Silenced Voices, Resuscitated Memory, and the Problematization of State Historiography in Yvonne Vera’s Novel The Stone Virgins

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Abstract

In Zimbabwe (like in most post-colonial African nations), history holds a critical place in discourses on constructions and reconstructions of national identity. The history of the Gukurahundi (the massacre of civilians in Matabeleland and Midlands regions of Zimbabwe in the early to late 1980s) continues to dominate debates on the politics of ethnic exclusion in contemporary Zimbabwe. This article explores the place of creative fiction in this political discourse. The article contends that Yvonne Vera’s novel The Stone Virgins (which is set in the Gukurahundi era) is a historically situated narrative of murder, rape, and trauma that powerfully challenges and renegotiates state power premised on hegemonic inscriptions and re-inscriptions of national history. The article focuses on the subtlety with which the psychic impact of rape and violence, especially as manifested in the suppression of the female victim’s voice and memory, can be read in turn (and paradoxically so) as the novel’s complex attempt at speaking back to the political stifling of debate about the Gukurahundi. The focus on the political significance of representations of a woman’s voice and memory in The Stone Virgins is informed by the pervasive politicization and masculinization of voice and expression in post-2000 Zimbabwean politics.

Keywords

national history, hegemony, Gukurahundi, trauma, violence

Sibaso’s voice is the closest. It crushes between every other word before I can hear. His voice makes every other sound perish. I cannot hear, and tremble, lost and blind to everything except his versions of events, his persistent pursuit of what has happened here.

Vera, 2002, p. 103

In the post-2000 period in Zimbabwe, history occupies an important place in socio-political discourses. The dominant historical narrative in post-2000 Zimbabwe manifests a clear attempt by the state to conveniently eclipse certain aspects of national history that threaten the political status quo. Many scholars have written about the use and abuse of history in hegemony creation, sustenance, and contestation. Invoking Robert Mugabe and Mandivava-Tarumva’s metaphors of sign and taboo in Sign and Taboo: Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera, Sophia Kostelac (2006) reads Vera’s subversive engagement with history in The Stone Virgins as an act of taboo breaking—a fictional yet gender-oriented intervention against the silencing of alternative remembrances and interpretations of the violent suppression of dissidents bordering on genocide in what was to be known as the Gukurahundi. Doubting Vera’s claim to be merely “interested in . . . national history” Grace Musila (2012, p. 5) argues that Vera’s writing in fact generally demonstrates “a more radical relationship with history.” Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front’s (ZANU [PF]) attempts to silence debate about the Gukurahundi (citing its potentially divisive impact) have lately manifested, for instance, in the party’s resistance to the recently created Human Rights Commission’s attempt to probe human rights abuses committed prior to the formation of the Government of National Unity in 2009, consequently sealing off the Gukurahundi from investigation. As a counter-discourse to this abuse of history, Vera’s novel The Stone Virgins is a unique and complex text not least because it is written by a woman and puts a woman at the center of its subversive re-inscription of politically abused history of the Gukurahundi. Fictionally narrativizing history in The Stone Virgins is certainly a subjective undertaking not without political implications. The history that Yvonne Vera expropriates and re-constructs from a female author (and protagonist’s) vantage point is, of course, subjective and contested.

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The actual Gukurahundi culminated in the signing of the Unity Accord—an uneasy “Unity Accord” between the liberation movements: the governing ZANU (PF) and the then opposition, Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZAPU)—in 1986 under circumstances that effectively turned Zimbabwe into a one-party state. The Gukurahundi thus becomes a taboo topic for discussion and debate insofar as such debates threaten hegemonic notions of national unity and exposes ZANU (PF)’s violent incorporation of ZAPU to entrench its rule. For Christiansen (2005), the unity founded on the state’s strategic remembrances of the massacres is “installed as the sign by which memories of the violent past could be turned into an obligation to forget” (p. 9). However, The Stone Virgins recuperates the female (and also male) subaltern’s unjustly silenced voice to challenge—not only the glossing over of the social and political impact of the actual massacres, but perhaps more importantly, the state’s “patriarchal” stifling of other voices in the nationalist project. Against the increasing masculinization of the Zimbabwean state in the last decade, Vera’s novel pervasively highlights the indispen-
sability of subaltern voices in the making of an inclusive national identity. In recovering voice for the subaltern, Vera foregrounds the imperative of re-writing politically abused history to render it useful to the ongoing search for an inclusive national identity.

