


The Nehanda mythology: Dialectics of gender, history and religion in Zimbabwean literature

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Recently, the government of Zimbabwe unveiled a newly constructed statue of the esteemed spirit medium and liberation icon who intrepidly fought against the British imperialism. The distinguished heroine is passionately known as Mbuya Nehanda Charwe Nyakasikana. The lexical item, 'Mbuya' in Shona language literally means grandmother. This study examines the ways in which the spectres of religion, historiography, gender and national politics find expression in often contested state narratives of Mbuya Nehanda and in selected Zimbabwean fictional writings. Foucault's theorisation of socio-political practices and subjectification as sites of power, together with the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework and bell hooks' feminist thought of 'talking back', provide provocative insights about regimes of power that could be more edifying in the interlocking discursive terrain of the African cosmology, frequently disputed archeology of historical memory, socio-political relations, which are noticeable in discourses and gender politics. The study interrogates whether the Nehanda grand narrative is told by politicians as the revolutionary story of all citizens or not. If not, what alternative versions are proffered in selected Yvonne Vera and NoViolet Bulawayo's literary texts? Arguably, the mythology of Nehanda in the chosen literary texts locates women as agents of revolution thereby generating semantic dissonance in the Zimbabwean context, which is largely considered as land of the Fathers.

Contribution: The study situates the Nehanda narrative within contested terrains of national history, gender and religion in Zimbabwe's transitional politics and literature. It concludes that in Vera and Bulawayo's writings, the Nehanda narrative is deployed to interject significations of woman (hood) and nation (hood) which seek to marginalise some sections of the society. The dissonances embedded in the Nehanda narrative produce a dialoguing space that 'talks back' and rebuts single storytelling.

Keywords: African cosmos; Critical Discourse Analysis; gender; Foucauldian theorisation; history; Nehanda mythology; nation (hood); power.

Introduction

In 2021, the Zimbabwean President, Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa, unveiled a recently erected statue of the most revered spirit medium who intrepidly fought against British imperialism. The distinguished heroine is passionately known in the country as 'Mbuya' Nehanda Charwe Nyakasikana. The honourific Shona language lexical item, 'Mbuya' literally means grandmother. Yvonne Vera's (1993) *Nehanda* and NoViolet Bulawayo's (2022) *Glory* provide essential tropes that could yield fresh acumens in debating Nehanda narrative in Zimbabwe today. Foucault's theorisation of socio-political practices and subjectification as sites of power, together with the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework, provide stimulating insights that could be more edifying in the interlocking discursive terrain of the African cosmology, archeology of historical memory, gender and nation (hood). The study seeks to interrogate whether the Mbuya Nehanda grand narrative is told as the revolutionary story of all citizens or not. If not, what alternative versions are suggested in Vera and Bulawayo's fictional narratives through an act of 'talking back?'

Foucault's formulations of power, Critical Discourse Analysis and Hook's feminist thought

This study draws its analytical lens from Michel Foucault's (1971, 1978) conceptualisation of power, Critical Discourse Analysis, hereafter CDA and bell hooks' (1986) feminist notion of talking back. Michel Foucault is a French philosopher whose theorisation of power has not been applied to read the discourse of Nehanda and its ensuing polemics of power, gender, and socio-religious

Note: Special Collection: Zimbabwean Scholars in Dialogue, sub-edited by Conrad Chibango (Great Zimbabwe University).

dialectics in modern-day Zimbabwe. The Foucauldian framework is adopted to question how the state employs its strategies or technologies to enact power (Powell 2015), and impose its political ideology. One of the salient features in Foucault's thought is the struggle to control the body of knowledge that then shapes human thinking and practices (Powell 2015). For Foucault (1988:20) 'every point in the exercise of power is a site where knowledge is formed'. Conversely, each established piece of knowledge sanctions the performance of power. From Foucault's view, discourse just like knowledge is an effect of power that should be always probed. Thus, in this study, the figure of Mbuya Nehanda is examined vis-a-vis Foucault's formulation of the subject as occupying a possible position of function in discourse. According to Fairclough (1992), CDA arose from Roger Fowler's Critical Linguistics (CL) and Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics. Critical Discourse Analysis is mainly concerned with issues of language, actions of power and ideology as they are enacted in discourse (Van Dijk 1993). A critical view in CDA is its recognition that language use is a sociopolitical practice informed by its context of use and intended function or meaning. In addition, CDA considers language as a potent means through which particular worldviews, identities, power structures and cultures become dominant and sustained in a society (Wodak 2001). bell hooks (1986) feminist concept of talking back offers discursive praxes of gender politics and resistance of patriarchal traditions in the context of Vera and Bulawayo's literary writings. The choice of these conceptual models is informed by their capacity to shed more light on both subtle and visible forms of power embedded in the Nehanda narrative as part of both Zimbabwean politics and its presentation in the chosen novels. The theories are utilised to discuss the censored subaltern narratives, which are at odds with gendered national history, socio-cultural imaginaries and religious discourses entwined in the Nehanda metanarrative.

