



The End of Unheard Narratives

Contemporary Perspectives on
Southern African Literatures

Edited by Bettina Weiss

Indigo paperbacks

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"How All Life Is Lived, in Patches": Quilting Metaphors in the Fiction of Yvonne Vera

JESSICA HEMMINGS

A fragment is also a life, it is how all of life is lived, in patches.

Yvonne Vera, *Butterfly Burning*

Zimbabwean author Yvonne Vera's fiction is radical in its disruption of the conventional form of the novel. Her writing style rejects linear plot structures, consistent symbols and conventional resolutions to the narrative crisis. The textile, commonly associated with the realm of the domestic which has consumed the energies of women's lives in Africa and around the world, is a recurring presence. The textile is perhaps a particularly useful motif to consider in light of the female centred experiences of rape, abortion, infanticide, and incest which are the focus of Vera's narratives. Nonetheless, the presence of the textile in Vera's fiction often operates in unexpected and unconventional ways. While Vera appropriates structures and metaphors such as the novel and the textile which are useful to her writing, she is equally at ease with the rejection of the previous ways in which such structures and metaphors have been handled. In her preface to *Opening Spaces: An Anthology of Contemporary African Women's Writing* Vera states, "A woman writer must have an imagination that is plain stubborn, that can invent new gods and banish ineffectual ones" (1). Vera's use of the textile in her fiction is as equally imaginative as it is selective in its construction of a literary voice worthy of the burdens she asks her fiction to carry.

The presence of the quilt in fictional narratives is often read as a symbol of "scarcity, ingenuity, conservation, and order" (Showalter, *Sister's Choice* 128). This essay suggests that the patterned, stained, and worn fabric found throughout Vera's fiction offers an adapted version of the quilting motif found in women's writing from North America and Europe. The quilting pieces apparent in Vera's fiction mirror her

'unassembled' writing style and are one example of the experimental manner in which she attempts to tackle topics that have otherwise remained shrouded in silence. As Ruth Barnes and Joanne Eicher note: "[t]he patchwork quilt is an immediate feminine point of reference, and with it is implied the real or imaginary gift of creative power in the face of adversity" (3). Recognising the pieces of an unassembled quilt in Vera's fiction acknowledges the realities that Vera's fiction captures: fragments and patches of life that appear in the face of adversity. These fragments, like the isolated phrases and moments in which Vera's fiction dwells, refuse finality or closure. As Elaine Hedges observes:

[o]ur response to quilts as an art form rooted in both meaningful work and in cultural oppression will therefore inevitably be complex; a combination of admiration and awe at limitation overcome and of sorrow and anger at the limitations imposed. (19)

Thus the quilt is situated as both a record of adversity and limitation as well as an empowering form of communication. While the form of the novel and quilt metaphor command power through a decidedly North American and European assumptions of familiarity, I am suggesting that Vera continually reworks and reassembles material in a new and innovative voice that does not rely on previous familiarities.

Elaine Showalter traces the rise of the American short story written by female authors and the North American quilting tradition, noting that the fragments of time that women were able to snatch from their daily lives made the short story rather than the novel an accessible structure for fiction writers. Similarly, the piece by piece assemblage required of quilting as opposed to production which requires extended time and concentration was well suited to the multi-tasking required of many women's time and concentration. In both cases the formats lent themselves to short bursts of attention and did not demand the luxury of hours of peace and quiet, work space or an extensive amount of resources. In addition, Showalter notes,

the process of making a patchwork quilt involves three separate stages of artistic composition, with analogies to language use first on

Quilting Metaphors in the Fiction of Yvonne Vera

the level of the sentence, then in terms of the structure of a story or novel, and finally the images, motifs, or symbols ... that unify a fictional work. ("Piecing and Writing" 223)

Showalter suggests that the quilt informed the short story tradition of American literature and

a knowledge of piecing, the technique of assembling fragments into an intricate and ingenious design, can provide the contexts in which we can interpret and understand the forms, meanings, and narrative traditions of American women's writing. ("Piecing and Writing" 227)

Showalter goes on to note that the "relationship between piecing and writing has not been static, but has changed from one generation to another, along with changes in American women's culture" (228). Thus the rise of the short story is connected to quilting and both structures understood as a response to the fragmentation and thrift demanded of women's creative lives in light of enormous domestic responsibilities ("Piecing and Writing" 229).