The tendency in the state’s account of the Gukurahundi to water down the humanitarian consequences as well as the ethnic and regional antagonism widened by the Gukurahundi atrocities best manifests in President Mugabe’s attempts to claim equality of impact of the massacres on both Shona and Ndebele ethnic groups. In one of the few instances that Mugabe (cited in Kostelac, 2006) has spoken about the Gukurahundi massacres, he said of it,

It was an act of madness, we killed each other and destroyed each other’s property. It was wrong and both sides were to blame. We have had a difference, a quarrel. We engaged ourselves in a reckless and unprincipled fight. (p. 11)

Similarly, two bills crafted by Members of Parliament from Matabeleland region (Jonathan Moyo, then an independent legislator in 2006 and Felix Magalela Sibanda of the Movement for Democratic Change [MDC] party in 2012) to address the Gukurahundi issue were frustrated and aborted on technicalities in terms of parliamentary bureaucracy. In this political context, I read Yvonne Vera’s novel The Stone Virgins (whose plot unfolds in a Gukurahundi time–space) to demonstrate how the unreconciled Gukurahundi past—what Lene Bull Christiansen (2005) cites President Mugabe calling “ugly history” (p. 208)—haunts the present façade of unity as celebrated, for instance, on Unity Day, foregrounding the urgent need to establish actual national reconciliation. In their grappling with nationalist politics of the post-2000 period in Zimbabwe, the focal texts covertly yet profoundly underline the treatment of women in the context of the broader patriarchal turn of national politics.

Pauline Dodgson-Katiyo (2012) highlights the influence (to The Stone Virgins’ political impact) of the historical text co-authored by the historian Terence Ranger, Jocelyn Alexander, and JoAnn McGregor (2002)—Violence and Memory: One Hundred Years in the “Dark Forests” of Matabeleland—and Vera’s own admission that The Stone Virgins is partly a product of Ranger’s influence to pursue through fiction what he had engaged with through historical analysis: the subject of violence and memory, which is an inextricable part of the history of Matabeleland and its relationship with non-Ndebele regions of Zimbabwe—particularly Mashonaland. The intertextual coherences between the violence of the actual Gukurahundi and that evoked in The Stone Virgins are therefore not coincidental. In this light (and according to the dictates of this study’s overarching focus on “alternative” metaphors of Zimbabwe’s decade of crisis), it is therefore imperative to explore the fictional narrativization of Gukurahundi violence and its contested memorization in the context of the state’s discouragement of alternative representations. Vera’s literary engagement with the politics of hegemonic revisions of national history in The Stone Virgins is not entirely a post-2000 phenomenon. Precedents can be found in her oeuvre for such artistic interventions, for example, in her counter-discursive re-appropriation of the female figure Nehanda in her novel Nehanda (Vera, 1993). Here, the centrality (to the narratives of the text and of the nation) of Nehanda’s historical role in some of the earliest anti-colonial uprisings foregrounds women’s importance and involvement in the making of the nation. Vera’s first novel presents what may be one of the earliest post-independence feminist literary contestations of the patriarchal occlusion of females in the political sphere and is therefore an important work to begin to examine this author’s efforts to re-inscribe national history from a female perspective. Nehanda is a re-appraisal of the story of Nehanda—the historic and mythic spirit-medium of the Shona people—who inspired the first native uprising; initially in protest against the colonial hut tax. The novel re-creates the feminine revolutionary, not only to advance a female subjectivity but more importantly to make her the face and symbol of Black resistance—and thus identify her with the birth of the independent nation against hegemonic revisions of the nation as a product of masculine liberation. Nehanda’s central role in the Chimurenga wars is linked to the mythical significance attached to her identity by the later generation of liberation warriors who identified themselves as her “bones” that would “rise” and defeat the settler regime in what is referred to as “The Second Chimurenga.” This feminist claim to historical agency disrupts previous androcentric mythologies of the Chimurenga wars in the sense of what Muchemwa and Muponde (2007) call “the wars of men” (p. xvii). Muchemwa and Muponde (2007) further argue that in the post-2000 epoch, “outside the war ethic, driven by an excess of masculinity, individuals whose gender does not contribute to the war economy are under threat” (p. xxvii). National heroism in the post-independence epoch has undergone extensive phallocentric
yet political revisions. For Lene Bull Christiansen (Muchemwa & Muponde, 2007), Vera in *Nehanda* substitutes “a male dominated version of Zimbabwean nationalism and replaces it with a feminist nationalism” (p. 205) to challenge the exclusionary nationalism of post-independence Zimbabwe. In appropriating a female figure with a national appeal, Vera’s *Nehanda* recovers a forceful voice for women to articulate their relevance and lay equal claim to citizenship and the nation’s founding legacy in the *Chimurenga* wars. In addition, more than simply subverting androcentric constructions of heroism, nationality and history, Vera’s fictional reconstruction of the Shona spiritual legend of Nehanda as the pillar of the *Chimurenga* wars becomes an act of re-gendering national memory much in the same way that Nonceba (in *The Stone Virgins*) is instituted as the “authentic” voice of the Gukurahundi and an indispensable repository of its memories—the prerequisite to the ethnically divided nation’s convalescence. Unlike the historic Nehanda, Vera’s *Nehanda* is born just after colonial invasion: evoking her birth as the land’s strategic reaction to colonialism. As an author, Vera may abuse some historical facts to render history useful, but in the process, the *Chimurenga* wars are reconstructed as the wars of women too and the liberated nation as belonging to them as well. For Faith Mkwesha-Manyonga (2012), Vera’s fictional recreation of Nehanda re-inscribes the nation as “brought into being by the hyphenated subject of a woman hero” (p. 47). Nehanda’s symbolic significance as an inspirational site of resistance to oppression, then, transcends this colonial configuration and foregrounds a feminist aesthetic of the post-colonial nation.