Locating Mbuya Nehanda in Zimbabwe's archeology of history and memory

The name Nehanda Charwe Nyakasikana whose real name was Nyamhita, is linked in the Zimbabwean political domain to the venerated historical memory of a great ancestral spirit medium from the *First Chimurenga* historical epoch, who heroically resisted white settlers in the 18th century. Nehanda is also recalled as a revered mythical princess of Shona ethnic lineage (Bull-Christiansen 2004). She deterred the British white settlers during their forceful occupation in Zimbabwe. Before she was sentenced to death by the colonial regime, Nehanda legendarily proclaimed that her bones would rise again to haunt her persecutors. It is claimed that her prophesy motivated the second Chimurenga that overthrew the white rule and ushered in independence in 1980 (Dube 2018). Mhlanga (2013) asserts that during the nationalist movements in the 20th century, Nehanda came to be a central political and symbolic figure. She was highly celebrated as one of the founding pillars of the nation who died fighting against

white rule. It is also appropriate to argue that Nehanda does not only symbolically represent the resistance to colonial rule but has been commemorated and elevated into the narrative of the 'nation' (Beach 1998:27) and its idyllic past. Furthermore, Nehanda signifies a religious dimension in Zimbabwe that is African Traditional Religion (ATR), because of the role she played as an esteemed spirit medium among her people. Being a spirit medium of the renowned rain goddess Nyamhita Nyakasikana of Handa, the late heroine, intermediated between her people and ancestors in the African indigenous religion cosmos that prevailed during her time (Dube 2018; Mavengano 2023a). Nehanda thus embodies inherited religio-cultural practices and her memory is used to pay homage to ancestral foundation of the Zimbabwean society. However, this supposed illustrious historical memory is masked in toxic political culture and has recently triggered critical conversations that underline the idea that the Nehanda discourse has become a disputed discursive terrain in the contemporary Zimbabwe. This situation is aggravated by the prevalent postcolonial context defined by foreboding human relations between the authoritative ruling elites and a subdued ordinary citizenry. Critics of the postcolonial environment in Zimbabwe such as Moyo and Mavengano (2021), Muchemwa (2010), Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2009), Ranger (2004), among others contend that the existing political culture, has utterly deviated from the founding principles of the nation (hood), which was fought for by the First Chimurenga liberators like Nehanda, Chaminuka and Kaguvi. The current Zimbabwean President, Mnangagwa just like his predecessor's government is indicted for deploying Nehanda's mythologised historical figure as an ideological apparatus in Althusserian conception of state power to reinforce Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front's (ZANU PF) parochial nationalist conceptions and to erect socio-political or cultural binaries. Yet, the government of Zimbabwe and the ruling party, ZANU PF claim that those who despise the memory of Nehanda and criticise the recent construction of Nehanda's statue are unquestionably enemies of the nation (Mavaza 2021). It is amidst these competing discourses that this study could be opportune to re-examine such tensions and dissonances linked to the memory of Nehanda today. Taking Yvonne Vera and NoViolet Bulawayo's works as framing references, this article also reflects upon the implications of these contestations with regards to the present-day nationhood in Zimbabwe. In doing this, the study further re-examines conflicting positioning of women or the gendered imaginings of power in the national space in what Elden (2001:152) calls 'a history of the present in cultural and political capital'.

Locating the Mbuya Nehanda mythology in Zimbabwean fictional writings

Nehanda is a significant figure in Zimbabwean literature who has been used to articulate violent foreign intrusion and its adversarial impact on political, sociocultural and spiritual

existence of the subjugated indigenous Africans. The execution of Nehanda marked increased spiritual denigration of the politically dominated subjects in the 18th century as the prisoners were compelled to relinquish their spirituality (Vambe 2002). Nehanda's defiance led her to the gallows. The legendary narrative of Nehanda in Zimbabwean literary tradition can be traced back to fictional works such as *Feso* and *Mweya waNehanda*, written in Shona language by Solomon Mutsvairo, Shimmer Chinodya's *Harvest of Thorns* as well as *Death Throes: The Trial of Ambuya Nehanda*, by Charles Samupindi. Likewise, Chenjerai Hove fictionalised Nehanda's remarkable boldness and prophecy in one of his novels, *Bones* as conveyed in the following excerpt:

You can torture me, spread my bowels for the jackals to eat and tear them to pieces, mutilate my body with your anger, throw my brains to the vultures, leave the remains of my body in the playground for your children to play with, cut my ears to decorate your own ears, cut my fingers use them to wipe your own sweat... my bones will rise in the spirit of war. (Hove 1988:53)

The passage conveys how Nehanda dared her oppressors even at the point of her assassination. Her decree foregrounds her obstinate spirit that she sustained even under duress and torment.

