Traumatic Memories in Yvonne Vera's Select Novels

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The word 'trauma' an ancient Greek word, that refers to a physical injury that required nothing more than medical attention. Later on, in the nineteenth century, the term took a shift in meaning that is now primarily used to address the emotional wounds in the minds of victims under catastrophic or painful situations. In Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja's article, they refer to trauma as "…psychological injury, lasting damage done to individuals or communities by tragic events or severe distress" (1). The victims, survivors and witnesses of any kind of traumatic experiences feel responsible for those who are not directly affected. These affected individuals raise issues of collective responsibility to find means to restrict the past injustice from finding space in the present or future. One important forum through which this affected group addresses traumatic issues is through literature. It is literature that serves as a platform for the victims to find a solution for the scar left behind by trauma. Martina Kopf opines, "During the past ten years the concept of trauma has been taken up more and more in cultural and literary studies, where it serves as an analytical tool for the hermeneutics of narratives of violence and loss" (101).

Trauma theory evolved out of the medical and legal concerns of the nineteenth-century industrial revolution. The industrial age produced victims who did not demonstrate visible wounds rather it traumatized individuals who sought medical treatment. Medical experts like John Errchsen (1866) framed the theory of 'Railway Spine' where the victims suffered from spinal damage which is not visible. Similarly, in 1889 a leading German Neurologist Hermann Oppenheim coined the term 'traumatic neurosis' which denotes neurological damage. Later a French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot (1889) emphasized the role of hysteria as a principal

causative to mental shock. In the twentieth century when Sigmund Freud witnessed the experience of soldiers in the First World War, the word 'trauma' took a new psychological dimension that referred to any sign of lasting injury on the mind caused by any shocking event. Yet another semantic transformation took place in 1980 when Post-Traumatic-Stress-Disorder (PTSD) was officially accepted by the American Psychiatric Association. Thus, trauma has dual genealogy that emerged as a medical, psychological and psychiatric concept.

According to Collin Davis 'Trauma Discourse' has become as common as it includes both personal and collective experiences. It emerged as a new category of thought that brought a noticeable social shift. Davis briefs that, "This shift involved acknowledging how a painful past can resurface in the present, often through indirect symptoms silences and repetitive patterns of thought and effect" (3). This paved way for the formation of a new vocabulary which explains suffering and reiterates to approach it both as an injury that requires treatment and as a resource.

Trauma theory emerged out of a complex interaction of suffering, law, ethics and medicine. The literary theorists Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman, the psychiatrist Dori Lamb and the historian Dominick Lacapra laid the foundation for the exclusive category of Trauma Studies. Cathy Caruth in her ***Unclaimed Experience***, assertively states that what returns to haunt the victims in narratives of trauma "….is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known" (6). This approach emphasizes on belatedness where trauma is denoted by a delayed response to an extreme event that cannot be addressed at the time when the event happened but it manifests itself through intrusive thoughts, flashbacks or nightmares. It is found that the major contributions to Trauma Studies have often been discourses on women and their issues, which not only take much space in the field, but also multiply the intensity of the concept of trauma in the intricate world of women.

The relationship between the literary and the real-life accounts of sexual violence on women has always been tumultuous, yet the two have continued to cohabit, frequently in the same textual space. Throughout history, fiction has both aided and hindered medical, criminal, political and popular discourses on sexual violence, challenging what it is and helping to define it, confronting who is to blame and assisting our understanding of how language can both be a part of the healing process as well as part of the problem. These issues about the recounting of sexual trauma are not unique to the twenty-first century. Indeed, stories of sexual violence have been told throughout history, but acknowledging the act itself has always been difficult, even in the literary arena. The specific issues of the narratology of sexual trauma have long been recognized by authors.

Victims of sexual abuse in real-life cases hardly have any reliable source for justice. When discussing crimes that frequently occur without witnesses, victims have been accused of being 'fantasists' and 'liars' which is a problematic term to use in relation to testimony on sexual abuse. In the case of sexual assault, the ulterior motives such as malice, bitterness ('a woman scorned') or regret have been assigned to the victims. The way a victim dresses or how much alcohol they consume can also be used to disprove their claims.

However, literary fictional accounts of sexual violence have played an important role in bringing victims' sufferings to the public's attention, not just in terms of reporting the event which is, after all, the province of journalism. It also attempts to recreate the emotional intensity of the experience itself: the terror, the pain, the shock, the paralysis, the effects on relationships, and the victims' subsequent everyday life. Thus, literary authors have worked to express the uniqueness of the event, to engage the readers with the characters so that they feel the same emotional intensity of such traumatic events and thereby gain awareness of the whole situation.