My focus on the interlocking themes of Gukurahundi violence and memory in *The Stone Virgins*’ creation of (or participation in) what Rita Felski (2008) calls “a counter-public sphere” (p. 8; especially in the context of Vera’s declaration of an intention to use the novel to contest contemporary hegemonic re-inscriptions of the Gukurahundi) is informed both by intratextual and extratextual considerations. After years of obscuring the Gukurahundi through the state’s refusal to make public two reports on the massacres prepared by the Dumbutshena and the Chihambakwe Commissions of Inquiry, the non-governmental organization Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP) published, in 1997, the first (and up to now the only) report about the massacres. The title of the CCJP report, *Breaking the Silence*, reflects an awareness of the muzzling of debate about the Gukurahundi that historians such as Masipula Sithole, Terence Ranger, James Muzondidya, and Yvonne Vera (through creative fiction and at the persuasion of Ranger) have tried to deconstruct, in so doing opening up access to alternative knowledge and theorizations of the atrocities. In this light (and guided by my present study’s focus), I read *The Stone Virgins* as a “new way of seeing”—in Felski’s (2008) phrase (p. 10)—the Gukurahundi (and its significance to post-2000 political developments). Such complex articulations engage with already circulating narratives of the massacres in a more profound and captivating manner. In an interview with Jane Bryce, Vera demonstrates her concern at the politicization of the Gukurahundi and the state’s attempts to re-script its history for hegemonic purposes. Vera (cited in Bryce, 2002) says of *The Stone Virgins*,

The last book I’ve written is set in the period of the dissident movement after independence (1980-1985). It’s a very difficult subject, but I have a scene—a photograph—of a woman being decapitated. It happened—they would cut your lips or your nose—but cutting someone’s head off . . . A man come into the village a does that: how does he do it? How do I convey that in a way that interests the reader? . . . I don’t want to say, ah it’s so awkward, ugly; messy, bloody, I’m not going to write it. No I have to enable it to be read, when it is encountered, as astounding, beautiful, creative experience. So I have to choreograph it.

In *The Stone Virgins*, state hegemony premised on self-serving inscriptions of history is challenged and re-negotiated in a historically situated narrative of murder, rape, and trauma. Much debate has centered on the subject of rape and trauma/pain and its relationship to the process of reimagining history and the nation in *The Stone Virgins*. However, my current enquiry shifts focus to explore the subtlety with which the psychic impact of rape and violence—especially as manifested in the suppression of the female victim’s voice and memory—can be read in turn (and paradoxically so) as the novel’s complex attempt at speaking back to the (political) stifling of debate about the Gukurahundi. This focus on the political significance of (a female) voice and memory in *The Stone Virgins* is influenced by the pervasive politicization and masculinization of voice and expression in post-2000 state politics in Zimbabwe. In this sense, I find the right, ability, and capacity to remember, speak, and be listened to as occupying a critical dimension to the making and unmaking of political hegemony and indeed as characterizing the antagonistic relationship between political and civil society in post-2000 Zimbabwe. Commenting on *The Stone Virgins*, Pauline Dodgson-Katiyo (2012) argues that state-suppressed memories—what she calls “anti-memories”—“create a space for . . . the otherwise forgotten or absent to be commemorated, documented, narrated and even felt” (p. 117). What makes “anti-memory” a fascinating site for counter-history, I would add, is its experiential dimension—its capacity as a product of the marginalized to present what Grace Musila (2012) calls “intimate histories” (p. 5).

The narration of events in the Section “1981-1986” (pp. 59-165) depicts the violence of the Gukurahundi so forcefully that it relates to reality according to Ross Chambers’s definition of reading as “the name of the practice that has the power of producing shifts in desire; and desire does not produce ‘fantasy’ but reality itself” (cited in Baker, 2012, p. 121). The section’s periodization not only situates the narrative in a definitive epoch in the history of the nation. More importantly, the periodization marks the Gukurahundi chronotope in which Sibaso’s acts of rape, murder, and torture (as
well as the massacre at Thandabantu store) and the resultant trauma and struggle to retain memory and voice on the part of the surviving female victim can be fully apprehended. However, the Gukurahundi chronotope does not merely delineate the historical context to situate the narrative historically allowing it to participate in debates on the massacres. In fact, the time-space occupied by the narrative allows it to use the actual Gukurahundi as justification to “challenge male dominated discourses of patriarchy both in the private sphere as well as in the narratives of national history” (Christiansen, 2004, p. 19). In The Stone Virgins, fictionalization of the Gukurahundi is bound up with focus on a traumatized female subject. This pivoting of the narrative on a female subaltern enables the narrative to re-capture the event vividly and affectively so as to address the readers’ emotions and potentially lead them to an “informed” and critical position that undermines the validity of the official grand narrative of the event. Besides this tactical framing of the narrative, the novel’s early hints of engaging with the contemporary empirical Gukurahundi politics can be seen in its depiction of an unstable independence period whose euphoria prepares us for its brief duration before a return to chaos and violence. In only two paragraphs of the first page of the “1981-1986” section of the novel (the dates indicating the Gukurahundi period), Vera is able to compress and critically represent the history of this tragic turn of events in independent Zimbabwe with evocative descriptions that foreground disillusionment and confinement especially on the part of Sibaso. Sibaso is here evoked as one of the earliest victims of the “pitfalls of national consciousness”—to use Fanon’s popular phrase. The short-lived independence excitement is described in just 11 lines, conveying a mood of cautious celebration that hints at the imminent rekindling of the war and marks Sibaso’s “complex” victimization. This can be inferred in the following quotation:

STREETS-LIGHTS AND LUMINOUS BALCONIES, DOORWAYS, drinking houses, tailor shops, bus stops and fish seller porches . . . Milkmen in torn and faded blue collars, ice-cream vendors chatting to forgetful prostitutes, ambulance drivers, blood drying on their fingernails. Husbands carry loaves of bread to their lovers, bespectacled priests, dogs bark at half-masked nuns from mission schools. Naked hips dance Jerusalem dances at the small city for the first black mayor . . . Funeral parlours are scented with hibiscus bushes. (SV 59)

In this hotchpotch of images reflecting independence, pleasant images of “luminous balconies” are intermingled with ghastly metaphors of death describing “ambulance drivers [with] blood drying on their fingernails” and funeral parlours . . . scented with hibiscus bushes” (SV 59). The imagery portrays a post-war period that is ambivalently and precariously haunted by forces of destabilization and primed for a return to chaos. However, this representation of independence under siege does not merely situate The Stone Virgins in the corpus of “disillusionment” literature that is characteristic of the post-war period in Africa but (more importantly) also reflects on the potential tragedy resulting from unreconciled interests inhabiting the nationalist project after the attainment of independence. The succeeding paragraph in the novel’s “Gukurahundi section” confirms the fears evoked in the first and foregrounds the intricate relationship between post-colonial violence and memory. The violence of the post-independence epoch is depicted in the paragraph (and in the novel at large) as averse to mental decoding. Not only is the violence portrayed as hostile to memory; it in fact annihilates memory such that (as memory is evoked in the novel as a prerequisite for the convalescence of the victim) the victim has to rise beyond her victimizer’s instruments and methods of psychic destruction and gagging to recuperate. This is how the onset of war is described:

The war begins. A curfew is declared. A state of emergency. No movement is allowed. The cease-fire ceases. It begins in the streets, the burying of memory. The bones rising. Rising. Every road out of Bulawayo is covered with soldiers and police, teeming like ants. Road blocks. Bombs. Landmines. Hand-grenades. Memory is lost. Independence is lost. Guns rise. Rising anew. In 1981. (SV 59)

What is striking about this passage is not only its use of short descriptive sentences to signify the shortness of independence and the abruptness of post-independence civil war but paradoxically, the novel’s apparent intertextual resonance with the historical narrative of the period highlighted by the temporal reference in the short last sentence: “[i]n 1981” (SV 59).

The dovetailing tropes of suppressed voice, trauma, and convalescence in The Stone Virgins are captured in an extraordinary poetic narrative characterized by short sentences exemplified by the passage cited above. Much has been written about Vera’s poetic use of language to explode “taboos” attached to dominant narratives of the nation in almost the entirety of her oeuvre. I find its use in The Stone Virgins as enhancing the novel’s illocutionary force—its affective evocation of the female (and also male) subaltern’s victimhood. However, the illocutionary force embedded in the poetic narrative does not only move us into a compassionate relationship with the victims but also discloses the injustice of their victimization. As Lara (1998) comments, “[n]arratives that possess such ‘illocutionary force’ have the ‘disclosive’ ability to envision normatively—that is, in a critical way—better ways of being in a world of ‘equality and distinction’.” Sofia Kostelac (2006), for instance, reveals the stylistic efficacy of poetic language in the creation of a subaltern subject, which buttresses my present reading of The Stone Virgins as foregrounding the female victim to challenge the “hegemonization of particular versions of narratives on national liberation wars in African historiography” (p. 32). Kostelac argues,
In its discursive recognition of the “other,” I propose that poetic language is positioned to heed Spivak’s call for an ethical relationship in our dealings with the subaltern; one that will recognise her independent “otherness,” without re-incorporating her voice into the dominant structures which ensure her subordination. (p. 32)

Kostelac (2006) further argues that “in its capacity to disrupt existing unities, poetic language can grasp ‘deep ideological changes operating within society, which current symbolic forms cannot yet articulate’” (p. 33). The “poetry” in Vera’s language marks its vividness that compels us to enter Nonceba’s (and Sibaso’s) traumatized mind as guided empathizers. An extract from one of the most chilling, arresting narrative moments, depicting Nonceba’s traumatization at the hands of Sibaso, the “dissident” can elucidate this point:

He has sought my face. Held it. His fingers, the gap between my eyes, the length of my brow, the spread of my cheekbones, my chin: my lips, moving or silent. He cut. Smoothly and quickly. Each part memorised; my dark blood. My mouth a wound. My mouth, severed, torn, pulled apart. A final cut, not slow, skilfully quick, the memory of it is the blood in my bones. (SV 59)

In this quotation, the poetic language creates an unnerving pictorial representation of Nonceba’s mutilation by Sibaso, arousing sympathetic emotions and enlisting affective alignment with Nonceba’s subject position. For Lara (1998), such vivid evocation of women’s suffering “connect[s] women with the aesthetic realm, because . . . the expressive sphere allows new experiences to be presented in the very act of describing them” (p. 59). In this light, the evocative and poetic quality of Nonceba’s descriptions of her experiences can be read as constituting what Lara (1998) calls “tacit knowledge [which results from] communication about the personal core” (p. 59). Nonceba’s memories of her experiences, we are told, are hidden deep “in the blood in [her] bones” (SV 99), thus enabling her to shield them from total annihilation by Sibaso. In retaining her memory, Nonceba manages to create and sustain a subjective position that is independent from Sibaso and his violent mechanisms of physical and psychic destruction. Nonceba’s narrative, then, can be conceived of as both “self-critical and self-reflective” (Lara, 1998, p. 109), enabling us to comprehend and interpret the nature of her ordeal with a flair of solidarity with her.

John C. Hawley (2012) brings in a fascinating perspective on Vera’s style that connects the trauma of her second main female character Nonceba (and attempts by her tormentor Sibaso to elide her memory of the torture) to that of the nation in the context of the Gukurahundi. Hawley reads The Stone Virgins as focalized on victim-centered narrative that resembles a “testimonio.” Hawley’s choice of the word “testimonio” (a term that is mostly used in international human rights tribunals instead of “testimony”) indicates his belief in the gravity of Sibaso’s acts of torture as crimes against humanity. Hawley suggests that the flair of fictional realism heightened by the narrative’s testimonio form allows both the victim and the victimizer agency to tell their versions of the experiences, thus allowing readers to feel as if they are experiencing “first-hand” the innermost motives of the perpetrator and the reactions of the victim, enabling us to “judge” the event. Hawley connects Vera’s depiction of both victimizer’s and victimized’s states of mind to her overarching intention to re-script the Gukurahundi in a manner that would allow the novel to play a role in contemporary discussions concerning the event. Despite Gayatri Spivak’s (1998) point that “the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (p. 28) and Kizito Muchemwa’s (2002) comment (in relation to Vera’s earlier novels Under The Tongue [1996] and Without a Name [1994]) that “rape is a violent silencing act that takes the identity of a woman as a possession of the rapist” (p. 13), I argue that The Stone Virgins’ styling as a testimonio enables Nonceba’s traumatic memory to constitute an alternative archive of a witnessing subject’s claim to “truths” about the event. Nonceba’s subjectivity can be conceived of as responding to what Maggio (2007) calls “the essential Spivakian puzzle . . . [that is,] How can we account for the subaltern?” How can they speak?” (p. 426). As Lara argues, when subaltern subjects (especially female ones such as Nonceba) speak, their narratives are inherently agonistic, persuasively and aesthetically foregrounding new meanings of the moral. For Lara (1998), “the agonistic dimension refers back to the expressive sphere, where the validity is granted by an appeal to the quality of an authentic or sincere expression” (pp. 9-10).

The function of the testimonio in The Stone Virgins, however, transcends the mere disclosure of the victim/perpetrator’s subject positions. Besides its capacity to recover voice and memory for the subaltern woman (who then stands as an indispensable witness in the reader’s mental human rights tribunal), the testimonio allows Nonceba’s witnessing subject’s perspective informed by her experiences, to acquire an affective and aesthetic dimension. The resulting illlocutionary force generated by Nonceba’s passionate address forces us into a state of emotional solidarity with her and also with her victimizer who turns out to be an equally traumatized victim of a higher (political) order. The “disclosive capacity” (Lara, 1998, p. 4) of Nonceba’s traumatic narrative, then, not only compels us to “convict” Sibaso and condemn his attempts to stifle the witness’s memory and voice to “testify” against his dehumanizing acts. More importantly (and as Zoë Norridge’s study of pain in The Stone Virgins reveals), the pain in Nonceba’s narrative “deepens our human understanding of what the facts and figures of this violent period really mean” (Norridge, 2008, p. 2). Read in the context of the state’s efforts to discourage debate over the Gukurahundi, Nonceba’s resistance to Sibaso’s violent determination to destroy her memory can be read on a symbolic plane as the novel’s surreptitious destabilization of the state’s censure of alternative narratives of the massacres. Beyond reflecting the
female victim’s and the male victimizer’s war-torn psyches, Nonceba and Sibaso’s testimonios situate their experiences in the broader early manifestations of signs of post-independence “pitfalls of national consciousness” characterized by the post-independence state’s politics of exclusivism. In giving a voice for both Nonceba (an obvious victim of male violence) and Sibaso (a covert victim of state marginalization) to talk about their experiences, Vera goes beyond focusing on what many scholars read as the physiological and psychological impact of war on a female victim to explore the “bemom[isation]” (Gagiano, 2007, p. 72) of the male victimizer by state violence and political deception. The testimony thus inscribes affect and authenticity to Nonceba and Sibaso’s subjective narratives to claim agency and recognition as credible sources of knowledge about the Gukurahundi—a “record before the memory disappears forever” (Hawley, 2012, p. 69). Read with a consciousness of hegemonic demands to forget the Gukurahundi or at least to remember its toned-down state-revised versions (and Vera’s declared intention to re-script the Gukurahundi), the testimonio mode of narrativizing torture creates an impression of Nonceba and Sibaso’s stories as indispensable to any search for a fuller understanding of the violence. Nonceba and Sibaso’s different victimhood, victimization, and victim/victimizer relationship establish them as alternative forms of victims of the Gukurahundi, thus extending our conceptions of Gukurahundi violence and its impacts on individuals.