Yvonne Vera and recently NoViolet Bulawayo's fictional writings in the novels, *Nehanda and Glory*, respectively, defy the problematic masculine representation of Nehanda in Zimbabwean politics. Vera (1993) employs her allusive style and poetic language to rewrite national history and rebuke phallogocentric narrative in her first novel, *Nehanda* (Ranger 2004). By making the character, Nehanda, the protagonist in her novel, Vera, reconstructs a heroine whose impertinence and rebellious spirit live on beyond her grave. Nehanda does not lose her valiant position among her people because of her death in both novels. This depiction is also in line with these two novelists' preoccupation with female conditions across historical epochs. For instance, Vera's other novels, *Without a Name*, *Under the Tongue*, *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgin* show her concern with women's marginalised positions in the society. It is this feminist tradition that also comes out distinctively in Bulawayo's second novel, *Glory* that profoundly pays homage to Vera through its orality and intertextual references to *Butterfly Burning*, *Nehanda* and *Under the Tongue* (Mavengano 2023a).

Bringing Yvonne Vera and Violet Bulawayo's literary texts into conversation

The selection of Vera's text, *Nehanda* together with Bulawayo's *Glory* is informed by re-deploying of Nehanda mythology to interrogate depiction of socio-cultural and political relations that continue to signify phallogocentric gender representations (Mavengano 2023a; Muchemwa 2010). What is quite intriguing about Vera and Bulawayo's literary archives is an apparent effort to refashion a discursive space for restorative

actions and completeness that promote survival of the society. In *Nehanda*, Vera combines reality and myth to defy both the (pre) colonial and patriarchal traditions that collaborate to weigh down the subordinated African female subjects (Cox 2007). Likewise, in *Glory* (2022), Bulawayo satirises the postcolonial condition in Zimbabwe and how the nation space has reduced ordinary citizens to perpetual state of victimhood mainly emanating from a tainted socio-political order. A fictionalised Jidada nation just like existent Zimbabwe, is held hostage by a tyrannical government that has no respect for democratic ethos. Bulawayo adopts a cynical style to describe postcolonial Zimbabwe as a site of political impunity, stagnation, complicity and religio-ethical vices (Mavengano 2023a). The country descended into a chaotic state under a dictatorial leader, an Old Horse who ruled for almost four decades. The ruler is also known as 'Father of the Nation', a caricature and pastiche of postcolonial African despots whose logic of rulership includes instilling fear and public brutal killings of the civilians presumed to be 'enemies of the state' (Bulawayo 2022). The historical setting of the novel dates back to the early days of independence, capturing the civil tension in the Northern part of Zimbabwe, infamously known as Gukurahundi. The narrative plot moves back and forth through a series of flashbacks and memory tropes. The novel dramatises the removal of Mugabe from power that took place in 2017, ending with the present moment of Mnangagwa's reign in the post-Mugabe era in Zimbabwe. It foregrounds the lives of female characters as the plot follows the lives of Destiny and her mother Simiso who survived the traumatic experiences of rape and political torture. The two women are among the victims of the autocratic regime during the Old Horse who is Robert Mugabe's fictional doppelganger in the novel and even after his reign has ended, their condition of victimhood persists. The two male-centred regimes stamped upon the female subaltern in a grotesque manner as conveyed through the 'deep furrow' on Destiny and Simiso's brutalised bodies (Bulawayo 2022:223). An arresting feature of Bulawayo's novel is, all the characters are animals residing in their Animal Kingdom of Jidada, evoking an Orwellian world. The writer lays bare fraught human relations, gendering practices and profound disillusionment among the marginalised. In the text, the spirit of Nehanda is offended by the state of affairs in postcolonial Zimbabwe and comes back to join hands with the oppressed especially women and children victimised by the state. This makes, *Glory* a suitable novel to read together with Vera's *Nehanda*.

