Review

Feminist discourses in Chenjerai Hove’s and Yvonne Vera’s selected nationalist narratives

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This paper demonstrated how Yvonne Vera and Chenjerai Hove’s selected works challenge the masculinized dominant nationalist version of history of the Zimbabwean liberation struggle against colonialism by foregrounding the black Zimbabwean woman’s ‘other’ struggles. Such a response to the biased nationalist narration has been to illuminate the other struggles that are women specific. The selected works were aimed at bringing women back in the study of nationalism and national politics. Selected works included but were not limited to the following: Yvonne Vera’s selected short stories such as Why Don’t You Carve Other Animals, Without a Name and Under the Tongue and Chenjerai Hove’s Ancestors and Bones.

Key words: Nationalism, Zimbabwe, historiography, patriarchy, liberation, struggle.

INTRODUCTION

Though African nationalism was a response to the undemocratic colonial enterprise, it was itself not a “school for democracy and human rights, having been deeply interpellated by the colonial culture of politics of intolerance, militarism, tribalism and violence” (Ranger, 2003 cited in Ndlovu, 2009). Nationalism rested on patriarchal ideology, and particularly failed to escape from gender discrimination. In the Zimbabwean context, the woman as subject has been rendered invisible by the historiographies of Rhodesia as well as within the nationalist ideology (Lyons, 2004). Where masculinity becomes the only trusted guardian of national history, land and heritage as well as the only fire that warms the national patriotism femininity is excluded (Ndlovu, 2009). Once the exclusion of women is stamped, the collective commonality of nationalism is defeated and nullified. The woman question has never been made an integral part of the fight for national culture and this exclusion has also been to render invisible women’s hands in the making of nations and states (Nagel, 1998). This is largely so because nationalism has typically sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope (Enloe 1990 cited in Nagel, 1998); and is then, a discriminatory identity (Bhabha, 1995).

The masculinized dominant nationalist version of history of the liberation struggle against colonialism is gender blind. According to Lyons, “most popular fiction about the war has been written by men”, and hence women exclusion is predictable. All the literary works selected for this paper, in different ways, contest the image of the historic woman warrior fighting for political independence, wielding a gun in one hand and holding a baby with the other. This shows the complex roles and positions occupied by women not only in the fight for national culture, but also in other struggles that are gender specific. Such a response to the biased nationalist narration has been to illuminate the role played by women in the fight for national struggle, the impact of the struggle on women’s lives and particularly the other struggles that are women specific. Such narratives are then directed at bringing women back in the study of nationalism and national politics and have since filled in an important gap in Zimbabwean war historiography. As part of the postcolonial discourse, the narratives weaken the orientalist discourse by exposing the inadequacies of conventional accounts of the past by attempting to include what these accounts tended to leave out.

In an opening chapter in Ancestors, the narrator says,
The stories that we hear, the victors are the only storytellers. If only the monkey could tell his own story. If only the bird could tell the story of its flight in the air, the tree too if it could tell its own story. The story of our life is the story of our male blood flowing in the veins but there is other blood flowing in our veins, not mentioned by those who know the names of things. To name is to live. A father never lies to his children but it does not mean that he may tell all there is to be told and to omit is to lie (Hove, 1996).

Primarily then, there is need to listen to the often ignored and unheard voice of women in national historiography. To listen to the one sided male voice is tantamount to listening to lies, for this voice is always narrow in its interpretation of history. Thus, the stories in Ancestors are stories of the female blood... blood that has been neglected by so many tales which father has hidden away (Hove, 1996). In view of the above, this chapter then seeks to study Yvonne Vera’s selected short stories in Why Don’t You Carve Other Animals (1992), Without a Name (1994) and Under the Tongue (1996) and Chenjerai Hove’s Ancestors (1996), Bones (1988) and Shadows (Hove, 1991). The discussion revolves around how the two authors explore and understand the place of woman in nationalist war discourse.