Quilts are often seen as the creation of beauty in the face of hardship, assembling and producing usefulness from waste. The numerous fragments of patterned, stained, and worn fabric that appear in Vera's fiction, even in an unassembled state, recognise the power of the textile to act as a form of communication and present us with one example of experimental style in which Vera has elected to write. Each fragment contains a message, contains a story, but resists a tidy or forced conclusion. These fragments operate much like the written word in Vera's fiction and reveal information but deny total closure or conclusion. This resistance to closure or ultimate conclusion is due to the pained subjects Vera discusses, the experiences and atrocities that in most cases escape any hope of complete explanation, or complete recovery. According to Judith Perani and Norma Wolff,

[I]like all cultural artefacts, cloth has a life history. Depending upon the particular life history phase, the cultural value of cloth at any

specific moment may lie primarily in either an aesthetic, social or economic function. (10)

As can be seen in cloth fragments, these lives often occur in a descending order of cleanliness, from pride of place – starched and new – to the worn out rag. The quilt as an object of beauty and usefulness ironically represents one of the last stages of a cloth's life when the fragments that remain are mixed with snippets of new cloth too small for any other task and instead are preserved under the stitching and backing in their final reincarnation.

One of the many roles of cloth during its many lives is that of a silent witness. The burden of this witness is evident in the materials themselves: faded, soiled, frayed, and bound. The fragments of cloth that can be read throughout Vera's narratives are witness to unspeakable atrocities that occur within its presence. Jenni Sorkin notes that cloth also records evidence of intimate and damaging dirt and stains. She writes:

Cloth holds the sometimes unbearable gift of memory. And its memory is exacting; it does not forget even the benign scars of accident: red wine on a white tablecloth, water on a silk blouse, dark patches beneath arms on a humid summer day. (77)

Bedding, in particular, links the material presence of the cloth to the role of witness to sexual violation. Nina Fleshin notes, that

[s]leeping and dreaming, conception and birth, lovemaking, illness, and finally death keep most of us in bed for much of our lives. As a staging ground for the life cycle, the bed is a psychologically charged piece of furniture that can evoke countless associations and complex feelings of fear, dread, desire, vulnerability, pain, passion, nurturing, and loss. (7)

Fleshin goes on to observe that,

[w]hile the empty bed can signal the possibility of loss, loneliness, and even death, it can suggest that it is not the individual or psychological construction of the human subject. The decontextualized bed serves as a reflection of cultural values and as a repository of collective experience, rather than simply a site of personal narrative. (8)

In Vera's narratives the bed as a site of rest and protection is distorted. In *Without a Name* (1994) the bed is a site of unwanted sexual advances. For example Mazvita's partner Joel is described with,

movements [that] were erratic as he sought her between the torn covers. A thin light sifted through the worn curtains ... Through the mist Mazvita smelt the stale grey blankets, the worn out mattress ... She remained quiet to accommodate him. (59-60)

While Mazvita has chosen to live with her partner, the rape she has endured earlier in the narrative and her unwanted pregnancy are unspoken barriers to their relations. For the remainder of *Without a Name* the fabric fragments that appear are soiled with the act of infanticide. Unlike the frayed and unravelling fragments that will be observed in *Under the Tongue* (1996), these cloths are already bound at the edges. In *Without a Name* the soft milk cloth used "to wipe the curdled milk from the side of the baby's mouth" (94) would have fit well into a quilt of remembrance but the milk is sour, not nourishing, and the mother has committed infanticide in exchange for motherhood. Similarly Joel's "black tie from a rack in the corner of the room" (95) becomes a tool for murder rather than remembrance. While it is Joel's inability to accept or support the pregnancy that is a contributing factor to Mazvita's decision to end the child's life, Mazvita implicates him in the murder by using a tie borrowed from his wardrobe. Rather than continue to carry this evidence with her, she is eager to return the fabric to Joel's possession. In a small way, the black tie left spread on the bed offers Joel an explanation of what Mazvita has done to the child. Finally

the "dramatic white" (10) apron that is used to bind the corpse to Mazvita's back is, like the blanket under which Phephelaphi hides while considering her unwanted pregnancy in *Butterfly Burning* (1998), sewn with a distinct stitch that suggests a partial explanation for her actions: the black and white thread allude to the rampant racism in the community which offers her little hope for economic independence.

