

Article

A culture of resistance: Vera's *Nehanda* and *Butterfly Burning*

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Introduction

A brief overview of Zimbabwean literary culture prior to, and after the country's independence largely portrays military resistance as the people's sole response to colonialism. Consequently, the last twenty years have seen most scholarship on Zimbabwe and Zimbabwean writers centre on the country's armed struggles to colonialism. This paper explores alternative acts of resistance as emerging from Yvonne Vera's novels of *Nehanda* (1993)¹ and *Butterfly Burning* (1998)². It does so largely by reading both novels via the optic of existentialism in the context of a postcolonial critique. By which lens it illumines how Vera's protagonists resort to both existentialist intentions and acts of resistance from which they emerge not as victims of colonialism, but rather as resisters of an alternative kind. It concludes that read by way of existentialism, the two novels counter the perception of armed struggle as black Zimbabweans' sole response to colonialism's excesses.

Overview: Black Zimbabwean literary culture and resistance to colonialism

Since the beginnings of modern, written and published black Zimbabwean literature between 1956 and 1957,³ Zimbabwe's First *Chimurenga* or war of liberation fought between 1896 and 1897 against white colonialism, has inspired many generations of the country's black writers. Solomon Mutswairo's *Feso* (1957)⁴ is canonical in Zimbabwe's literary history. Set amid the occupation of Zimbabwe by the first settler column, *Feso*'s description of traditional Shona culture also combines an allegorical political message of armed resistance against white oppression. Other pioneering novels which portray early Zimbabwean nationalism are: Sithole's *Amandebele kaMzilikazi* [Mzilikazi's Ndebele] (1982)⁵ and Peter Mahlangu's *UMthwakazi* [The Ndebele nation: Tales of the origin of the Ndebele] (1978).⁶ Both outline Ndebele history and particularly the Ndebeles' 1893 and 1895 armed uprising against white occupation. In addition, Lawrence Vambe's *An Ill-Fated People* (1972)⁷ and Samkange's *Year of the Uprising* (1978)⁸ equally depict the First Chimurenga as black Zimbabweans' initial and only response to white occupation.

For the majority of the country's Second generation writers, those born, raised and who started writing under colonial rule⁹, armed resistance and the nationalist movement similarly constituted their notion of resistance against the colonisers. Their experiences of the country's political conflict that eventually culminated in the outbreak of the Second *Chimurenga*, gave rise to such writers as Wilson Katiyo, Stanley Nyamfudza and Charles Mungoshi. Their works equally focused their work on or around the country's war of liberation. Unambivalent nationalists, they wrote about the need to reclaim the land that is Zimbabwe from the colonizers through armed conflict or the barrel of a gun.

The culmination was what can be best described as: “a very site and history specific literature [...] written in the context of organized resistance [...] and national liberation struggle”.¹⁰ Literary works such as Wilson Katiyo’s *Son of the Soil* (1976) tellingly urged all who considered themselves true ‘sons of the soil’ of Zimbabwe to join in the liberation of their country.¹¹ In the novel, Katiyo models the story of his childhood and youth into a novel that sees him, like his forefathers, joining the country’s armed anti-colonial freedom fighters’ struggle for the land. Along the same vein as Katiyo’s novel, Nyamfukudza’s *Non-believer’s Journey* (1980), also links his black protagonist’s story to the people’s history of anti-colonial resistance.¹² Significant therefore, is how for most pre-independence black Zimbabwean writers, armed resistance is portrayed as the only mode of resistance to white colonial rule.

This is to the extent that since the country’s independence in 1980 and during the last millennium, literary scholarship on the country’s literature has often centred on its depiction of black people’s armed resistance to white colonial rule. Kahari (1980) for instance, categorizes the eight black Zimbabwean novels in English published between 1966 and 1978 under the category of: “Literature of alienation and protest”.¹³ Similarly, such critics as the Danish scholar Preben Kaarsholm (1986) concede to the close link between literature and armed resistance in Zimbabwe. Thus, according to Kaarsholm, “[t]he war became also one of the dominant motifs of both white and African revolutionary culture”¹⁴. Likewise, Flora Veit-Wild’s groundbreaking: *Teachers, Preachers, Non-believers: A Social History of Zimbabwean Literature* (1993) sees behind the country’s resistance literature, “a stubborn settler regime [that had] ensconced itself in 1965 [and] had to give way, in 1980 to black majority rule, after a prolonged guerrilla war fought by the Zimbabwean liberation movement”¹⁵. Subsequent to which were, “outstanding works of Zimbabwean literature [...on] the liberation struggle”¹⁶ that distinctly identify and focus on the country’s armed struggle as the colonial black Zimbabweans’ anti-colonial response.