In The Stone Virgins, Vera “remembers the nation’s acheing spot”—to use Anna-Leena Toivanen’s phrase (2009, p. 1)—the nation’s division along ethnic lines widened by the event and memory of the Gukurahundi—with a subtle yet powerful commentary that thrives on representational mechanisms of the fictional story to cast doubt on the authenticity of hegemonic narratives of the Gukurahundi. Besides Nonceba’s testimonial evidence, Vera’s critique of violent political and ethnic domination finds expression through the symbolic significance attached to places—particularly Kezi. Vera’s depiction of the tragic fate of the Thandabantu store and its storekeeper (Mahlathini) is a useful case in point. The fate of the Thandabantu store is intricately bound up with that of Kezi, whose cartographic and symbolic significance as the Matabeleland region (where most of the atrocities were recorded) is unmistakable. In his commentary on the ideological implications of known places such as London in English Literature, Leonard Davis (1987) gives an interesting commentary that “[n]o author can actually re-create a place, but . . . the locations become in effect reshaped through the intersection of the literary imagination and the social mythology” (p. 55). For Davis (1987), this intersection results in the creation of a “‘known unknown’ space” (p. 55). In the context of The Stone Virgins, we come to “know” the “unknown” Kezi through the fictional text’s relationship to the Gukurahundi “social mythology” inhabiting Kezi’s empirical text. Such “social mythologies” (not the least of which is the state’s reductive grand narrative downplaying the Gukurahundi) can be located in records in the form of reports and documentations about Kezi during the Gukurahundi. The CCJP report (1997), for instance, reveals that Kezi was the epicenter of the historical Gukurahundi. The report describes Kezi as “a largely communal area south of Bulawayo where atrocities were known to be severe in 1984” (p. 4). Vera’s Kezi is, however, not a mere site for the unraveling of the Gukurahundi. In the novel, Kezi comes close to what Davis (1987) calls an “intentional location” (p. 70)—an ideologically loaded space whose social and political significance is connected to the semantic effect of the novel. The description of Kezi before and after the massacres in the novel demonstrates an implicitly subversive commentary on the event. Through her kaleidoscopic description of Thandabantu store and the Gulati Mountains and Thenjiwe and Nonceba’s passionate relationship to them prior to the start of the atrocities, Vera creates (in readers) a fascination with the places (and the sisters) that generates reproachful emotions when they are violently destroyed later in the novel. Kezi is (perhaps even more) horrifically desacralized by the Fifth Brigade’s sustained torture and slow murder of the shopkeeper of Thandabantu store (with its resonant name) and the gunning down of the local customers who had innocently gathered there. An illustration of this complex function of space is necessary to our understanding of its affective, aesthetic yet political function. This is how Vera describes Kezi before its desecration by Sibaso’s torture and mutilation of Nonceba and the murder of Thenjiwe:

It is full of light before the complete shape of the sun appears above the touring hills of Gulati, at midday it is directly overhead and finally sets on flat ground, where land meets sky, in Kezi, opposite to the immense horizon of the stone hills. At night this difference is visible: on one side the stars vanish suddenly into the density of the heavy rocks now a quiet and impenetrable mass of darkness, on the other side the sensation is that of walking directly on the stars, so near and infinite is the sky that the mind floats, imbued with the most enigmatic sight. (SV 16)