There still prevails a dispute as to whether or not literature should convey sexual trauma, as well as on how to convey the same. Conflicting assumptions about the role of literature exacerbate the situation: Is literature a form of art or a form of entertainment? How can we know if portions of these works are gratuitous or if they are a means of challenging us with a representation of the violence that many people really encounter, if they have a political or social role as art? Despite the fact that sexual violence and literature have had a complicated relationship for ages, it was not until the 1890s that child abuse was linked to latent suffering in adults, a revelation that would drastically alter how sexual trauma was narrated.

In the 1990s, a flurry of research on the nature of traumatic memory, evaluating survivors' ability to reclaim memories of their experience and whether they are able to incorporate their trauma into a recognizable narrative form, helped to formulate trauma theory in the humanities. Judith Herman, Bessel van der Kolk, and Cathy Caruth, among others, opened an important space for debate, but there are still no conclusive conclusions on how sexual trauma affects individuals or their ability to remember and narrate. However, the least bare supply of traumatic narratives of women across cultures raises a uniform voice that shakes the world from its long, comfortable catnap of ignorance and wakes it up to the alarming call of injustice and trauma.

This research paper focuses on the trauma that Yvonne Vera' women experience as victims of sexual abuse in ***Without a Name and The Stone Virgins***. It further interrogates on the varied intricate characteristics of trauma memories which Vera's characters experience after the assault. Vera's writing addresses the suffering that affects the lives of women on a regular basis.

Vera investigates how individuals and groups suffer as a result of violent conflict. War and violence test on the powerless and helpless struggle of Vera's victimized women who end up finally in trauma: "The basic experience which makes war, sexual violence and other forms of massive violence traumatic is helplessness in front of an overwhelming force, in a situation which is subjectively felt as inescapable" (Kopf 102).

Yvonne Vera is one of the most acclaimed writers of Zimbabwe, who has pioneered for the cause of African women, especially for those who were victims of colonization and of war. In fact, her childhood had only witnessed the traumatic experience of natives under colonial rule and their strenuous fight for freedom. Being raised in a war atmosphere, she had also had frequent and shocking encounters of the doubly victimized African women and their bare sufferings. It was only when she turned 15, she breathed the air of freedom for the first time when Zimbabwe became politically independent. She has undoubtedly had the true experience of not just being a victim of war but also of the trauma that it ultimately forebears.

Yvonne Vera was well aware of the fact that though her nation has finally achieved independence, the women of her country had a long way to go, as they were still chained by cultural, social and gender norms that restricted their freedom. One could see a revolutionary fire in the radical feminist like Vera, in her novels that include ***Nehanda (1993), Without a Name (1994), Under the Tongue (1996), Butterfly Burning (1998), and The Stone Virgins (2002),*** along with the short story collection, ***Why Don't You Carve Other Animals (1992).***

All her five novels and the short story collection, speak of the inspiring, persuading and deeply moving narratives of the African land and its people, especially the women of the nation. She takes the readers on the 'blood' carpet of war, and makes them witness the trauma that it brings to her people, especially to those helpless women victims. At the end of the long, breath-taking voyage into her works, her readers reach an empathetic destination of awareness on African women and their traumatic tragedies that shout out a demanding call for justice.

In ***Without a Name*** Mazvita's departure from Mubaira and journey to Harare is described. The story opens with her departure from Harare and continues with her journey back to Mubaira at a crucial point. The story shows how Mazwita experiences trauma when an attack happened in her native village. She was traumatized by the Shona freedom fighter who rapes her and she decides to move away from the native place.

The Stone Virgins is set in Zimbabwe, with the first half of the novel focusing on pre-independent Rhodesia (1950-1980) and the second section focusing on the frequently violent post-independent transition (1981-1986). Thenjiwe and Nonceba, two sisters, are the protagonists of

the novel. They are the victims of some of the most heinous acts of brutality committed during those times. A man who previously defended and fought for the country's freedom has now turned brutally against its people. Vera, on the other hand, pushes the readers to confront Sibaso, the liberation fighter who kills for pleasure and also craves approval and acknowledgement from his people. However, the civil war intervenes. A soldier named Sibaso, caught up in the explicit sexual killing frenzy, murders Thenjiwe and rapes and mutilates her sister Nonceba. In the last fire, the Thandabantu Store is destroyed but Nonceba makes her way to Bulawayo and takes refuge with Cephas, Thenjiwe's former boyfriend, providing a bleak gleam of hope.