Post-independence however, Zimbabwean literature began to express disillusionment with the armed struggle. This is because not only were the politicians who had participated in it not delivering on the masses’ expectations, they were also now using their participation in the struggle to undemocratically hold on to and abuse power. Thus for instance, Nyamfukudza (1980) as part of the pessimism inherent in his generation, “expose[s] elements of irrational violence accompanying the political activism of that period”.¹⁷ The non-believer’s violent death at the hands of a freedom-fighter symbolically emphasizes the novelist’s pessimism about a freedom brought about by violent armed struggle. Similarly, while Chenjerai Hove’s *Bones* (1988)¹⁸ and Shimmer Chinodya’s *Harvest of Thorns* (1989) also largely demonstrate how the country’s independence was won through the barrel of the gun, they too express their despair over the black masses’ ‘harvest of thorns’ and ‘bones’ mainly brought about by armed struggle.¹⁹

It was not until “the 1990s, [when] a new generation of Zimbabwean writers began to open up new issues in literature [and t] wo literary ‘stars’ came out of this period: Tsitsi Dangarembga and Yvonne Vera”.²⁰ Belonging to what Veit-Wild (1993) identifies as Zimbabwe’s Third generation of writers, those born after 1960, it is with the emergence of these two writers that “focus shift[ed] from [...] grand narratives of the national history to individual experiences”.²¹ This was especially due to Vera’s writings around resistance to colonialism and its related ‘isms’ in Zimbabwe.

Existentialist existence as an intention and act of resistance: *Nehanda*

Yvonne Vera is best known for her internationally acclaimed works that address and represent a variety of different moments in Zimbabwe’s history. From 1993 to 2002, she produced a series of five novels and a collection of short stories. These works are: *Why Don’t You Carve Other Animals* (1993), *Nehanda* (1993), *Without a Name* (1994), *Under the Tongue* (1996) *Butterfly Burning* (1998) and *The Stone Virgins* (2002). She died on 7th April 2005 in Toronto, Canada.

Vera’s approach to and concerns about Zimbabwe and its liberation struggle have deeply impacted notions of and scholarship around the country and resistance. This discourse has spanned amongst others, aspects such as Vera’s use of language, history, memory, the colonial space, spirit possession, resistance, voice and body politics. Over the last ten years, in particular, her “dense poetic prose, her allusive style, and her ability to handle the most difficult subjects and confront taboos [...] has fostered intense discussion about her writing”.²² Of interest to this paper are those discussions concerning themselves with the issue of resistance and subjectivity in *Nehanda* and *Butterfly Burning*, which I explore and illumine theoretically in this paper. These include, but are not limited to: Lene Bull-Christiansen’s *Tales of the nation: feminist nationalism or patriotic history? Defining national history and identity in Zimbabwe*.²³ Grace Musila’s ‘Embodying Experience and Agency in Yvonne Vera’s *Without a Name* and *Butterfly Burning*’²⁴ and Meg Samuelson’s ‘Yvonne Vera’s Bulawayo: Modernity, (Im)mobility, Music, and Memory’.²⁵ I enter into conversation and critical engagement with some of these and others in the sections that follow.