In the midst of her traumatic ordeal, Nonceba’s attempts to create an illusion of happiness through brief excursions from the reality of her torture lead her to “see only these white blooms growing along the Kwakhe River after the rains” (emphasis added; SV 85). Nonceba, we are told, has passionately “loved every particle of earth there, the people, the animals, the land” (SV 82). However, Kezi sits precariously on the brink of destabilization signaled not only by the restlessness of the female former ex-combatants milling around Thandabantu store but also by its locatedness (in contrast to the relatively “safe” city of Bulawayo) in the “bush”—the space that is synonymous with the anti-colonial guerrilla liberation fighters and the nascent battle ground for the looming war. The visiting urbainates from Bulawayo are repelled by Kezi—they “miss . . . the city lights whose brilliance outshines the moon [in Kezi]” (SV 25). Unlike Bulawayo, Kezi emerges as a place doomed to host the
post-independence war just as the actual Kezi (according to the CCJP report) was the place most affected by the Gukurahundi. Thus, in The Stone Virgins, “to be in Kezi, to be in the bush, is to be at the mercy of misfortune: fear makes their hearts pound like drums. The war so near, close to the skin [they] can smell it” (SV 26). Ironically, when the Gukurahundi does come to Kezi, it manifests in the fittingly named Sibaso (meaning “a flint to start a flame” [SV 73]) whose movement from the bush (at the end of the liberation war) into the city (Bulawayo—under a tide of euphoric independence celebrations in which he is politically excluded) forces him back into the bush (Kezi) where he vents his anger on the two sisters.

It is, however, the unerring violent massacre of innocent civilian patrons and the destruction of Thandabantu store (for long the lifeblood and heartbeat of Kezi) and the chilling murder of its storekeeper (Mahlathini) that not only differentiate The Stone Virgins’ account of the Gukurahundi from that of the CCJP but also make Kezi a symbolic microcosm of the Matabeleland region and its destruction metonymically signifying the violence suffered by the people from the region during this operation. The following are constellated quotations from different passages describing the destruction of Thandabantu store and the death of Mahlathini:

Those who claim to know inch by inch what happened to Mahlathini say that plastic bags of Roller ground meal were lit, and let drop bit by bit over him till his skin peeled off from his knees to his hair (121) . . . those who witnessed the goings-on at Thandabantu on this night said Mahlathini howled like a helpless animal . . . the odour of charred flesh filled the air and has stayed in the minds of the Kezi villagers forever . . . Thandabantu Store was razed to pieces, bombed, and silenced . . . Some of the men who are missing in the village are said to have certainly died there . . . (SV 123)

What is striking about these descriptions is not only the apparent narrative shift from Noneca’s point of view to reliance on secondary witnesses as sources of information about the Gukurahundi (revealed by the constant use of phrases such as “it is said”) but more importantly, the sadistic manner of the destruction of a place and its keeper we have come to identify with Kezi (and by implication the entire Matabeleland region and the Ndebele people). While this shift in sources may effectively “verify” the event as different witnesses confirm the violence, it also reveals how deeply entrenched in the civilian psyche the atrocities were. The memory of the event lingers in the Ndebele group’s mind caused by “[t]he odour of charred flesh [that] filled the air and has stayed in the minds of the Kezi villagers forever” (SV 123). As revealed earlier in this section, Kezi as a spatial entity assumes a symbolic ethnic and geographical significance as the hotbed of the massacres of mostly Ndebele speakers by the Fifth Brigade that comprised mainly Shona speakers. The nature of the setting in Vera’s novel, then, demands a reading of the soldiers’ motives and the nature of their brutal attack on Thandabantu store that connects the political impact produced by such fictional representation to contemporary political accounts of the actual massacres at Kezi. Historical knowledge allows us to discern in Sibaso’s “testimonio” (especially his revelation that “[h]e FOUGHT IN THE HILLS OF GULATI”; emphasis as in the original SV 107) that he is an ex-ZIPRA (Zimbabwe People’s Revolutionary Army) war combatant. Ironically, the fact that in Vera’s novel, some of the most appalling acts of atrocities (rape, decapitation, and mutilation) are committed by an ex-ZIPRA combatant on Ndebele victims may seem to justify the “peace-making” intentions of the infamous Fifth Brigade—a largely Shona North Korean trained army sanctioned by Mugabe to stop the dissidents. However, Sibaso’s “testimonio” displaces this perception and in reflecting his victim and perpetrator sides, exposes the political roots of Sibaso’s monstrous disposition. Through Sibaso, Vera indicates parallels between dissidents’ atrocities and the Fifth Brigade. Vera suggests the “background” influence of ZANU (PF)’s ethnic exclusivism in creating monsters like Sibaso. Sibaso’s violent disposition may thus be conceived in terms of his disillusionment and frustrations at his exclusion, as he says, “My mind is a ferment. What it is it to live? After a certain point, reality stops coinciding with your wishes” (SV 107). According to the CCJP report, the atrocities committed by the dissidents were by far surpassed by those perpetrated by the Fifth Brigade both in terms of numbers and the intensity of the brutalities. This fact, it seems, forces one to comprehend Sibaso and his two female victims not merely as conceptual constructions in the author’s political grand plan to undermine the official narrative of the Gukurahundi but to conceive of him as a creature (and even victim) of the war and an abortive independence that has turned him into a callous phantom soldier, as he says, “During a war we are lifeless beings” (SV 74).