Black Zimbabwean Women’s “Other” Struggle

During various liberation struggles in Africa, many black women realized that the root cause of their oppression was not capitalism and colonization alone but also patriarchal” (Lyons, 2004). The above has also affected Zimbabwean black women in various levels. Both colonialism and patriarchy confine women to the fringes of existence. Alongside the national liberation, women represented in Hove’s and Vera’s also seek emancipation from the clutches of patriarchy. Knowing that black women are oppressed in colonial culture, maybe an insufficient approach to an understanding of women oppression, there is need to go beyond race structures for a fuller understanding of black women oppression in colonial existence. Black women could register their fight against colonialism in the nationalist struggle but they need to wage a separate fight against patriarchy. This kind of emancipation for women is never intended in the nationalist fighting. This is largely because the culture of nationalism is constructed to emphasize and resonate with masculine cultural themes. Yet, paradoxically, women’s emancipation is a prerequisite for national liberation (Lyons, 2004) and cannot be postponed until the nation is politically independent.

All the works selected for this paper, in one way or the other, highlight the other struggles against restrictions imposed on African (specifically Zimbabwean) women by elements built into traditional conceptions of womanhood; physical, spiritual, and emotional violence committed on African women (Vambe, 2012). Yvonne Vera’s short story “An Unyielding Circle” has “African femininity” as its central theme. Men in this short story order women around and uphold the age – old tyrannical values associated with the subordination and humiliation of women (320). They give a manual on expected women’s behavior: “a woman must bend on her knees to give food to a man, a woman must use two hands to give food to a man, a woman must sit down when she is among men and a woman must use two hands to receive anything from a man” (Vera, 1992). This catalogue of expected women’s behavior borders on the belief that women are different and are “the inferior part of men”. The expected behavior is part of the forms of invented customary laws that oppress women’s desires and aspirations (309).

Hove’s Ancestors, on the other hand, dramatizes the difficulties that arise when the identities of the African girl are determined by biological considerations (308). Tario is a crippled girl who is not given a chance to make choices in her life. She is literally and metaphorically dumb and deaf. In that state, she is considered useless and hence is given away into marriage to a drunkard old man. This is promoted and instituted through old aunts who take her to a new home without telling her where they are heading for. Women’s participation here is a sign of how patriarchy has mobilized some women to its side 309). Most importantly, this is an instance of forced marriage, which violates the girl child’s right to make choices in life; including the choice of a life partner. The Old Man who marries Tario only accepts her as an offer and thinks the girl may be too young for him; the young woman would soon know widowhood than marriage, but a man who marries a young wife also marries for his blood who are not yet born (Hove, 1996). The idea of a forced arranged marriage translates a girl child into a commodity that can be passed from one hand to the other, especially in cases where the husband is old and is approaching his death. The young wife will also be passed on to the young men in the family upon the death of the old man through inheritance.

In Bones, Hove alludes to the fact the paying of bride price is one of the things of bad rules that also translate a child girl into a commodity. Janifa’s mother encourages her to get married so that the family can enjoy the bride price. She is critical of bride price payment; especially when the bride does not benefit anything from the payment. Tario retorts: “What does it help to bring cattle when the bride does not benefit anything from the payment. She is critical of bride price payment; especially when the bride does not benefit anything from the payment. Tario retorts: “What does it help to bring cattle when the bride does not benefit anything from the payment? If she cannot eat the cattle that she brings, then it is worthless to bring cattle to her house. Her husband must learn that the things of one’s sweat are the things which one eats well, not the things of bad rules (Hove, 1988). In this context, paying of bride price dehumanizes the girl child. Janifa’s critical position becomes part of the new discourse that recovers the repressed position of women in African tradition.

Patriarchal ideology is also questioned in relation to the
concept of Western formal education that the girl child is usually denied of. In African history, Western education was one of the many advantages that nobody in his right senses could underrate (Achebe, 1988) yet it also occupied an ambivalent position for the colonized people. Education as an instrument of oppression attempts to control thinking and action and leads women and men to adjust to the world and inhibits their creative power while indoctrinating them to adapt to the world of oppression (Freire, 1996). On the other hand, education, as a humanist and liberating praxis, posits that the people subjected to domination must fight for their emancipation (67). As women fight for inclusion in the education system, such dimensions are often ignored. Women are not so much worried about the ambivalent role of colonial education but are impressed by the prospects that come with the attainment of education in a modern African set up.