Butterfly Burning offers a setting divided by poignant imagery, and conflates the skins of daily dress with meat for consumption. The room in which the couple live is divided diagonally by a wire which is hung with clothes that function as a makeshift partition for the room. In cramped quarters, the couple, "slid the clothes to one end of the room away from the bed and suspended them high. Then they sliced meat into narrow strips and hung it on the wire" (39). There is a palpable tension between the degrading environment in which they live and the possibility that their clothing, if new and freshly pressed, can raise their identities above the squalor of their living space and accord them greater respect, possibly even admiration, in the social exchanges which occur outside the home. Bryan Turner explains that meat is "located mid-way between nature and society, between nature and culture, between the living and the dead" (xiii). The meat of Phephelaphi and Fumbatha's evening meals establishes a dialogue with all forms of consumption that occur in the space. It questions the supposed culture of city life by reminding one of the corporeal realities of everyday life needed to sustain the body as well as the culture of material consumption introduced by the values of the city. Turner also relates flesh to communication noting that,

[w]e appropriate the world through the mouth, as our original social link with our mother's, as an organ of speech and articulation, as an organ of consumption and animal violence. (xiii)

Hence speech, identity, and consumption are all bound together in the shifting division of the couple's living space. Their intimate connections reveal the interdependent relationships the three assume and, in this case, expose the futility in isolating one aspiration without the availability of the other two. To exist in the space of the city, one must

engage in the endless cycles of consumption that fuel the urban economy. In spite of a veneer of culture, these cycles can often be seen as exchanges of the most basic nature, prostitution pays for food, abortions protect employment opportunities, and sexual favours replace an education never available to the individual. Again, the fragments of flesh and cloth that record these transactions are inappropriate reminders of a brutal, rather than the celebrated, existence.

In *Butterfly Burning* the bed acts as a makeshift shelter for the horrifying presence of an unplanned pregnancy. Poverty, which envelops all of the characters in the narrative, makes the prospect of an unwanted pregnancy more than an inconvenience. Pregnancy could bring about destitution, or heighten the strained economic circumstances in which all of the family members already exist. In Phephelaphi's case her pregnancy is a death knoll for the future she has imagined for herself as an independent individual. The prospect of work, let alone the nursing school she dreams of attending, are quashed the day she admits to herself that she is pregnant. The narrator explains, "[s]he slid downward into the centre of the bed and raised the coarse grey blanket over her breasts. She held the blanket against her chin" (91). Hiding under the rough cover of the bed she can see a "bold red seam along the edges" (91) of the blanket that signals the closure of this fragment. Instead of taking solace in a quilt made by the fragments of generations of women before her, an object that may have been able to remind her of the adversities generations of women in her family have endured, Phephelaphi is instead covered by a generic cloth that is not even soft or warm. Furthermore, the red thread that is sewn along the edge acts as an unwelcome reminder of the changes occurring inside her body. As Ranka Primorac suggests,

[t]he crucial spatial borderline in Vera's novel is therefore not between town and country, or white and black parts of town, or even spaces marked by male and female domains of activity, but between the inside and outside of a woman's body. (107)

In contrast to this bed, Fumbatha works on building sites far from home where the cost of the daily commute would exhaust his meagre earnings.

Instead he sleeps with "empty khaki bags of cement for a pillow, and a small grey blanket under his body" (*Butterfly Burning* 18). For warmth he uses the "velvet blanket of night" (18) and when that is not enough and it becomes too cold he sleeps under a lorry at the work site. Instead of the comfort of a home to return to at night, "he might creep under the lorry and the safety of its large wheels. Perhaps pull a plastic bag and cover his body with it" (18). Come morning, these fragments will be noticed and required for other projects: the patchwork of a harder nature, the city made from the mixing of cement and the building of walls.