An analysis of scholarship cited above reveals their use of theories and frames that have been derived or nuanced from postcolonialism and postmodernism to read Vera’s work. However, in view of the post-colonial pessimism and despair which beginning with Nyamfukudza and progressing with Dambudzo Marechera, Hove, Chinodya and reaching its climax in Vera, in this paper I place emphasis on animating resistance and subjectivity in the aforementioned novels, via the humanistic optic of existentialism. This is also in view of Vera’s style which by its nature challenges the unspoken; silence, convention, oppression and domination through a language which “re-dreams the world”²⁶ that her characters existentially seek.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre conceives humans as beings rebelling against authority by accepting personal responsibility for their actions, unaided by

society, traditional morality or religious faith²⁷. According to Stephen Cromwell (2004), for Existentialists, “there is nothing outside one’s self on which one could rely for guidance or meaning’ or what Sartre termed: ‘condemned to be free’”.²⁸ Focusing on and exploring Vera’s novels of *Nehanda* and *Butterfly Burning* via the optic of existentialism in the context of a postcolonial critique therefore, this paper posits how for Vera, armed struggle was not the only mode of resistance to colonialism for black Zimbabweans. Instead, it argues that as the two novels demonstrate, “anti-colonial resistances have taken many forms, and [...] drawn upon a wide variety of resources”.²⁹ The result of which, as both novels reveal, has been a thread of what I perceive as existentialist alternatives to armed struggle.

Vera’s *Nehanda* largely employs the pre-colonial past to explore Shona identity and experience. Painted against a backdrop of Shona pre-colonial tradition, this evocative novel spans the time from before the arrival of white strangers, their arrival, desecration and eventual occupation of the land that is today, Zimbabwe. Integrating reality and myth, the novel chronicles the tale of the legendary Zimbabwean spirit medium, Nehanda, from the dreamlike events foretelling her birth, her spiritual possession and ultimate inspiration of the Shona people to rebellion.

Of particular interest to this paper, is when at the height of the armed rebellion, despite the Shonas’ pleas to their ancestors, “not [to] abandon [them] in this fight, [but rather] protect and shelter [them]”,³⁰ they go unheeded. Subsequently, the Shonas are defeated and eventually surrender to their white colonisers. Dejected, the once fearless warrior Kaguvi, “surrenders to the settlers and is imprisoned”.³¹ According to Sweetman (1984), Kaguvi surrendered after dynamite and cannons were used to destroy African families who had found sanctuary in caves.³² Other Shonas also surrender after they are persecuted by the white settlers who, “come and kill half the families and force the leaders of the rebellion to come down from the hills”.³³ It was under such circumstances, that Nehanda apparently allowed herself to be captured in order to save her people.³⁴

Bourdillon (1993) writing on colonisation in Africa, notes how: “all roads taken in the colonial enterprise [led] to the same goal: the control of not only the natural resources, but also the mind, [...] body and [...] space of the African, all resulting in his being diverted from his normal course of being”.³⁵ In this regard, once the colonisers’ victory over the once resisting Africans had been attained, they, in collaboration with the missionaries and missionary societies such as the *London Missionary Society*, often embarked on converting blacks to Christianity. This was done to at least curtail and at best ensure that the defeated blacks would not revolt again. Consequently, in Zimbabwe and other parts of Africa, Christianity was later to be seen by many blacks as the religion of the all powerful white conquerors and often found popularity among those black people who viewed it as the wave of the future. Accordingly, Kahari (1990) highlights how, the novels of such first and second-generation writers as Sithole and Samkange “present us with human relationships in communities which have, in one way or another, been affected by the agencies of social change such as the

Christian Church and its formal education”.³⁶ Reading some of these novels, one observes how in response to colonialism, some blacks found in Christianity a means of collaborating with and surviving colonialism rather than resisting it.

Conversely however, while some blacks genuinely co-operated and converted, others remained ambivalent, syncretically worshipping both the new Christian God and the ancestors. Charles Mungoshi’s *Waiting for the Rain* for example, portrays some such traditionalists and syncretics in the form of Garabha and Lucifer respectively.³⁷ Whether such syncretism was an intentional or unintentional act of resistance or self-preservation is debatable. This paper argues that in Vera’s *Nehanda* and *Butterfly Burning*, responses to the white colonisers’ agencies of social change were indeed explicit acts and conscious intentions of resistance. As such, significant as armed resistance might be to the history and literature of Zimbabwe, in the framework of this essay, it is seen as “narrow[ing] our understanding of [Zimbabwean] history rather than expand[ing] it”.³⁸ For this reason, in the context of this essay, resistance has been expanded to include what Shaw (2001) has termed “intentions and acts of resistance”.³⁹