It is the land of fathers not mothers: Ambiguities in Zimbabwe's patriarchal organogram

Gender politics in Zimbabwean society is buttressed by religio-cultural stereotypes that recurrently produce fissures between the sexes. In the novel *Nehanda*, Vera introduces gender politics through symbolic representation. When Nehanda was born, she did not cry and her initial failure to use voice figuratively announces the author's concern about

muzzling of women in a male-dominated society. The following passage thus serves to illuminate this:

After she had been born she did not cry for a day. Mother was worried about this silent child whom she had brought into the world, and wondered if her daughter had the power to assert her own presence on the earth. Where would the mother gather the gifts of speech for her child if it was true that her daughter had lost the gift on that perilous journey out of the womb? ... Afterwards, she cried, and the women sang her back to sleep, willing a silence onto her. She defied them with her tiny speech-seeking voice and cried all day and all night until the mother fell asleep. (Vera 1993:10–11)

Nehanda's initial failure to use language is inconsistent with her later role as she is endowed with the gift to speak for her people, arguably, a rich tradition of orature that is stifled by both patriarchy and a harmful colonisers' political culture. Remarkably, Vera and Bulawayo draw attention to women's muteness. The child's lack of speech at birth troubles the mother who regards it as a self-assertive act. Of note here is that Nehanda recovers her expressive capacity, thereby symbolically defies imposed silences. Likewise, in *Glory*, Bulawayo presents her two female characters who deploy the non-verbal mode to reveal their desecrated bodies. These characters fail to find verbal language that can express their traumatic experiences. Yet, their mutism is ironically audible as the cause of pain is captured through a multimodal textual construction of visual imagery and other non-verbal semiotic codes making 'the mutilated bodies' conspicuous. The deep furrows on Destiny and Simiso's bodies are wounds caused by the vicious state agents who beat and raped these women over different historical periods in post-independent Zimbabwe. The cracks or furrows metaphorically signify the extreme form of violence and thereby re-enact Mbembe's (1992) construct of grotesque in the postcolonial rulership. The hyperbolic signification frames subjection of the oppressed people whose wounds are permanent marks of dictatorship. In this regard, the act of the muted undressing undertaken by both Simiso and her daughter, Destiny, is subversive as it reveals what has been hidden 'under the tongue' of the victims of an autocratic regime. Their silent stripping also signifies their debased freedom and bare lives to borrow from Agamben's (1998) notion. Both these women live under patriarchal authority as well as marginalised political others. The deep angry furrows on Destiny and her mother's bodies also speak about an unhomey postcolonial homeland to evoke Homi Bhabha's (1994) language. The nature of violence illustrated in the fictionalised Zimbabwe speaks about the hollowness of independence and women's generational intersubjectivity.

Historical details about Gukurahundi are brought out to point fingers at ZANU-PF's hostility towards citizens. Simiso's madness could then be interpreted as a symbolic disengagement from such a nation. Her insanity heightens the citizenry's disillusionment and cynicism in postcolonial Zimbabwe. Whereas the state holds a slanted mirror of the nation to hide the only enduring reality of uncanny conjunctures of violence, corruption and power abuse Vera

and Bulawayo disclose such ills. In Vera's *Nehanda* and Bulawayo's *Glory*, women are presented as custodians of traditions and the subsistence of the nation. We are told that the symbolic Wall of the Dead is erected near Simiso's home to remember the victims of the regime. It is also women like the Duchess, Destiny, Simiso and Sisters of the Disappeared who demand socio-political righteousness and a return to the African moral code of justice. Elsewhere, Muchemwa (2002:8) commenting on Vera's female characters, asserts that 'a woman is seen as a begetter of words, voice and presence'. Women in fictional Lozikeyi Township in *Glory*, perform a ritual that is accompanied by 'songs and ululations' (Bulawayo 2022:193). The musicality is completed with the imagery of natural phenomena, the presence of red butterflies around Mbuya Nehanda Tree that is ironically part of the Garden of Eden. More importantly, the Garden of Eden is a product of the female character, the Duchess. Another woman, MaMoyo, venerates the ancestral spirit possessing the Duchess. In this way, both Vera and Bulawayo advocate the revival and return to African traditional cosmological ethos that reinforces traditions of gender complementarity and shared history at the same time embracing the contemporary diversities. The gathering in the Garden of Eden is a symbolic endeavor to typify an all-encompassing proto-national from the subaltern's point of view. The presence of the red butterflies, the ancestral spirit, interconnected symbols of oral tradition and Christian religion also connote what Jonathan Sacks (2003) would call the dignity of difference. The scene in the mythical garden illuminates a legacy of struggle and involvement of the dead's continuous role in shaping an appropriate paradigm of the future nation. The Garden of Eve is significantly picturesque and symbolic of communal life. The ancestral spirits represent the old wisdom. Of note here is the fact that female characters demonstrate their memory of the customs, transliterated language punctuated with proverbs, oral style and allegories in an adulterated sociopolitical and religious-cultural spaces of the pre and postcolonial eras. It is thus relevant to argue that Vera and Bulawayo elevate their female characters to present a national narrative that contests the male imaginaries of a nation and nationhood. Through natural imagery, resuscitation of oral resources and hindsight, Bulawayo like Vera shows how nationhood is endangered by egocentric political culture because trees shed leaves when Tuvy's Party of Power wins the elections through rigging. It is noteworthy that the image of the Wall of the Dead where names of the state victims are captured chillingly reminds the nation of the dictatorial menace and therefore demands a rebirth. The novel accentuates women's solidarity and their symbolic demonstration of how Zimbabwean humanity in its diversity must come together. The red butterflies and reference to whirlwind are symbolically important as they suggest a harmonious co-presence of humans, ancestors or the dead and nature, which is an imagined beautiful cosmology, contrary to the reality of throbbing pain and dismay in present-day Zimbabwe. Bulawayo like Vera defies monologic discourses and traditional conceptions of religion and culture by presentations of characters whose religious-cultural practices transcend erected boundaries (Mavengano

