberation guerrilla, beheads Thenjiwe, then rapes and mutilates her twin sister, Nonceba, whose lips are sliced by the same man. As a result, Nonceba is mute for much of the narrative since she literally cannot articulate the trauma that she endured. Nonetheless, she challenges this complete silence which envelops her since she realizes that she must not let it shatter her. She tries hard to move her lips in order ‘to tell them everything’ that she had seen (TSV, 114). The critic Toivanen rightly contends that ‘the only way to challenge the violator’s version of what has taken place is to have the possibility to voice it’.

Yet, in order to do this, Nonceba has to undergo several operations to have her lips restored and healed. This depicts the painful process of one’s recovery from trauma but also draws attention to the fact that ‘wounds that no one can hear; the wounds are in their hearts’ and so ‘only the skin heals’ (TSV, 95).

Just like Zhizhza and Mazvita find it difficult and painful to remember their traumatic past, Nonceba also encounters difficulties but she resists falling into oblivion. She wants to defy the absolute silence that her perpetrator tried to inflict on her the minute he sliced off her lips, by revealing him to others. With the support of a female relative and Cephas, the man who was her sister’s lover, she manages to overcome her trauma and find a job in Bulawayo. Unlike Zhizha’s traumatic memory which is transfigured into a silence that shuns language, Nonceba is able to ‘open her mouth and let the sound free’ (TSV, 90). Her recovery is helped by Cephas because ‘he allows her the freedom to control her body, and does not make any attempt to control her movement’. Therefore while she is silenced and suffers pain at the hands of a man, she also regains her strength with the help of a male figure. Consequently, it is not men in general who silence the subaltern woman but those African males who treat women as subservient subjects.

Conclusion

Different images of silent African women, as portrayed by two African women writers, have been traced in order to depict the social realities of the female subaltern. In analysing both the personal and cultural struggles of African women, these authors demonstrate the heavy burdens that the female subaltern has to endure since most of the time she finds herself in a muted space which leads to a position of non-agency. Moreover, for

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37 Muchemwa, in Muponde and Taruvinga (eds.), 9.
38 Wilson-Tagoe, in Muponde and Taruvinga (eds.), 175.
39 Ibid., 177.
40 Y. Vera, The Stone Virgins (New York, 2003), hereafter abbreviated TSV and thus cited parenthetically in the main text. The Stone Virgins examines the subject of violence ‘from the perspective of two sisters living in a small township outside of Bulawayo. Weaving historical fact within a story of grand passions and striking endurance, Vera has fashioned an uncompromising portrait of life before and after the liberation.’
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the majority, the female subaltern who tries to challenge this precarious position by trying to speak out is subjugated to acts of violence because of her powerless situation. Yet, the women in these narratives, while appearing voiceless, are not merely victims. Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*, while outlining women’s harsh reality in the likes of Ma’Shingayi and Maiguru, seeks to provide new concepts of feminine subjectivity in her portrayal of Lucia who goes against Spivak’s aspect of the female subaltern as a non-speaking subject.

Similarly, while Vera’s various female figurations experience the most atrocious acts, she challenges the gendered myths of silent women through her novels. Vera’s texts affirm the encumbrances that women face at the hands of males. Her female characters undergo instances of physical violence and rape which render them mute. However, she tries to break the silence surrounding such painful acts and memories in order to reclaim the muzzled voices of women. With the help and agency of others, women like Zhizha and Nonceba manage to overcome the problem of verbalizing their trauma and subvert their muted space. Moreover, at times the female subaltern ‘speaks’ through acting out rather than articulating verbally as in the case of Runyararo in *Under the Tongue*. While these writers contradict Spivak’s notion that the subaltern cannot speak, their proposal seems to be that the subaltern is able to speak but in her own type of language. In the same vein, Novak argues that ‘the transformation of the address needs to lie not in bringing the Other into language and signification but in transforming the addressee so that he or she is capable of hearing what is being spoken.’

Consequently, what seems to be the female subaltern’s inability to speak is actually her counterpart’s incompetence to understand what is being said. This alternative to women’s inability to speak deviates from past images of muted African women. In analysing the subaltern females’ personal and cultural struggles to overcome their muteness, this paper has tried to show how the two authors under examination challenge the myth of silent African women and show the strategies they use to voice themselves.

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