The ‘intention and act of resistance’ is an encompassing notion which Shaw deploys to describe the myriad ways that are particularly employed by women to “contest and challenge dominant ideologies and the structured power relations of class, race, disability, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and other forms of societal stratification”.⁴⁰ According to her, intentions of resistance may be intentional or unintentional and occur overtly or covertly. They may happen with, or without a conscious understanding or regard for their social and political appropriateness. Lastly, such intentions and acts of resistance can be individual, collective and local.⁴¹ Therefore, for the remainder of this paper, both acts of resistance and intentions of resistance shall be used to demonstrate how starting with *Nehanda*, some of Vera’s black protagonists’ alternatively resist colonisation.

In *Nehanda*, after their defeat of the Shona, the colonialists turn to converting the indigenous Shona populace and its leaders to Christianity. This is immediately evident when following Kaguvi’s incarceration, a priest visits him. In the priest’s ensuing conversation-interview with Kaguvi, the question that has raged on since the advent of the white settler, that of: whose “God is greater and more powerful?”⁴² arises. Cooper (1999) reports how: “In existentialism, the individual’s starting point is characterised by what has been called ‘the existential attitude,’ or sense of disorientation and confusion in the face of an apparently meaningless and absurd world”⁴³. Unable therefore, “to ignore the fact that the land and its people lie defeated as he languishes in prison”⁴⁴; Kaguvi’s conversation-cum-debate with the priest leaves him metaphorically and spiritually stranded.

Grundy (1999) also observes how, “Vera very vividly portrays Kaguvi’s separation from his ancient spirit and while not directly asserting any sort of religious conversion of Kaguvi’s part, Vera implies a gradual disassociation from

the traditional spirituality".⁴⁵ However, while for Grundy, Kaguvi does not convert, I posit that he fact does, just not to Christianity, but to something akin to existentialism. This is especially in view of Kaguvi's notable "gradual disassociation from traditional spirituality".⁴⁶ What can equally be read as the onset of "the existential attitude" can be read as angst. Thus, Kaguvi's spiritual turn, which is equated to "the bursting of a prophetic cloud in the sky",⁴⁷ is in my view an existentialist act of resistance against the colonisers' Christian beliefs and his own ancestral cosmos which had fallen silent when it was needed most. In this regard, Kaguvi's incarceration for me marks the beginnings of what can best be read as his and later, that of some of his female contemporaries', existentialist act of resistance against the colonizers and his religion, as well as against their ancestral cosmos.

Read thus, the opening of chapter eighteen of the novel is ominous in its portrayal of "grasshoppers holding to the grass with wings made wet by the dew, and they cannot fly [...] While they await the moment of their release, they wave their antennae in search of their future selves".⁴⁸ It is metonymic of those who like Kaguvi, albeit defeated and imprisoned, later embark on an explicitly existentialist existence and acts of resistance. In Kaguvi's case, this is evidenced by his sorrowful realization that no umbilical cord exists between him and the ancient spirits⁴⁹. Instead, apparent is that a chasm has developed:

It is as though they now live in separate ages of time, himself in the present and his spirit departing further into the past. They move in both directions of time, and will not find each other. Before today, *Kaguvi has ridden on the back of the spirit*. Now he can only see short distances to his right and to his left, backwards and forwards.⁵⁰

Kaguvi mirrors an initial and partial disengagement of the individual from communal traditions, and a reliance on one's own moulding of existence and the consequences thereof. Such an acceptance of personal responsibility for himself, unaided by tradition in my view marks an emergent response, a counter-culture. It is such a predicament that had earlier been ominously presented by, "a snake pass[ing i]n the morning, its shed skin [...] bright with dew".⁵¹ However, just as shedding skin for new is a difficult process, equally clear is that Kaguvi's separation from the ancestors will not be easy. This is especially as, "No one can walk away from the departed, free and whole".⁵² Consequently, Kaguvi suffers severe mental anguish as a result of his non-traditional contemplation and conviction. Such is the magnitude of Kaguvi's mental torment for contemplating an existentialist existence that the spirits manifest themselves as a voracious lion, "ready to attack him".⁵³ Eventually, it is Kaguvi's refusal to convert to Christianity which results in his hanging. Despite this however, his death does not seem to halt the spiritual revolution he had contemplated on embarking on.

