

**DRAFT PAPER: Perceptions of Pain in Contemporary
Zimbabwean Literature – Personal and Public Narratives in
Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins***

Zoë Norridge

4th Global Conference
Making Sense of: Health, Illness and Disease
Monday 4th July – Thursday 7th July 2005
Mansfield College, Oxford

African literature is suffused with pain narratives. From depictions of the horrors of colonial occupation to accounts of ongoing poverty and health inequalities, both mental and physical suffering remain a constant theme. They are not however the only theme, and monolithic representations of Africa as a place of disease and death, still common in the European media today, sustain a deeply uncomfortable stereotype for many African intellectuals.

However, I believe that celebrating Africa's diversity and creativity doesn't necessarily mean avoiding researching the more painful aspects of Africa's literary output. Rejecting any study of pain or violence in Africa is becoming a cliché in itself, particularly when so many of the currently fashionable themes in African literary studies, such as nationalism and gender, are founded on an understanding of mental and physical health in a specifically African context. The main challenge for anyone researching representations of pain in African literature is finding theoretical approaches that take into account both the African context of the texts available and existing research by pain theorists.

The area of pain studies is diverse, innovative and spans several disciplines. Nonetheless it has concentrated predominantly on Western subjects. Biomedical research has a tendency to categorise and pathologise, looking for diagnostic criteria to facilitate practical interventions in the context of national healthcare systems, founded on specific expectations and beliefs. More culturally focussed anthropological studies of pain by researchers such as Arthur Kleinman and his North American colleagues provide richer frameworks for literary analysis, but are still mostly focussed on the West.¹ In Africa, the ethnographic work of medical anthropologists rarely seems to engage with African writers themselves. My research aims to begin to bridge this gap, bringing African literary theory together with pain theory to generate

new understandings about how African literature makes sense of health, illness and disease.

One way to bring these disciplines together is through combining divergent theoretical approaches in the detailed study of specific literary texts. This paper examines particularly striking pain narratives in Zimbabwean Yvonne Vera's most recent novel, *The Stone Virgins*.² I will argue that Vera's work offers us unique insights into Zimbabwe's turbulent past whilst at the same time enriching our understanding of fictional pain narratives, both in general and in a specifically African context.

Vera's complex, poetic texts carry within them an insidious sense of sadness, a feeling for the tragedy of people frustrated by surroundings and circumstance. Her five novels and short stories are located in the Zimbabwean past, treating taboo subjects such as incest and abortion through descriptions of the personal lives of women. The text for discussion here, *The Stone Virgins* is Vera's first novel to treat post-independence Zimbabwe. Set in Matabeleland in the 1980s, it describes the devastating civilian impact of dissident guerrilla attacks and violent government oppressions. The pain she depicts is a pain of violent causation – harm infliction through mutilation, rape and burning alive. Nonceba, the main female protagonist is attacked by a dissident guerrilla soldier in her home. The terrified woman watches her sister being beheaded, before the attacker rapes her and cuts off her lips. The rest of the narrative forms an attempt to make sense of this violence, and describes Nonceba learning to live with her broken body and mind.

The Stone Virgins depicts a historical period of time from a strongly literary perspective: not seeking to uncover new facts and evidence but instead moving towards an understanding of events through an imaginative probing of the perceptions of individual people in pain. The 1980s Matabeleland violence she describes forms a highly contested period of Zimbabwe's history. Largely unreported in the press at the time, events began to come into the public eye in 1997 with the publication of the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace report, *Breaking the Silence*.³ Terrence Ranger, one of the few historians researching the period, has claimed that the current government has deliberately tried to simplify and suppress what Mugabe himself refers to as 'ugly history'.⁴ Evidence reports also frequently cite civilian fear of speaking out about these events of the past.⁵ The complex narrative of *The Stone Virgins* is therefore both a brave political move and means to resist the simplification of history. By fictionalising brutalities that more factual accounts argue did take place, the novel explores a realm of past possibilities and uncertainties for their aesthetic and ethical ambiguities. Creating personal stories about multifaceted individuals in pain deepens our human understanding of what the facts and figures of this violent period really mean.