In *Under the Tongue* a "short fraying curtain" (83) patterned with "large blue stars" (83) is meant to function as a room divider in the small room Runyararo and Muroyiwa share with their daughter Zhizha. Instead, the cloth offers a "faded and torn" (83) witness of the abuse Zhizha has endured. In place of the saturated, joyful colours of a child's bedroom – shooting stars and dreamy whimsy – the fragment suspended across the space reveals the inability of the family members to keep up the appearance of innocence. Zhizha sleeps in a room "created by the curtain with fading blue stars. In this tight space their lives would change completely while the war was fought and anticipations conjured" (102). Muroyiwa uses the war as an excuse, a further reason to doubt the validity of his life and strength as a man. Like his own life, the shooting stars that decorate the space are worn out and can offer nothing to dream on, no way of escape. Perani and Wolff note: "[c]loth's ability to indicate boundedness is evident in its function to separate private and public space in the built environment and to emphasize ritual spaces" (45). This power is deconstructed in Vera's writing of cloth, where insufficiency and inadequacy prevail.

The design of the room inhabited by Zhizha in *Under the Tongue* furthers a feeling of entrapment with "no window on this side of the short red curtain with the fading blue stars. Nothing separated the two spaces but the hint of separation, an attempt alone" (84). In contrast to the faded blue stars of the curtain, another piece of cloth lays on the floor:

A small brown mat had been spread on the floor near the bed, and it was new. It was very neatly made, with pale cream stripes along the border, and deep brown circles at the centre. (84)

Unlike the curtain that has failed in its role to divide the space, the mat on the floor is handmade by Runyararo. It is ironic that this fragment is new, not worn out at all, but clean and precise. Zhizha's mother is a mat maker, and the piece is her own craftsmanship rather than a costly purchase. But again, the mat's purpose is questionable for the shadow it casts is able to "split the room much more than the curtain. The shadow was broad. It cut the room diagonally" (84). The mat is laid to stop the spread of unwanted dirt from being tracked across the house and acts as a boundary; a point of deposit, a surface upon which unwanted things accumulate. It is this square, rather than the faded and torn cloth printed with stars, that casts a strong, albeit ineffectual division across the space of the room. In both the mat and the curtain, the materials from which they are made are soiled with the history they have witnessed, with the knowledge of incest and the breakdown of the family unit. Like Mazvita's fractured spine in *Without a Name*, the spinal column of Runyararo and Muroyiwa's room sags under the weight of the futile connections it attempts to support. Also contained in the room is a bed covered with fabrics that reveal unsanctioned intimacies. The "prettiness of the cream cover mixed uncomfortably with the coarseness, it hugged it tightly" (83). The personification of the bed, too similar to the sexual abuse the 'pretty' daughter endures from her 'coarse' father in his tight and unwanted embraces, is yet another remnant of a quilt that cannot be welcomed into a larger record of family history and exists instead as an isolated fragment.

Later, when Zhizha goes to live with her grandparents in a space that is both a refuge and an extension of the silence she suffers under, the falling stars of the curtain reappear: "the sky is inside Grandmother and it is filled with voiceless stars. The stars fall like rain from Grandmother's waiting arms which fold slowly over my shoulders like something heavy, sorrowful" (41). Grandmother bears the knowledge of the incest her granddaughter has experienced alongside a history of her own broken dreams. Zhizha's new bed is contained in a makeshift space

of protection with proportions that read like those of a bizarre doll's house:

It is a small room. Most of the family furniture is stored here; a large table made of wood. The table fills half the room ... In the morning I fold my blankets neatly, walk carefully around the table, and place them in Grandmother's room. I am shorter than the table. When I have woken under the table, I think the house has shrunk even further. I crawl out and fold the blankets into a small heap. I sit on the blankets waiting for my grandmother. (24)

The space of Grandmother's house offers some semblance of protection for Zhizha, but the knowledge of her abuse haunts the environment. Here, too, a frayed curtain appears. Rather than a childhood lost, this curtain acts as a symbol of Grandmother's lost hopes. "The curtain is frayed around the edges. Old, almost transparent, it captures shadows moving across the hedge, on the road" (25). Like Grandmother, the curtain, absorbs the movements of those around it. It has born witness to abuse that has shattered the family and as a result its function, energies, and substance have been sapped.