In Vera’s ‘Crossing Boundaries’, Masibanda reflects on how her father did not allow girls to attend school. She says, “my father did not allow us girls to go to school why waste money on a girl? When it came to making a choice, he sent the boys to school” (Vera, 1994). Sending a girl to school is considered money wasting hence if there are choices to be made boys always get first priority. Yet there are implications for lack of education in girls’ lives. Masibanda retorts, “it is difficult to be a woman in these times. If my daughter can get an education, she will not have to live this hard life that I have endured; she can walk away from pain” (6). Masibanda believes that women generally live a difficult life and experience various forms of pain and one of the available outlets is embracing the white world and what it offers; in this case education. However, Masibanda is very cautious; she felt her condition on the farm was a daily trial and to embrace more of the culture of those who kept them subservient was hard to accept.

For Hove as shown in Shadows, children who do not go to school end up like Johana, who milk the cows, dehorn the small bulls and smell cow dung. Yet according to Johana’s father, “girls do not have to go to school for more than was enough to open their eyes to the letters of their young lovers who courted them in the forests. The little money there was would be spent on the boys, not the girls. Did not the white man rule it when he said only boys would pay taxes? What was the use of sending girls to school when only boys would pay taxes?” In Ancestors, Tsapi and his friend agree, “girls must only go to school to enable them to read letters from their suitors.

Nothing more”. This kind of violence against the girl child is instituted as a necessary measure to maintain the institutions of patriarchy; that is the structures, beliefs and practices that maintain male dominance over women (Williams et al., 2001).

The battle to go to school is however reduced to a less ‘pain’ in Chenjerai Hove’s Bones. Marita tells Janifa: “it is good to send children to school …they should not be kept at home like cats and dogs”. However from Marita’s point of view, this is “little biting things” and the pain from this “does not kill”. In the context of the liberation struggle, Marita thinks: “the pain of her son kills” (7). Marita here refers to the pain of motherhood. Related to the pain of motherhood is the pain of not bearing a child in an African context. In African culture and traditions if a couple cannot have children it is usually the woman’s fault. In Marita’s case in Bones, “for many years the seed did not come. The man planted his seed in her, but the soil inside her could not make it grow to a plant … then names came – you witch, you day witch, you who ate the roots of your womb, devourer of herbs which no herbalist can reverse” (10). This kind of pain burnt Marita’s heart till she was as tiny as grass (10).

The ‘other struggle’ in women lives reflects their double colonization. The phrase ‘double colonization’ was coined in the 1980s and is identified with Rutherford’s A Double Colonization: Colonial and Postcolonial Women’s Writing (1985), and refers to the observation that women are subjected to both the colonial domination of the empire and the male domination of patriarchy. Parry refers to how Spivak has described the above phenomenon as “instances of doubly-oppressed women who are caught between the dominations of a native patriarchy and a foreign masculinist imperialist ideology” (1995). The empire and native patriarchy act as analogous to each other and both exert control over female subjects who are thus, doubly colonized. What compounds the women’s position is that nationalism does not necessarily seek to dismantle especially the power of patriarchy. In other words, the fronts on which women's struggles took place are not necessarily congruent with the aims of the nationalist project (Toivanen, 2009). Therefore, women’s ‘other struggle’ often continues after national independence; and women’s sites of struggle seem to be emphasized in other areas than purely those of decolonization and nationhood (70).

Both authors successfully highlight the ‘other’ struggles that women have to wage outside the popular and masculinised liberation struggle. They do so through a rebellion that questions patriarchy (Vambe, 2012). For women then, the past does not automatically mean a glorious golden age that decolonization is anticipated as bringing back; rather it is marked by a continuous burden of indigenous masculine oppression. However as rightly noted by Vambe, “one senses that the struggles are open-ended so that what is privileged is not necessarily organized political rebellion stacked with a knowable beginning and anticipated but predictable ending. Unlike the liberation struggle reflected in the background of these women’s other struggle, theirs is not organized response. Rather it remains at the level of the affected individual and there are no intentions, from the other women around, to come up with an organized response.