Vera's literary account also offers a different angle to the very functional first person narratives in existing evidence reports.⁶ More than a straight description of what happened, or a set of medical case notes, Vera's fictional representations communicate emotional perspectives on pain that are so personal they are not easily shared by the real victims of the tragedy. She opens up new possibilities for human intuition, engaging the reader in the attempt at understanding and empathy. This process is inherently discursive. Vera's complex poetic style and the inconsistencies and gaps in the narration challenge the reader to make sense of the experiences described, reflecting the real pain patient's quest to make sense of their own narrative confusions. As Indian sociologist Veena Das explains:

“In repeatedly trying to write the meaning(s) of violence against women in Indian society, I find that the languages of pain through which the social sciences could gaze at, touch or become textual bodies on which this pain is written often elude me. [...] Some realities need to be fictionalised before they can be apprehended.”⁷

Not only does Vera's fiction provide a privileged space for the exploration of pain, the construction of *The Stone Virgins*, whether consciously or unconsciously, also mirrors characteristics of narratives of real people in pain. Vera's treatment of time and space, the structures she employs and the language and narrative voices she uses, all have some resonance with the pain experience as described by pain patients themselves.

Firstly let us examine Vera's novel's structure and chronology. The central narrative of *The Stone Virgins* is the story of two sisters who suffer a brutal attack resulting in the death of one and the rape and mutilation of the other. From the very beginning of the novel, which is set years before this central incident, we have the sense of an impending tragedy, a feeling that the description is leading towards a revelation. Although the story unfolds in the present tense, it also seems to be told in retrospect. At times this impression is generated by the narrator, for example when Vera writes: “She has no idea now, or ever, that some of the harm she has to forget is in the future, not in the past...”⁸ At other moments the characters themselves seem to have prior knowledge of what is to come. This focus around a central defining incident bears strong resemblances to narratives of real pain patients who define their lives in terms of the onset of their condition. This is at times, as Byron Good suggests, because the telling and retelling of a story helps to make sense of how and why the patient's pain began.⁹ In *The Stone Virgins* this is explicitly seen in the way Vera repeatedly revisits the attack with differing levels of detail. It also links into Arthur Frank's theory that the pain experience forms

the filter for subsequent narratives, because it is the patient's illness that provides the motivation for remembering the past.¹⁰

Another manner in which Vera's novel resembles patient pain narratives is in the renegotiation of space; both the internal spaces of the body and the external places where the pain experience is lived out. This is beautifully captured in a passage that describes Nonceba waking in hospital for the first time, faced with a new physical reality:

“She can feel the cloth pressing down, the smell of medicated ointment. Her mouth is slightly open under the cloth. Her tongue is moving in her mouth. She is thirsty; her throat is burning. She moves her tongue over and over, searching for saliva. She wants to reach the bandage with her tongue. To loosen it. To breathe through her mouth not her nose. [...] Everything is changing. She has a desperate feeling that everything has already changed, gone, not to be recovered. Nothing can be the same. Her own arms have changed, her body. Kezi, her place of birth, is no longer her own.”¹¹

This sense that the world has irrevocably changed and that what was once accepted can no longer be taken for granted is echoed in the words of people who are physically and mentally wounded describing how even every day activities are transformed into challenges to be overcome. In Vera's text physical belonging is fundamentally linked into the person in pain's renegotiation of identity. We see violence taking place within the domestic space, resulting in removal of the patient first to a medical institution, and then to another refuge for recovery. Everything that is known and safe has become foreign. As the quote above illustrated, these two alienations, of body and place, are fundamentally intertwined.