Indeed, as the epilogue of *Nehanda* reveals, Kaguvi's intentional act of spiritual and cultural resistance becomes the catalyst for further similar resistance. Thus after Kaguvi's death, we learn of how some of his women contemporaries equally imagine, "a new language and a new speech [when at] the bank of the

flowing river where life grows, they *bury the dead part of themselves*⁵⁴ – their traditional selves. In place of the old, they welcome “new forms of existence, new languages with which to cross the boundaries of time”.⁵⁵ As Mangwanda (2002) writing from a different perspective also observes, “It is noteworthy that the term ‘new’ is used repeatedly in the novel to suggest the idea of a revitalized breed of Zimbabwean people”.⁵⁶ Greenwald (1999) seems to concur with the idea of the people’s existentialist turn, when he notes how the scene runs, “against ancestral veneration and instead hints at a realisation of the need to adapt in some way to the future”.⁵⁷ This is more so, considering that, “[t]he newly born [will] come into the world with freed souls that are restless; [and] seek ways [as opposed to ways being sought for them,] to outwit their rivals”.⁵⁸ All these further point to, and suggest a transformed and futuristic mode of resistance amongst some blacks against their colonial rival.

Interestingly, the kind of post-war despair blacks experience after the First *Chimurenga*, to some extent mirrors the kind Europe experienced post-Second World War. This is in view of the fact that what is today known as Sartrean existentialism emerged after World War Two’s devastation in 1946 – somewhat like the Shona and Ndebele’s First *Chimurenga* with the white settlers. It was a time when religion no longer held the lustre it once held and the irrationality of war combined to undermine people’s confidence in religious faith – such as Kaguvi and his women contemporaries find themselves. Thus, for me, the women’s obeisance at the river foreshadows their existentialist future selves. We read how:

In cheerful voices, the women celebrate *their shelter giving selves*, and see new existences coming out of the dreaming air. They are in a state of birth, and growth, and unstoppable exultation [...] that will lead them safely into the future. They clap their hands and create new songs to help clear the path into new lives.⁵⁹

Notably, the women’s view is, until now, “[t]he living [have] been listeners, [...] powerful articulators. Where only the dead make the living speak”⁶⁰ Now however, their reference to new existences further reinforces new agentic modes of existence, self-expression and experiencing. They envisage themselves and those hereafter, as a new breed of women with new conceptions of existence and in particular, resistance. As such, this author disagrees with the conclusion that: “The story told through *Nehanda* is [one of] spiritual enslavement”.⁶¹ Rather, it evidently is one in which “the dead part of the living”⁶² has been existentially awakened and seeks redefined. So, while most of *Nehanda* would seem to revolve around the Shonas’ relations with their ancestral cosmos and armed struggle against their colonisers, towards the end of the novel, starkly evident are some black women’s intentions to adopt new modes of resistance. And as Vera’s *Butterfly Burning* testifies, the future ushers in a new breed of black women who embodying the existentialist spirit of Kaguvi and his female contemporaries, position themselves as the vanguard of counter-culture and resistance. In the segment on *Butterfly Burning* that follows therefore, this paper explores some

black women's alternative acts of resistance against colonial domination and oppression.

Intensifying consciousness and alternative resistance in *Butterfly Burning*

Veit-Wild (1993) observes how many Zimbabwean novels link every contemporary generation with the pre-colonial past or with an ancestor who experienced the coming of the white men.⁶³ In *Butterfly Burning*, it is circa 1946, fifty years after the First Chimurenga in which historically both the Shona and Ndebele fought against white occupation. The novel continues where *Nehanda* left off. Mention of the men hanged at the end of the First Chimurenga and the presence of Fumbatha, a descendant of one of the condemned men, both link the past with the colonial present. It is however, the presence and prominence in *Butterfly Burning* of strong and freedom loving women such as: Deliwe, Gertrude, Phephelaphi and Zandile, that is particularly resonant with *Nehanda* and the women that concluded it. The section that follows traces the private lives of *Butterfly Burning*'s women in colonial Bulawayo. It argues that read via the existentialist precepts of freedom and desire in the context of a postcolonial critique, analysis of their intentions and actions reveal the emergence of a culture of resistance alternative to conventional armed struggle.