Janis Jefferies writes of frayed fabrics:

[t]he cut edges of some fabrics are particularly prone to fraying, thus running the risk of causing a falling apart at the seam or at points of intricacy in the making up of cloth. (11)

Jefferies connects this fraying to the individual writing that the "same can be said of selves, or of other identities for which boundaries serve both to protect and form allegiances" (11). In these examples both Grandmother and the quilt fragment bear fraying edges. The life Zhizha and Grandmother have been asked to endure "run[s] the risk of falling apart ... at the points of intricacy in the making up of cloth" (Jefferies 11). Grandmother's burden of knowledge allows death to hover as an escape from these unmentionable transgressions: "[i]t is true there is a word sweetened by death, lit by a fire gathered from a falling star" (*Under the Tongue* 42).

Grandmother's creative life involves a futile relationship with a Singer sewing machine that works with such frustrating inconsistency that she cleans the machine, almost worships it, but does not make useful objects or gain the soothing and contemplative nature of work that her daughter is shown to possess while weaving. Grandmother's one act of making is to take a pair of scissors and unhesitatingly cut the ragged edge of the window curtain,

Snap...snap...a sharp trimming round the edges. The scissors have an orange handle. That looks better, Grandmother says, to the curtain. The curtain leaves the bottom part of the window bare. (25)

The gesture displays no hint of repair or reconciliation. The harsh reality of the family's situation means that Grandmother cuts and cleans, but cannot mend or construct anew.

Finally, in addition to the fragments of cloth that appear throughout Vera's fiction and function in a manner similar to that of a quilt, Grandmother possesses another object that functions much like a quilt in its role as record keeper and source of memory. The presence of a woven winnowing basket within *Under the Tongue* is intimately tied to the act of naming and the possession of language which all three generations of women in the narrative struggle to articulate, a similar role that the quilt plays in fiction elsewhere. The communication conveyed through the winnowing basket is both fixed and mobile, just as Grandmother seeks language to express her sadness while rejecting words as an inadequate explanation of the pain she has witnessed and endured. Grandmother's winnowing basket hangs on the wall high above Zhizha, her granddaughter's, reach:

I raise my head up from the ground and from my feet, very carefully, and find the roof which seems so far away. My eyes fill with patches of soot. I search the wall's deep black, clotted with smoke. A flat winnowing basket is suspended against the wall. A frayed rope, once white, dangles over the basket and swings softly upward when I look. Behind the basket is the grey tail of a lizard. The tail is large and points downward, almost dead, like the rope. (13).

While I have suggested that Vera effectively appropriates and reworks both the form of the novel and European and North American motifs such as the quilt, the winnowing basket is an appropriate object for the Zimbabwean narrative in so far as the object has a history of production and daily use in the region. Marjorie Locke writes in her extensive study of basketry patterns in Zimbabwe:

The craft of basket making has been traditionally confined to women, except for a few special baskets that men made from roots. The grandmothers or aunts, often with more time to spare than the mothers, had instructed their young relatives in basket making, thus handing down the heritage of the people and retaining a link with the past. (15)

Basket making is largely a female activity in the region with the knowledge passed through the generations on the female side of the family. As Zhizha focuses on the structure of the woven basket her attention is drawn to her grandmother. Language grows increasingly imprecise as granddaughter and grandmother struggle to regain the power to name thoughts:

- I ask Grandmother why she has fallen like that and she says she has forgotten where she was going, where she is, the places of her wisdom. My arms are empty, she says. My arms do not remember what they were carrying. She opens her arms and looks slowly downward to the ground as though she will recover something fallen there, as though she will pick a dream from the ground and place it back in her arms, nestle it where it has fallen from, in the warm crevices of her arms. (15)