2023a). The cultural rite, Garden of Eden and public gatherings are used to develop new morphologies for imagining new construct nationalism and reject the existing damaged polity in Zimbabwe.

Challenging feminine subordination through Nehanda and female characters

The story of Mbuya Nehanda in Vera and Bulawayo's novels exalts women into the position of heroines whose fighting spirit is discernibly celebrated. The two novelists apparently write against female invisibility (Mavengano 2023a). In Vera's depiction, Nehanda is entrusted with an enormous responsibility as a spirit medium who directs her people and safeguards their well-being. Vera bestows power in the renowned heroine, Nehanda, which is in contrast with male-authored historical narratives that represent Kaguvi as a prominent spirit medium during the First Chimurenga. Vera's novel reveals that it is Nehanda who initiates and leads the rebellion against the white settlers despite the knowledge of her looming persecution and demise. Nehanda is heroically ready to die in defiance of the oppressors of her people. She is thus, a symbol of a selfless political leadership that is certainly absent in contemporary Zimbabwe. Readers are told about Kaguvi's rise to power after Nehanda was executed, 'the horn-blower emerges again out of the crowd. His name is Kaguvi' Vera (1993:67). Ironically and noteworthy, Kaguvi bows to the colonisers' pressure and was baptised to serve himself from the hangman's noose. This is allegorically vital as it could be interpreted as a smear to his image as a male politician. He betrays the spirit of the struggle, a culture that still persists in Zimbabwe. This seditious representation of Nehanda relocates women who have been deliberately marginalised in the national historiography to promote masculine authority in Zimbabwe. By offering a different version on national historiography, Vera endorses Adichie's (2009) warning about the danger of single-story telling. Dreams and story-telling are central motifs deployed to project female consciousness and perspectives. Vera's female characters are endowed with the gift of story-telling, stories that infuse history and religio-cultural beliefs of their people. The women participate in important matters of their community. For instance, 'the midwife was also among the shapers of wisdom, who determined the future of the village'. These women also play a vital at *dare* (a village court) that was a large clearing in the center of the village. Those who were admitted to the *dare* knew the power of words (Vera 1993:9).

A similar presentation is taken up by Bulawayo whose female characters dare challenge the ruthless postcolonial ruling regime in the fictionalised nation of Zimbabwe. Like Nehanda, these female characters work together across generations to fight for justice and integrity. Destiny dies in the process, the Sisters of the Disappeared are beaten up and arrested by both the Old Horse and his successor, Tuvy's State Defenders (the soldiers and police). Yet, they continued with their fight. Both Vera and Bulawayo pay tribute to such resilience and selfless dedication to fight oppressive authority

and reinstate uprightness in sociopolitical and religio-cultural domains. The memory of such gallant fighters is kept alive in Bulawayo's novel as symbolically represented by the Wall of the dead where the names of state victims are written. The active participation of Bulawayo's female characters in national politics contradicts a phallogocentric view that 'a female has no business whatsoever outside her home, specifically outside the kitchen and bedroom' (Bulawayo 2022:76). When such confinement of the female gender fails, such women who defiantly cross the gendered borders are labelled unbridled females with itchtails who can bring the downfall of men (Bulawayo 2022). The patriarchal organogram that exists in Bulawayo's fictive Jidada society has no kind words for women who commit 'unpardonable sins' of rebelling against its authority (Bulawayo 2022:76). General Judas Goodness Reza, who is one of the key coup leaders and belongs to male rulers, claims that only 'the Fathers of the nation', 'died for the country' (Bulawayo 2022). His patriarchal mentality is further conveyed when he bitterly complains that Jidada has been turned into 'a miserable petticoat Seat of Power that an animal can't even recognize it anymore' (Bulawayo 2022:61). His comments are made in a context where the male ruler (the Old horse and Father of the Nation) is losing grip of the 'rulership because of his old age' and his wife, Marvelous, becomes actively involved in national affairs (Bulawayo 2022).