A close reading of the novel’s second section (“1981-1986”) strongly discourages and even resists any reading that detaches the violence perpetrated by Sibaso and the experiences of the two sisters from the Gukurahundi chronotope. In this light, the killing of Thenjiwe and the facial maiming of Noneca are not only symptomatic of the suffering inflicted on Kezi (and Matabeleland) but also an allusion to the state’s attempts to obliterate memories of Gukurahundi atrocities (as symbolized by the decapitation of Thenjiwe’s head—the symbolic repository of her memory about the event—and the mutilation of Noneca’s mouth). The puzzling trope pervades the whole narrative of the “1981-1986” section, constantly reminding us of the empirical state-induced culture of silence over the Gukurahundi. Re-invoking Hawley’s theorization of the “1981-1986” section as progressing in a testimonio kind of narrative style, Sibaso’s structured violence and its memory/voice warping impact on Thenjiwe and Noneca can be read as implicitly reflecting on the empirical attempts at destroying alternative and hegemonically “inconvenient” archives and narratives of the
massacres. The memory elision motif best manifests in the form of two contrasting images—Sibaso’s attempts to annihilate Thenjiwe, the woman whom he decapitates, and the survivor Nonceba’s struggle to reclaim and retain her memory and voice to remember and speak about the gruesome murder of Thenjiwe and her own torture. Nonceba is pushed by a passion to “to tell them [and of course, us] everything [she] ha[s] seen . . .” (SV 104).

An important dimension to the violence that Nonceba suffers at the hands of Sibaso is that it seems to affect the mind more than it affects any other part of her abused body. Sibaso’s overwhelming physical domination, we are told, makes “the force of his presence swirl . . . in her mind” (SV 62). Overpowered and helpless, her “cry comes directly from her mind not from her mouth” as “[h]er mind is scalded with the presence of his arms” (SV 63). In the hospital ward where Nonceba is convalescing, she is haunted by a mysterious voice of a woman she never sees. In a dreamlike hallucination in which the story of the woman who is forced by a soldier to kill her husband appears, Nonceba finds out that her hands are tied to the bed and she cannot help the woman; “she has to watch and be silent. She cannot see. She cannot say a word. Not a word. She cannot speak. Not a word” (SV 81). The relationship between Nonceba and Sibaso is based on the latter’s intention to physically and spiritually silence the former who in turn escapes from the physical torture to protect her memory and voice. Nonceba’s ability to retain her voice and memory (although in fragments) is therefore not only a subversive act of destabilizing Sibaso’s authority and plan but also an attempt to forge a vital subject position that enables her to remember (to forget) her experiences so that she can retain sanity and recuperate. At the end of her ordeal, Nonceba’s violated body, mind, and voice become indelible archives of a moment that defines her and indeed Kezi and Matabeleland. Nonceba’s convalescence is therefore inextricably bound up with the rehabilitating presence of Cephas the National Archive employee and her ability to remember and speak about her trauma to him. Nonceba discovers this healing potential of memory, voice, and speaking while recuperating in hospital:

She will have to find the sources of sound inside her, pure and timeless. Then she will open her mouth and let the sound free. Words will flow. Only then would she discover a world in contrast to her predicament. She would restore her own mind, healing it in segments, in sound. She thinks of the language of animals which has no words but memory. (SV 81)

Thus, in the narrative of the Gukurahundi (both in its actual and fictional forms), violence is not merely an act of disciplining a dissident body but also a means of annihilating memory as an act of self-protection. But, to make sense of her present self-identity and to move on in life, Nonceba has to offload the baggage of the traumatic past; that is, to “come to terms with the past” (Adorno cited in Toivanen, 2009, p. 1). Vera’s story of a Gukurahundi-violated woman’s attempts to convalesce and exorcise the “ghost” of past trauma becomes symptomatic of various efforts to use re-memory (in the sense of Toni Morrison’s use of the word in her novel Beloved—meaning remembering to forget) to come to terms with contemporary ethnically induced challenges to the national project. Whereas the state, for instance, has instituted the National Unity Day (celebrated on the 21st of December of each year), which places especial emphasis on the future and the possibilities in national unity, fiction such as Vera’s novel creates fictional life worlds, which compels us to re-think the present political and cultural state of the nation in terms of its evolution from the past, no matter how ugly it may seem.

In light of this discussion, it can be concluded that literary fiction in contemporary Zimbabwe plays a critical role in problematizing dominant narratives of the nation and imagining an inclusive nation. It has been demonstrated that The Stone Virgins enters the post-2000 political debate on the (in) significance of certain histories as a subversive narrative that opposes dominant state narratives of the nation and complexly re-interprets the past from a previously silenced female perspective. The novel powerfully illuminates how (especially the “ugly”) past is inextricably part of the contemporary nation. The novel’s gesturing toward national healing and reconciliation (symbolically signified in the novel by the female victim’s (Nonceba’s recuperation from her rape and mutilation) signals the imperative of remembering the ugly past in the processes of forgetting that past and charting the future.

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