From the novel's opening, explicitly evident is that with British settlerism and administration, something akin to black slavery has also been instituted as the colonisers' labour system. This physical subjugation and degradation of some blacks is effectively dramatized through aural, visual and thermal imagery. The air fills with the "sound of a sickle cutting grass along the roadside where black men bend their backs in the sun, clad in torn white shorts, short sleeves, with naked soles".⁶⁴ Physically subjugated, the black men's bodies become a transcript of colonialism's history of brutalization. A "police jeep patrol[s] the city street [with] white men with batons, ready to use them".⁶⁵ The horrendous effects of which are evident in "the line[s] of the whip digging over the other side, under the armpit"⁶⁶ and the "deprivation of civil rights"⁶⁷.

To some extent, *Butterfly Burning* also portrays the stratification of colonial Zimbabwean society and its racial binaries of black and white which, pitifully, the novel's blacks "understand [...] and [so they] walk in the city without encroaching on the pavements from which they are banned".⁶⁸ Indeed, such is their confined existence that they become more insect-like than human. This is because socially subjugated and economically marginalized, "they [can only] manage to crawl to their destination".⁶⁹ Colonialism's laws thus make second rate citizens of blacks in a city fittingly called Bulawayo, which literally means, 'the place of killing'. Important is the impact such racial discrimination has on some of the novel's black populace. In the midst of it all, what becomes important are the blacks' responses to their subjugation.

Modern philosophy defines a subject as among others, one who is a fully conscious or cognizing agent. According to Spivak (1987) the subject emerges when "those elements of social consciousness imperative for agency, namely; deliberative and individuated action"⁷⁰ have been provoked. The culmination of

which is what Bhabha (1994) calls, “the return of the subject as agent”.⁷¹ In *Butterfly Burning*, reminiscent of imprisoned Kaguvi, the onset of colonial subjugation intensifies the consciousness of some blacks to their existential condition. It is this intensification, that this paper argues leads to various existentialist intentions and acts of resistance amongst some black women. This is to the extent that resistance against colonialism becomes vested in them. It is on this basis that Bull-Christiansen (2004) reads as, “the two most important themes in [Vera’s] writings, feminism and history”⁷² which lead to a “feminist nationalism”.⁷³

In view of racial discrimination and subjugation that the advent of colonialism ushers in, Samuelson (2007) “explores the production and performance of modern subjectivity in Vera's Bulawayo and charts its restlessness by engaging with Vera's privileged tropes of music and trains” in Vera’s *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins*. In her article, she notes how: “The restless urban subjectivity infusing Vera's Bulawayo is, then, produced from a subjectifying containment”.⁷⁴ This is such that, “Banned from the pavements, Vera's black subjects inhabit the city by "liv[ing] within the cracks”.⁷⁵ This paper equally avers that colonialism produces in some blacks it dominates a fervent consciousness of themselves, their condition and need for action.

Accordingly, in view of the conditions of their existence, Vera in my view portrays how blacks in this subjugated colonial cityscape emerge as unconscious existentialist agents. Thus forced to “walk in the city without encroaching on the pavements from which they are banned”,⁷⁶ some of the black citizenry of Bulawayo devise creative imaginings as to how best to survive the system by offering what can be described as, “temporally embedded process[es] of individual social engagement and dialogue, divorced from the past and oriented toward the present and the future”.⁷⁷ This is especially recalling that existentialism privileges the subject’s actions over, “policies of federal bureaucracies and of commercial, religious, and political organisations”⁷⁸ that seek to define the limits of the subject or to authorise its claims to selfhood. The novel’s Makokoba Township provides a space within which some blacks can existentially express their freedom and resistance.