Foregrounding the previously silenced voices: A feminist empowering strategy

Vera and Bulawayo's novels assume the double task of critiquing primarily male sociopolitical and cultural paradigms by re-enacting female perspectives and experiences in an attempt to modify the tradition that has long muzzled and subordinated women. Mavengano (2023b:2) contends that another dimension of exclusionary narratives is embedded in discourse of entitlement by the ruling party that claims to 'have died for the nation'. The male-dominated ZANU PF emphasises 'blood shedding' as a vital qualification to political power. Equally, Mawere (2016) states that the former president of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, was known as *Jongwe* [the Rooster], which also previously functioned as a masculine symbol of the ruling party. This implies that it is only men who own Zimbabwe (guardians of the land) as they inherited this right from their departed fathers (Mavengano 2023a). This was earlier on noted by Muchemwa and Muponde (eds. 2007) who state that nationhood in Zimbabwe is anchored on patriarchal foundations, hence the male-dominated leadership as spiritual guarantor of the modern society is 'manning the nation'. Vera refutes the masculine construct of Nehanda whose power is attained from her association with a male figure Kaguvi. Vera reconstructs an autonomous Nehanda who stood strongly to defend her people. In *Glory*, Marvelous represents women who are 'unbridled' because she desires to be a president of Jidada country. Such women are called doppelgangers of 'Eve in the Garden of Eden...Delilah and Samson's hair... Lot's wife... Witch of Endor's shenanigans...

and wicked Queen Jezebel' (Bulawayo 2022:99). Marvelous does not qualify for the title 'mother', a 'bridled African wife' or woman who keeps her mouth shut and lets her man talk (Bulawayo 2022:76). Marvelous is considered a dangerous type of a woman who even provoked the male organogram in the Party of power and pushed it to force her husband out of power. Nevertheless, The Duchess, a female character in *Glory*, refutes such representation of women by the supposed man of God in the following passage:

Dadwethu kababa! Mother of God, tell me this blood swine isn't standing in this hot sun saying Jidada's coup has to do with that poor child, Marvelous! Doesn't he know that's how dictatorships, like a monster devouring itself, end, with coups? the Duchess cried, incredulous. (Bulawayo 2022:100)

Ursula King (ed. 1997) in *Women in New Religions*, writes that:

Women have always been the biggest 'consumers' of religion, but on the whole have been badly served, disparaged and oppressed by religions themselves. In most organised religions to be born a woman is valued as [sic] punishment, either for misdeeds in a previous life or for the sin of the first woman. (p. 1)

Fiorenza (1983) and hooks (1986, 1990) warn us about the theology of subordination that is anchored on the male leadership in religious discourses about creation, ignoring the fundamental function of a theology of equality. Thus, gender becomes a relationship organised by power matrices; a process in which religion is 'a matrix of culture and history' (ed. King 1995:4). This view is central to Foucault (1978) and critical discourse analysis frameworks. Ironically, in Zimbabwean society and like in many other patriarchal societies, even those who are labelled mothers are respected only because they embrace their inferiorised position in society. The lexical item 'mother' takes a subordinated position with a depiction as people who give birth to children and take care of the home. Women are not considered eminent and viewed as producers of the nation but are rather monitored by a male-dominated society in the pretext of keeping the nation unadulterated. These oftentimes masked ideals of femininity and masculinity are harmful as they compel women to be docile in matters that affect their lives and tolerate even the incompetent men to lead the nation as if leadership qualities are divinely gifted to males. It is imperative to note the gendered imagery and symbols of power that establish the discourses of both Nehanda and the nation to legitimise male-dominated political authority (Mavengano 2023b; Muchemwa 2002). In the same way, Walby (2000:523) observes that feminists have properly argued that national schemes are gendered projects that are part and parcel to dominant norms of masculinity and they feed into a 'global patriarchalism'. Although Gaidzanwa (1992:107) concurs that the women are victims of patriarchy in Zimbabwe just like in most African societies, she however, points out that the figure of Nehanda in First Chimurenga suggests that women had positions of power in pre-colonial indigenous people's cosmology, which was then disrupted by colonial invasion. This refutes allusions to traditional culture which are used in present-day gender, religious and