Grandmother's search for her unspoken loss culminates in her physical search for a tangible expression of communication capable of recording her sorrows. Along with the impact of Zhizha's incest, Grandmother carries other painful burdens from the past. She gave birth to a son that did not live past infancy – the child's head swelled grotesquely as she tried to keep him alive: Tonderayi's "head was full of

water. He would never grow, only his head would grow" (70). Rather than bury him alive as advised by her husband's family, Grandmother makes an attempt to save the child, even thinking, "I should have kept him safe, inside of me" (70). The birth defect is considered her failure and her problem alone. She explains,

I had been given the gift of death and my method had been to feel scorned and humiliated in the company of my husband ... The child was my own mistake and I had to clear it up in my woman way, with the help of my own kin. (71)

Just as individual fragments of cloth are carefully examined, sorted and discarded before assembling a quilt, the basket hanging on the wall inside the house is a silent witness to the movements of the room, collecting pieces of speech and thoughts which make up the social interactions that occur within the house:

Only the basket on the wall is waiting perhaps with words to be shelled and tossed, waiting with words to be chosen, cast aside, separated, dismissed. I look at the basket and know that the best words are those that are shared and embraced, those that give birth to other words more fruitful than themselves, stronger than themselves. (16)

The basket resembles a scrap bag of quilt fragments waiting to be assembled into the family narrative. Grandmother's search reads very much like a search for the individual elements of a quilt; the scraps and fragments collected throughout a lifetime that record, remember and remind one of family members both present and absent.

Zhizha embraces the concept of the quilted narrative when she notes that words are stronger when shared and brought together. Like the quilt made of disparate fragments, the individual word gains strength and purpose when assembled with others. Throughout the passage Zhizha struggles to establish a connection with her own limbs and a sense of her physical presence. She hears a noise which she believes to be a form of death occurring inside her grandmother and, overwhelmed by the

prospect of this knowledge, is stunned. Zhizha explains, "I do not move. I watch my toes dissolve. I watch my feet which are no longer my feet. They are large, not quite there, not quite part of me" (12). This distorted sense of self is repaired when Zhizha manages to pull the basket from the wall by the long rope attached to it:

I carry the basket across the silent room. I notice that my feet are my feet and I have also found my arms. I give the basket to Grandmother. I place it safely under her embrace. She touches my arms with a hopeful caress. She moves her right hand inside the basket to gather something she has recently discovered, something she has lost while gathering words. (16).

With the return of Zhizha's senses to her body, Grandmother's wisdom is returned to her.

Nonetheless, the passage resolutely refuses to place the word above all else. Grandmother's wisdom, captured and maintained within the basket where words are sorted and shelled, is far from an answer. In fact, the word itself is denied full force and value in the closing lines when it is revealed that Zhizha has been able to return to Grandmother "something that she lost while gathering words" (16). The force of a single word is undermined and instead the source of sorrow and recovery remain ambiguous. While the desire to articulate violation and loss are central to the narrative, their value, if unquestioned, can lead to losses of another nature: "Grandmother says we choose words, not silence. We choose words to bury our grief. A woman cannot say the heaviness of her life, just like that, without madness" (10). The communication contained within the winnowing basket is both fixed and mobile, just as Grandmother seeks language to express her sadness and discards language as an inadequate explanation for the pain she has endured.

The fragments of cloth that appear throughout Vera's fiction can be understood as a distinct aspect of Vera's textual style, a style that does not shy away from the fragmented realities her characters endure. The notion of an unassembled quilt embedded in Vera's unassembled

narrative structures reflects more than the fragmentation of women's time. Also reflected are the contradictions inherent in the postcolonial voice and the new structures Vera has developed to tackle silence. Vera's writing does not fall into the trap that Showalter warns against when she writes, that "[i]n closing off our critical pieces we may miss some of the ragged edges that are a more accurate image of our literary history" ("Piecing and Writing" 245). Instead, Vera dwells at these ragged edges and on these ragged fragments, refusing the temptation to tidy them into a contrived experience of wholeness. Vera links her own experimental writing style of fragmentation, non-chronological order, and contradiction to the unassembled textile. The gesture is in keeping with her desire to write beyond and outside preconceived structures and ways of knowing. Through fragments of cloth, Vera evokes an alternative voice which speaks in familiar, disrupted patterns.

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