Alternative existence and resistance

For Sartre, freedom dictates that human beings have “absolute freedom”. This is because, “No limits to freedom can be found except freedom itself, or, if you prefer, we are not free to cease being free.”⁷⁹ In this regard, despite the colonisers’ limitations to their freedom, some blacks in *Butterfly Burning* do not cease trying to be free. In view of existentialist’s notion of freedom, *Kwela* thus becomes an expression of an alternate freedom. Writing on the social history of the 1940s and 1950s in Rhodesia, Veit-Wild (1993) reports how new types of black entertainment and popular music were emerging; primary of which was *Kwela*.⁸⁰ Vera acknowledges how *Butterfly Burning*, “celebrates some of the elements of urbanization which came with colonisation and the creativity which it unleashed for people to survive”⁸¹ and be free. Therefore, in the township space of Makokoba where segregatory laws are absent, albeit the colonial

condition prevailing elsewhere outside the township, “[w]hen they arrive back, [...] The feet feel *free*”.⁸² The common relationship between music and freedom for some existentialist blacks becomes a conduit from oppression to freedom. In the midst of subalternizing colonialism therefore, *Kwela*, “a music that finds freedom in oppression”⁸³ frames the context within which some blacks seek and find alternative freedom. Consequently, once the people of Sidojiwe E2, Makokoba arrive home, “everyone is free, the young joyful”.⁸⁴ Sidojiwe E2 is flooded with *kwela* music: “The feet feel free”.⁸⁵

In addition, *Kwela* also becomes an expression of some blacks’ consciousness of their oppression and intention to resist it. Thus accompanying *Kwela* is dance as the black subalterns’ alternative mode of resistance. On hearing *Kwela* therefore, for some blacks “the desire [to dance] builds in the body”⁸⁶ and as they dance to it, the dance becomes a dramatisation of colonial oppression: “[t]he knees bend down and the baton falls across the neck and shoulders. *Kwela*. Climb on. Move”.⁸⁷ Dance becomes an expression of both consciousness and resistance.

Lunga (2002) points out how such, “counter-hegemony works not only through song, but also through the content of the song”⁸⁸. This is especially considering that the name *Kwela* was derived from “the noun *i-kwelo* which signifies a shrill whistling sound, made to [...] encourage people to attack”.⁸⁹ Accordingly, the men humming a tune at the novel’s opening probably do so to *Kwela* as an expression of their bitterness against the system and their intention to resist. In the novel, *Kwela* thus situates its protagonists within a zone of counter-culture consisting of a range of liberatory practices of alternative resistance which seek to confront colonialism’s emergent situations. Contributing to this range of liberatory practices of existentialist resistance are those of prostitution, lawlessness and nudity.

Prostitution, lawlessness and nudity as resistance

In *Butterfly Burning*, Samuelson points out how: “Vera’s Bulawayo is distinguished by being the headquarters of the Rhodesian Railways. It is this that defines her city, lending a particular inflection to the desires produced and nurtured therein.” In this paper, desire is initially read as sexual and an expression and tool of both existentialist freedom and resistance, respectively. Secondly, it is read by way of existentialism’s reading of desire as aspiration for “being-for-itself”,⁹⁰ an individual’s ability to achieve and maintain one’s economic independence and subjectivity, all of which are achievable through definite action.

Writing on oppression and repression in a different context, Foucault (1978/1980) advises how sexuality and desire can be looked upon not only as outcomes of repression, but also as constitutive forces generating relations of power.⁹¹ In *Butterfly Burning*, amid both colonial oppression and repression, sexuality and desire become constitutive forces of power. This is seen when sexual attractiveness allows black women like Deliwe and Zandile to sexually manipulate some white men, not only for material gain, but also as a form of unconventional revenge against colonialism. Thus, aware of some of the

colony's white settlers' sexual fantasies and preferences, the attractive prostitute Zandile "makes no distinction between white men and black men when it comes to pleasure and exchange".⁹² Instead, she exploits the men's sexual appetites for black women and their willingness to violate the colour-bar to have sexual intercourse with them. By so doing, she deploys sex to both wield power and revenge on the institution of colonialism.