political discourses to rob women's voices or urgency. Gaidzanwa (2003:37) asserts that 'colonialism amplified subordination of the Zimbabwean women as many groups and classes of African women became formally dependent on men [...] lost their political and religious powers'. This promoted a persistent lopsided misogynist culture that defines Zimbabwean and by extension African manhood (eds. Muchemwa & Muponde 2007:xv). It could be argued that the precarious conditions compel subordinated groups to engage in 'everyday forms of resistance; to borrow James Scott's (1985:20) vocabulary where they use weapons of the weak such as organising unsuccessful demonstrations. In *Glory*, Sisters of the Disappeared go nude in protest of their missing relatives during a national event. Although, they are quickly taken away by the state defenders and dogs, their protest message is registered. For Scott, such subtle acts of resistance upset the oppressive power hence cannot be ignored in resistance discourses. The writers modified the Nehanda mythology, to generate a polyphonic discursive terrain that focalises women's urgency and a fictional space serves to engender new consciousness of religion, politics and womanhood. Such creative writing responds to the call made by other feminist scholars such as Bell Hooks (1984, 1990) and Fiorenza (1983) who have respectively argued for 'talking back' and the importance of writing 'Her story'. These two feminists underscore the importance of self-representation against male-oriented gender ideology as enunciated at some point in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, which denigrates and lowers women's position in society.

Alternative versions of womanhood in Vera and Bulawayo's construct of Nehanda

The emerging women in both novels are decisive in the same spirit of Nehanda. This empowered version of womanhood is nurtured by a strong bond of sisterhood ethic. Most importantly, the reconstructed womanhood surfaces from the marginal space of the society. These female writers, in this regard cast-off male-mediated voices as previously noted by Schmidt (1992) and they empower their female characters to speak in both private and public spheres. It is quite intriguing to note women who assumed power through their subordination to males turn to be victims of such dependence in Bulawayo's novel. A case of Marvelous the Old Horse's wife in the fictive nation but Grace Mugabe, former first lady and Joice Mujuru, a former vice President in real political context of Zimbabwe. Patriarchal consciousness is problematised as it obliterates women's potentials. Foucault (1978) points out the idea that selves are constituted by power systems that can also be resisted in discourse. Marvelous' is anchored in the very patriarchal system that initially elevated her sociopolitical class. Her subjectivity is brought out by her lack of independence and voice once cut off by the patriarchal power. We are told through satire and metaphor that 'it's true that power is a kind of armor, and that once it has been

stripped, even the most powerful animal is nothing but an empty tin' (Bulawayo 2022:75). Conceivably, such portrayal is meant to encourage women to trust their capability and stand firm on their feet. Vera earlier depicts this through her heroine, Nehanda whose mother bemoans that 'my daughter is no longer mine' (Vera 1993:15). Clearly, women pay a price for wielding power emanating from patriarchal source. Her lack of speech at birth assumes new meanings as it entails a zombified subject of male power. We get the feel that Nehanda is enslaved in the service of the patriarchal society to an extent that the mother–daughter bond is threatened. This scenario is later interrupted by her sudden cry and refusal to be silenced by the midwives. She becomes a powerful spirit media:

Nehanda's trembling voice reaches them as though coming from some distant past, some sacred territory in their imaginings. It is an alluring voice, undulating, carrying the current of a roar that reminds them of who they have been in the past, but it is also the comforting voice of a woman, of their mothers whom they trust. Even the men stop dancing and kneel around Nehanda, and the women in the outer circle cast protective shadows over the bending bodies of the women. (Vera 1993:62)

It is appropriate to argue that Nehanda is both a masculinised (speaking as a medium of the ancestors) and feminised figure (as a recognised voice of a mother) and in each of these significations she commands respect. The occasion however, emasculates male figures who kneel together with women before Nehanda in respect. Vera subverts gender roles to give voice to her female characters in a society 'a woman has nothing to say in the life of the natives. Nothing at all' (Vera 1993:75).

(Mis) representation of the figure of Nehanda in postcolonial in Zimbabwe

The esteemed role played by Nehanda in the national politics does not spare her name from abuse mainly in the power wrangles that ensue in postcolonial Zimbabwe. The figure of Nehanda at the service of politics is used as a spectacle of hegemonic national narrative and a symbol of gallantry in religio-cultural discourses in postcolonial Zimbabwe. This description at first glance appears innocuous but the ruling elite evokes the figure of 'Mbuya Nehanda', particularly as a silencing mechanic against opposition parties who are disassociated from the mythical historiography of nation. Muchemwa (2010) and Mavengano (2023) contest this misrepresentation of liberation fighters who perished in the wars. Mavengano (2023) further troubles this view that delegitimises all those who are not linked to the dead heroes by the ruling party. The emphasis is mainly prominent during elections and ordinary citizens and members of the opposition demand active space in the political domain. In these apparently oppressive discourses, Nehanda is deployed as a strategy to reconstruct regimes of domination in Foucauldian's terminology. Her figure is projected as a resentful 'guardian angel' (Mavaza 2021), who condemns to death even those