Vera captures this sense of a world made strange in her language. She challenges the normal sequencing of words, the linguistic categorisation of experience, by pulling together divergent concepts and metaphors to reveal a fractured world view. Ato Quayson, a Ghanaian literary theorist working in Cambridge, uses an analysis of the proliferation of these strange metaphorical categories to suggest that “the literary text somehow refracts the consciousness of trauma that percolates in the African postcolony to different degrees”.¹² He argues that painful narratives form a key part of the fabric of life for any African writer. Vera's texts are rendered disjointed through her almost inevitable representations of traumatic acts. Quayson proposes that *The Stone Virgins* shows an ‘ex-centric symbolisation compulsion’, driven by an ‘epistemological enigma’, which is itself shaped by trauma.¹³ That is to say, the way trauma creates disjointed memories and uncertainties in real life is reflected in the structure and language used by Vera in her novels because in

some sense the writer is also sick. Pathologising an entire continent of novelists is obviously not unproblematic, but the concept is compelling, particularly when we look at authorial identification with wounded literary protagonists.

The Stone Virgins, in common with many other African novels dealing with complex pain narratives, includes a bewildering array of different narratorial voices. This is potentially symptomatic of the disturbing creative writing process during which the writer attempts to imaginatively inhabit other bodies. The novelist's fractured sense of identity also resembles the discordant perception of reality that afflicts the new patient of pain. The first person narrator surfaces at moments of extreme pain, and the 'I' pronoun is used for the first time by Nonceba in the initial description of the attack. Vera writes:

“I am waiting. I am alive, now, a companion to his every thought. I am breathing. My temples, beating. She closes her eyes and her body listens as his movements pursue each of her thoughts. She breathes. Harm”¹⁴

The narrative voice is both first and third person, both personal and removed, drawing the reader into an immediate engagement whilst also maintaining an observant perspective. As Quayson suggests, Vera herself is arguably implicated in the pain narrative here. But does this mean that all the pain narratives Vera creates are fundamentally centred on her own experiences, determined by her own sense of trauma? Or does Vera's fiction somehow open up spaces for the description of differing experiences of pain? The next section examines how Vera manages to create links between different pain experiences whilst preserving their diversity.

We have seen that fiction offers a privileged space for the exploration of pain and that Vera's work in many ways mirrors real pain narratives. However, having drawn these links between different pain experiences it is also important to ask how different pains diverge. *The Stone Virgins* contains many descriptions of hurt, often concerned with the central traumatic incident but also depicting different yet related events, other civilian experiences of pain stemming from the 1980s Matabeleland violence. These different representations of wounded bodies form a pictogram of pain in constant transformation. Each transformation is coherent within its own context, yet if you tried to separate out the pain accounts and assign them to discreet categories of experience with definite meanings the text would collapse. That is to say, the word 'pain' does not always signal the existence of the same sort of pain. The pain of a woman forced to kill her husband with an axe is related to Nonceba's painful witnessing of her sister's beheading, but different since the wife feels the agony of guilt whilst Nonceba is also suffering severe physical pain from facial mutilation. Nonceba's physical pain is related to

Vera's descriptions of a local store keeper who is burned to death by government forces, but is also separate since the store keeper and the young woman have different personalities, experiences of the world and positions within the novel's narrative. How can these pain experiences written by the same novelist and often described with very similar language also produce divergent and individual meanings?

A promising analytical approach to this question can be found by borrowing anthropologist Rodney Needham's term, the 'polythetic'. Needham uses this term to introduce a certain fluidity into his research, by destabilising our assumptions about categories of experience, in our context categories denoted by words such as pain, hurt and suffering. He observes that "the conventional definition of a conceptual class is that its members must possess certain properties in common".¹⁵ However, Needham is not satisfied with this definition, and uses the work of Vygotsky and Wittgenstein to argue that classes are composed in the form of a 'chain complex'. This means that "the definitive attribute [of a class] keeps changing from one link to the next" since there is no consistent relationship between the elements and instead "the variable meaning is carried over" from item to item with no overarching features in common.¹⁶ Needham cites Wittgenstein's powerful rope analogy to illustrate the concept: "The rope consists of fibres, but it does not get its strength from any one fibre that runs through it from one end to another, but from the fact that there is a vast number of fibres overlapping".¹⁷ This can helpfully be applied to *The Stone Virgins*. In a linear narrative fashion (which is notably not chronological) the experiences described in *The Stone Virgins* are all related, can all be lined up like small threads of the textual rope. But if these pain elements, or threads, are separated out then it becomes more difficult to analyse them in terms of a common category.