Traumatic memories occur when an event induces high levels of emotional arousal and the activation of stress hormones. Only a few hours after the first encounter, these memories become consolidated, stable, and enduring long-term memories (LTMs). So traumatic memory is the memory of a traumatic event that was not totally established by the victim at the time of its occurrence, which means that it cannot be consciously recollected by the victim when he or she desires to do so. It differs from narrative memory in that it shifts back and forth in flashbacks and dreams; pushes the protagonist deep into imagined worlds. Shamaila Dodhy in her article states, "Traumatic memory is a complex phenomenon as it is extremely unreliable because the survivor fails to establish sequence and connections between the event and the language" (235).

The first and foremost characteristic of trauma memory is the Involuntary recall. Here the victim's ordinary memories can be recalled involuntarily, but trauma memories are frequently ignored and hence are more likely to be relived involuntarily. This is due to the process in which the way trauma memories are encoded and preserved. This makes the victims susceptible to involuntary recall in response to perceptual signals that are similar to those present at the time of the trauma.

In ***Without a Name***, when Mazvita reaches Harare, she starts a new life with Joel but when they share intimate moments, she recalls her past: "she did not feel his action at all, though he truly held her tight. She heard only her cry which expanded into the hollow spaces within her, into the silence she had conceived for herself, into the past of her memory. She lingered in her remembrance" (69). Likewise, in ***The Stone Virgins***, Nonceba, the protagonist of the novel, relives the traumatic memories involuntarily. For instance, in the novel, "Nonceba sees Thenjiwe's face life upward, not with joy, even though the sky is bright and blue. Thenjiwe thinks she is alone in her pain, but she, Nonceba, knows how to follow Thenjiwe all the way to the sky, beyond life. Nothing can separate them from each other" (96). Here, after the death of Thenjiwe, the memories of Thenjiwe involuntarily comes to Nonceba.

The second characteristic of trauma memories is Nowness. Nowness is a perception of the traumatic incident as if it currently takes place. Unwanted memories of a traumatic experience range from knowing that it occurred in the past to feeling as though it is occurring again in the present time. Stronger varieties of re-experiencing, unlike regular (episodic) memories, are not accompanied by recognition that the memory's content is a past occurrence.

In ***Without a Name***, the characteristic of Nowness could be spotted when Mazvita senses the trauma that happened to her in Mubaira as narrated in these lines, "Mubaira was far away it vanished from memory. Mazvita remembered the cry she had heard above Joel's anxious breath" (70). It can be noted that Mazvita experiences episodic memories of the trauma that happened in her life. Similarly, ***In Stone Virgins***, Nonceba feels the presence of her dead sister Thenjiwe, "…then is see a figure move. I see light falling through a sieve-like a soft rain. Light is sprinkled through the room. The voice approaching is clearer to me than the light" (123).

The third characteristic of trauma memory is the predominance of sensory representations. This shows that the victims do suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. The sensory parts of recollections are usually distressing for people suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. For example, individuals might describe seeing a terrible expression on their attacker's face, hearing sounds that were present at the time of their car accident or smelling their attacker's deodorant. When other components of the memory are absent, the sensory portions of the memory are sometimes experienced. There is growing evidence that some PTSD patients who experienced pain at the time of their trauma relive that anguish in flashbacks when reminded of their tragedy. In ***Without a Name***, Mazvita during her intimate moments with Joel is traumatized by the recollections of the soldier's face who subjected her to a traumatic experience of rape. "Mazvita tried not to remember Joel as he rested above her, she tried to be alone but she could not be apart from him if she carried his face along, so she chose to forget Joel's face" (69).

In ***The Stone Virgins***, Nonceba feels the touch of Sibaso as part of her traumatic memories. She recounts, "… it is no longer a touch tracing my chin, not only a touch on my lower lip, his roughness invading, the agony prolonged, but more than that. I feel, now, each moment. I am trapped in my bones. He is here. Sibaso. In my bones" (109).

The fourth characteristic of trauma memory is fragmentation. When people who have suffered trauma are asked to describe what happened to them, their narrative can be 'fragmented,' according to certain reports of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Although the evidence for narrative fragmentation is disputed, there is some evidence that supports the fragmentation position. This fragmentation can take the form of missing sections of the story or difficulties

explaining it vocally, both of which can have an impact on the victim's assessment of an incident. For example, a victim may be ashamed of how they responded after a horrific situation because they do not remember being forced to do so. In ***Without a Name***, while sharing the experiences with Nyenyedzi, Mazvita could not narrate the incident in a linear fashion and her description appears fragmented. "…she had had to suppress her own cry which had risen to her lips. The unknown bird had silenced her when she needed to tell of her own suffering, to tell not to someone else – certainly not to the man – but to hear her own suffering uttered, acknowledged, within that unalterable encounter" (36). She could not express herself freely to her partner.