The vendor women that are terrorized by men in Vera’s “An Unyielding Circle” come close to shading “salty
Reflection on the ways in which the margins destabilize unitary concepts of the nation; even as there is the idea of a nation collectively fighting against the colonial government, there are also other battles that are being fought and which constitute part of the nation in the same way as the liberation war (Lipenga, 2012).

Timwa highlights this dimension with specific reference to Under the Tongue in the same manner as Muponde (2007). He has pointed out in his analysis of Under the Tongue the need to place the traumatized and silenced women voices on equal footing with the national liberation struggle (270). However, the general position taken in this discussion is that this can also apply to other women narratives written in the context of the liberation war yet rewriting the marginality of women's existence and struggles.

During the liberation struggle, black Zimbabwean women thought they would gain some kind of freedom by moving into the urban spaces. According to Pucherova, “in contrast to the nationalist idealization of the rural space, urban society is shown as having the potential to offer both men and women more opportunities for self – articulation and economic independence, and to nurture more equal gender relationships” (2012). Thus, Mazvita in Without a Name impresses upon Nyenyedzi that they should go to the city; “We must go to the city and live there; I don’t know if we are safe even in this place. The war is everywhere… it is said there is no war there; freedom has already arrived” (Vera, 1994). What is alluded to here is a different kind of freedom. Mazvita and other black women have acquired freedom “from the burdens of skin darkness”. This kind of freedom is purchasable and is squeezed from the skin lightening bottles (26). The subject of the back woman’s physical beauty occurs with frequency in the writing of black women that it indicates that they have been deeply affected by the discrimination against the shade of their skin and the texture of their hair (Washington, 1975). In the context of Without a Name, the wish to have light skin is expressed through the application of skin lightening creams. Skin color discrimination is an aspect of colonial domination and oppression that has affected, for the most part, only women. In spite of getting an opportunity to lighten their skins in the urban space, black women face major challenges. For Mazvita in Without a Name, even if the city is what she is looking for, she quickly realizes that she is a commodity, because he is using her also. Though she exploits the possibility presented by the man but at the same time she does it with a sense of despair, and dismay, not with a sense of celebration, of triumph. And therefore in the end she understands that this is not freedom either.

In a sexual relationship with Joe, Mazvita realizes that she is nothing but his sexual object and when it suits him well, he chases her away from his rented room. In Bones however, the city is not idealized. Marita understands that the city is like the throat of a crocodile; it swallows both...
the dirty and the clean. Have you not heard how many children run away to the city and then change their names until their own mothers cannot recognize them. In a different context though, Marita’s attitude toward the city described some kind of naivety (Wild –Veit, 1993). Morally, according to Marita, then the city corrupts, yet for some women it was an illusory idea of freedom.

Conclusion

For black women fighting alongside men against colonial oppression and insisting on the other struggle is, however, tantamount to betrayal. Palestinian activists describe the difficulties of insisting on gender equality in the nationalist struggle clearly:

We can’t open up a second front now. Our battle is not with men. In the context of struggling against the occupation ... we have to postpone questions of gender till after liberation... when we have our own state, we will work on the women’s issues (Augustin, 1993 cited in Nagel, 1998).

The above opinion is clearly delineated by Felix Mnthali in his poem “Letter to a Feminist Friend”. In the last stanza of this poem he says:

When Africa at home and across the seas is truly free
there will be time for me
and time for you
to share the cooking
and change the nappies –
till then,
first things first (as cited in Petersen, 1995).

Although, Mnthali largely exaggerates feminist demands in the above excerpt, he sets what he thinks should be African women’s priorities in clear terms. From his point of view, and as stated above by Palestinian women activists, African women should only talk about their separate freedom once they have made meaningful contribution to the emancipation of the whole race. Focusing on the woman’s “other struggles” in the context of the fight for national liberation may also seem ironic, but, significantly shows how the struggles of “the traumatized and silenced voices” should be placed on an equal footing with national liberation struggles. Women’s struggle cannot be suspended until racial liberation is attained because it is equally important. This is why works discussed in this paper are all set during the liberation, but largely foreground the black woman’s ‘other struggle’.

REFERENCES