accused of talking about change politics in Zimbabwe. The presence of Nehanda in such discourses is not to function as just an important historical memory but also to create othering logics that problematise notions of belonging and citizenship in Zimbabwe today. Nehanda in this case is an omnipresent political figure fighting and defending the nation from her grave. Absurdly, during her life, Nehanda fought against foreign domination. Yet, in contemporary struggle, it is claimed that she fights against both Zimbabwean citizens and foreign enemies who want to take power from the ruling party. It is this representation of Nehanda that has attracted contestations and even rejection of her narrative in the national memory. Nehanda is a historical figure that is further used to fuel ethnic division in ZANU PF's account of a Shona dominated 'nation' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009). Ironically, Mavengano (2023b) contends that it is not even all Shona people who are linked to this ancestry claim because some lose the entitlement once they join opposition politics. Bulawayo's novel deploys a recurrent motif of the presence of dogs and defenders who beat, rape and kill citizens who protest against an oppressive political regime. The collective suffering of the subaltern is tragically heightened and the postcolonial Zimbabwe profoundly defined by what Mbembe (2001) describes as visceral authority, an economics of rabid extraction and politics of eatery. Readers are told by an anonymous voice that is skeptic of the new leadership after the removal of the Old Horse from power:

Dogs have oppressed us since day one of this very regime. What about the tens of thousands massacred? What about the murdered activists and members of the Opposition? And the

Disappeared, the displaced, the tortured—all so the Old Horse and this ugly regime could stay in power? What about the economy they've trashed, the failure of governance, and everything else that's fallen apart? Aren't we where we are because of all of them, and these very Defenders you're now cheering? Would the Old Horse even have been possible without them? Do you honestly think, with everything that's happened, and after all these years, that they'd wake up one day and remove the Old Horse just for your benefit? (Bulawayo 2022:72)

This voice that is accused of being a Shakespearean soothsayer of doom emerged to have correctly predicted the doom that followed after the demise of the Old Horse. The vicious circle is heightened as the ruled and the rulers collide in a regime of violence; the dogs (police) and defenders (army) represent Mbembe's (2001) construct of conviviality. They are ostensibly corrupted by the autocratic 'Seat of power' in a warped postcolony.

The novel conveys that election rigging, violence, hypocrisy and all strategies of imposing fear are employed by Tuvy's government causing an untold despair and anguish for the ordinary citizens who watch Jidada's 'tattered flags, potholed roads, vendors everywhere and the majestic presence of Inner Circle of Animals or the Chosen Ones, wearing expensive adornments' that mark their benevolence (Bulawayo 2022:74). The animals knew that

[T]o rule Jidada with a-da and another-da, a land born of the blood of the Fathers, one had to meet the right criteria and with

no exceptions whatsoever, so the disgruntled animals keep their feelings inside like intestines. (Bulawayo 2022:48)

The novel further allegorically conveys how the postcolonial subjects are separated from their rulers through physical representation. The chosen ones are under the tent perched above and ordinary people are on the ground and under the hot sun. This resonates with Achille Mbembe's (1992) formulation of the postcolony, in which power of the rulers is weilded with a sight of gross extravagance *commandment* and absurd spectacles of megalomania as the modus operandi together used to muzzle discontent. It is this politically oppressive environment that keeps 'the Seat of power and Party of Power, ruling and keep ruling' (Bulawayo 2022:8).

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2009) concisely explicates the fraught nature of the notion in Zimbabwean context:

[...] nationalism is [...] a highly sedimented phenomenon that has operated through privileging certain features of social life while suppressing or de-emphasizing others that are considered repugnant to its chosen agenda. [...] Zimbabwean nationalism is overlaid with ethnicity, militarism, neo-traditionalism, nativism, patriarchy and violence-very negative aspects that require urgent deconstruction. (p. 8)

Conclusion: Zimbabwe's dream deferred

With the departure of Mugabe from the realm of power, Zimbabwe was presented with an opportunity to codify new national sensibilities. Bulawayo's novel casts doubt on any phantasm of hope towards finding immediate sociopolitical solutions since the regime's defenders shot and killed Destiny, a symbolic figure of justice. This complicates the dreams to attain new freedoms including that of self-expression. Arguably, the future of the nation-state is still at stake as those in power are not ready to embrace an inclusive national model. In a nutshell, Vera and Bulawayo rewrite Nehanda's myth to subvert age-old oppressive systems that continue to burden women and other members of the subdued underclass in Zimbabwe today.

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