The fifth characteristics of trauma memory are vividness and immutability. Even many years after the incident, trauma memories can be astonishingly vivid; in a dissociative flashback, the person may lose all awareness of their current circumstances. Intrusive trauma memories are 'unchanging,' in the sense that they do not adapt to new information. For example, the offender may have died since the incident, but this is not represented in the memory, or the victim may experience a great sense of guilt despite later learning that they were not at fault.

In ***Without a Name***, Mazvita loses awareness of her present situation, "…the silence was not a forgetting, but a beginning. She would grow from the silence he had brought to her. Her longing for growth was deep, and came from the parts of her body he had claimed for himself, which he had claimed against all her resistance and her tears" (35). Likewise, In ***The Stone Virgins***, Nonceba experiences a loss of sensation due to her trauma, "My limbs are stiff. No part of my body can move; my fingers, my arms, every part of my body is again still. I lie on the bed, listening to my body turning slowly into stone. My jaw is held tight. I do not shout" (121).

The sixth characteristics of trauma memory are the traumatic incidents that are re-experienced during day or night time. Trauma memories may manifest as flashbacks or unwelcome memories during the day. Traumatic memories – or themes linked with them – may be recovered and re-experienced as nightmares while sleeping. Sigmund Freud, the psychologist, in his ***Beyond the Pleasure Principle*** explains the traumatic neurosis as "it repeatedly takes them to the situation of their original misadventure, from which they awake with a renewed sense of fright" (362).

In ***Without a Name***, Mazvita's child is born for the soldier and she strangles the baby to death in a fist of fury. She does not want to have the child since she considers the baby as a burden, "…the baby was her own, truly her own burden" (51). Later the traumatic memories of killing her child haunt her. "…the past came to her in rapid waves that made her leave the child forward, away from her in a deep uncontrollable motion of rejection" (23). In a similar way, In

***The Stone Virgin*s**, Nonceba re-experiences the traumatic incidents of Sibaso raping her and murdering her sister. “Day time is the hardest to endure…. I wake with Thenjiwe’s name held on my tongue; my mouth is filled with saliva” (123).

The seventh characteristics of trauma memory are high levels of emotions exhibited by the victims. Trauma memories are frequently accompanied by intense emotions. This could involve replays of feelings felt at the time of the trauma (for example, feeling paralyzed with dread during a flashback) or emotions associated with post-traumatic assessments (for example, a sense of shame when I think “I should have fought back”). These emotional reactions can also be seen in the phenomena of ‘affect without remembering,’ in which a person relives emotions associated with a distressing incident without recalling it.

In ***Without a Name***, the trauma that she faced instilled a fear in Mazvita: “She feared that forest and the war” (29). So, she refuses to go back to her native place Mubaira though Nyenyedzi invited her to meet her parents. Similarly, in another instance, Mazvita “…had turned blind, the blindness rose from inside her and overwhelmed her entire face. She no longer spoke. Mute and wounded she moved through the streets and wept” (15). In a same note, in ***The Stone Virgins***, Nonceba feels, “I am unable to speak my forehead is heavy. I carry words at the back of my mind, names of things, objects, places I do not know. My entire face is swollen, and it throbs. The skin on it pulls down and tightens; then my words quickly withdraw” (123-124). Nonceba experiences a feeling of insecurity which forces her to a state of quietness and stillness. She states, “My mind is quiet. Not rushing like the wind. Perfectly still. Like the leaf on the window, pressed down by the thoughts rushing against it. Raging against it” (125).

Yvonne Vera’s novels ***Without a Name*** and ***The Stone Virgins*** thus explore the deeper psyche of the female victims of trauma. The characteristics of traumatic memories include Involuntary recall, Nowness, Predominance of the Sensory Representations, Fragmentation, Vividness and Immutability, Re-experience of trauma and Exhibition of emotions by the victims render a multi-dimensional comprehension of the intensive concept of trauma and its serious side effects. Vera’s writings make a clarion call to the world to attend to the paralyzing effects of trauma and for a swift rescue of its victims, thereby promising for a new and better change.

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