To illustrate this concept of the polythetic, let us compare the descriptions of the Matabeleland women as a collective group with the description of Nonceba as an individual in pain. Women's lives in all Vera's texts are characterised by resilience and hardship. The women of Kezi are no different. Towards the end of the first section of the novel, when independence seems to be upon them, the women celebrate their existence:

They sing earth songs that leave the morning pulsating. [...]
Their minds a sweet immersion of joy, they float, jubilant.
Their senses almost divine, uplifted; their pain inarticulate.
Voices rise to the surface, beyond the dust shadows that break
and glow, and lengthen. They will not drown from a dance in
the searing dust, from the memories of anger and pain. They
will not die from the accumulation of bitter histories, the

dreams of misfortune, the evenings of wonder and dismay,
which should have already killed them.”¹⁸

The collective and bearable pain expressed here may initially seem to be unrelated to the pain experienced by Nonceba when her lips are cut. That pain is more immediate and intense, even ‘surprising’.¹⁹ When the dissident guerilla hurts her “a piercing pain expands, and my body turns numb, motionless, with a searing pain”.²⁰ However, as the novel continues the two experiences appear increasingly related. As she recovers, Nonceba remembers the “haze of days succeeding days, anger and pain, and an insistent absolute silence”.²¹ All these women are angered by their suffering and the silence that in Nonceba’s case is a result of her bandaged mouth seems strangely linked to the celebrating women whose pain remains ‘inarticulate’. Memory is also key to both of the accounts, the past seen as something threatening, something to be consciously lived with and resisted. Pain here is a polythetic category tangentially linking experiences yet recognising their differences.

It could be argued that a polythetic analysis of pains in *The Stone Virgins* reveals how different incidents are deliberately thematically linked for narrative coherence. This might initially seem like a rather artificial aestheticisation of experience, a departure from real pain narratives. But the lines between fiction and non-fiction are not as clear cut as this might suggest. Strangely in fact, this argued aestheticisation actually links us back to real life. Pain narratives told by pain patients only include details of other people’s pains that have some bearing on their own experiences. But does this mean that we are only ever telling our own pain story, or is there some way of preserving the alterity of other experiences within a polythetic context?

Sociologist Arthur Frank identifies a type of illness narrative that engages with the depths of extreme experience by failing to fully articulate their essential points of difference. He writes that:

“The paradox of the *chaotic* voice is that it would seem to be incapable of storytelling. Here the losses, the pain, the incoherence of suffering become so overpowering that language cannot resocialise what has happened. In this heart of darkness, ‘the horror’ cannot be told; any telling can only point toward what happened in the vaguest terms [...] what is tellable *about* chaos is no longer the chaos itself.”²²

This citation has multiple implications for our discussion. Firstly, if we accept Frank’s argument that some extreme areas of pain are unrepresentable and can only be pointed towards by peripheral descriptions then we open up the possibility that Vera’s text may contain similar yet divergent descriptions of pain indicating unique and unrepresentable areas of experience. It is then the reader’s role to attempt to intuit some understanding of these diverging holes

of meaning. However, the danger inherent in Frank's suggestion is linked to his explicit reference to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* when he writes that: "the horror' cannot be told; any telling can only point toward what happened in the vaguest terms". The colonies were built on the shared agreement not to represent the painful reality of those human beings who paid for the foundation of empires with their cultures and lives. So continuing to unquestioningly accept this trope of the unrepresentable is deeply problematic for postcolonial literary theory. This also ties into questions of imaging Africa raised in the introduction to this paper and requires further investigation elsewhere. This takes us in a full circle back to where we began discussing the implications of research into pain representation in Africa and provides another convincing argument for the importance of this academic enquiry.

Here we have seen that fiction provides a privileged space for the representation and understanding of pain narratives that is nonetheless intricately linked to the experiences and stories of real people in pain. Exploring the similarities and structures of pain narratives has repeatedly thrown up the need for an understanding of the interlocutors' underlying ideologies and individual subject positions. Vera's novel is a public gesture that nonetheless explores very private and personal experiences of pain. And the aesthetics of her literary art have been seen not to proclude, but to maintain her stories' individuality and humanity. Let us finish with a quote from the linguist MAK Halliday who expresses the nuances of this topic so simply when he suggests that: "[pain is] a uniquely complex area of human experience: one that is unlike anything else – precisely because it is like almost everything else, at least in some respect".²³ Our challenge is to find the frameworks to make sense of pain's interactions with this 'everything else'.

Notes

¹ Cf. Mary-Jo DelVecchio Good, Paul E. Brodwin, Byron J. Good and Arthur Kleinman, *Pain as Human Experience: An Anthropological Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

² Yvonne Vera, *The Stone Virgins* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2003).

³ Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe and The Legal Resources Foundation, *Breaking the Silence, Building True Peace. A Report on the Disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands 1980 to 1988*, Harare, 1997.

⁴ Terrence Ranger, "Nationalist Historiography; Patriotic History and the History of the Nation: the Struggle over the Past in Zimbabwe", *Journal of South African Studies* 30 (2004): 215-234.

⁵ Cf. the fearful avoidance of the topic in Irene Staunton's anthology, *Mothers of the Revolution* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1990).

⁶ Cf. Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe and also Terrence Ranger, Jocelyn Alexander and Joann McGregor, *Violence and Memory – One Hundred Years in the 'Dark Forests' of Matabeleland* (Oxford: James Curry, 2000).

⁷ Thomas Cushman, "A Conversation with Veena Das on Religion and Violence, Suffering and Language", 2004, (March 2004). <<http://www.wellesley.edu/sociology/papers/Interview%20Veena%20Das-Cushman.pdf>>

⁸ Vera, 36.

⁹ Byron Good, *Medicine, rationality and experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 146-7.

¹⁰ Arthur Frank, "Reclaiming an Orphan Genre: The First-Person Narrative of Illness", *Literature and Medicine* 13 (1994):1-21, 4.

¹¹ Vera, 90.

¹² This quote is from an e-mail Ato Quayson sent me on 28/05/05 in response to my request for clarification on issues in his new work *Calibrations* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

¹³ Quayson, 87.

¹⁴ Vera, 68 (my italics).

¹⁵ Rodney Needham, "Polythetic Classification: Convergence and Consequences", *Man* 10 (1975): 349-369, 349.

¹⁶ Needham, 350.

¹⁷ Needham, 350.

¹⁸ Vera, 52.

¹⁹ Ibid, 69.

²⁰ Ibid, 109.

²¹ Ibid, 149.

²² Frank, 7.

²³ MAK Halliday, "On the grammar of pain", *Functions of Language* 5 (1998):1-32, 29.

Bibliography

Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe and The Legal Resources Foundation, *Breaking the Silence, Building True Peace. A Report on the Disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands 1980 to 1988*. Harare, 1997.

-
- Cushman, Thomas. "A Conversation with Veena Das on Religion and Violence, Suffering and Language".
<<http://www.wellesley.edu/sociology/papers/Interview%20Veena%20Das-Cushman.pdf>> (March 2004).
- DelVecchio Good, Mary-Jo, Paul E. Brodwin, Byron J. Good and Arthur Kleinman. *Pain as Human Experience: An Anthropological Perspective*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.
- Frank, Arthur. "Reclaiming an Orphan Genre: The First-Person Narrative of Illness" *Literature and Medicine* 13 (1994):1-21.
- Good, Byron. *Medicine, rationality and experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Halliday, MAK. "On the grammar of pain" *Functions of Language* 5 (1998):1-32.
- Needham, Rodney. "Polythetic Classification: Convergence and Consequences" *Man* 10 (1975): 349-369.
- Ranger, Terrence. "Nationalist Historiography; Patriotic History and the History of the Nation: the Struggle over the Past in Zimbabwe", *Journal of South African Studies* 30 (2004): 215-234.
- Staunton, Irene. *Mothers of the Revolution*. Harare: Baobab Books, 1990.
- Vera, Yvonne. *The Stone Virgins*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2003.