Zandile does not however stop at metaphorically defeating the colonial institution through some of its white men. She sleeps with and also pilfers from the white men in question. Consequently, as she 'voraciously' solicits men, "[t]ucked safely within her low bodice are monogrammed handkerchiefs that she has retrieved from the pockets of white men"⁹³ as 'trophies' of her conquests. In this way does Zandile gratify her own revenge and that of her people by exploiting the carnality of such white men. Her apparent indiscriminate racial sex crossings, therefore, reflect not only her personal sexual freedom and material appetite but can also be re-interpreted as a postcolonial sexual defeat of the white settler by the female black subaltern, where the former had defeated the latter militarily.

Considered further, Zandile's sexual desire has not only liberated her from colonial society's conventions, she has also appropriated it and turned into a different kind of "pleasure of agency"⁹⁴ whereby she derives erotic pleasure, while at the same time engaging in an anti-colonial agency. Accordingly, sexual intercourse becomes a paradoxical act of both pleasure and resistance. This is especially as Zandile's beautiful black female body becomes a disarming weapon that gives her a comparative advantage and dominance over the white coloniser. In this way, does she ingeniously tackle the issue of black repression and dominance by whites.

On the other hand, Phephelaphi, Zandile's biological daughter, is also an exemplar of sexual desire and existentialist freedom. Unmarried and simply co-habiting with Fumbatha, Phephelaphi and her partner freely satisfy their sexual desires, in and outdoors. As the omniscient narrator expounds, "Long after midnight they *pressed their bodies together* and tucked into the hedges [...] They hid under the skin [my emphasis]".⁹⁵ However, it is Phephelaphi's desire to be a being-for-itself, her aspiration to become a nurse and escape the poverty which colonialism has placed her in, that takes on connotations of resistance. Unfortunately, for Phephelaphi, she becomes complicit in the defeat of her resistance when her sexual desire leads to her pregnancy in a context "that reject[s] women's reproductive bodies, as pregnant women remain excluded from the profession".⁹⁶ When she aborts and yet falls pregnant for the second time, in despair, Phephelaphi commits suicide by setting herself alight. For Lunga (2002), Phephelaphi's choice to commit suicide can be read as a kind of agency, as it is something that nobody or nothing can take away from her⁹⁷. In this paper, her death has been read as Phephelaphi's existentialist choice to protest against colonial institution's denial of her desire for being.

Civil disobedience or lawlessness in the face of the coloniser's unilaterally imposed laws also leads to other acts of existentialist resistance. Thus, because, "African women were not welcome in the urban townships of Rhodesia and so were confined to the barren reserves"⁹⁸ some such 'enterprising' black women as Deliwe, Getrude and Zandile had instead defiantly severed themselves from the land and come to the emerging city of Bulawayo. Once in the emancipatory space of the city, the three proceed to violate the colonial government's laws and by-laws by engaging in prostitution and becoming shebeen queens. In this regard, from an existentialist perspective, the women daringly subvert and challenge colonialism's restrictions.

In view of the hostile "predatory and inhospitable nature of the city",⁹⁹ the acts of women such as Deliwe bare testimony to their resolved intention and acts of resistance against the status quo. However, Deliwe does not, for her part, resort to sleeping with white men as an expression of her contribution to the struggle. Instead, she consciously and vehemently hates black policemen who she sees as symbols of the colonial system. Her chagrin is particularly directed towards them because of their infliction of pain and suffering on fellow blacks; their blatant betrayal of their own. Consequently, to her, "they [the black policemen] were not only capable of eating their own vomit but slicing open the stomachs of their own mothers [...] She hated them and that was not a secret she, or anyone else, could keep".¹⁰⁰ Due to her hatred of the police therefore, she embarks on a crusade against the police by spiritedly resisting and belittling their authority.

Albeit a fifty-year-old slender black woman, Deliwe asserts her resistance and militancy particularly through selling illicit beer on her premises. One learns how: "Deliwe had once been locked up for a whole night in a police cell for selling alcohol [...] Afterward, [...] the deafness in her right ear was caused by the beating she received during her detention. She *continued to make her own liquor and sell it* [my emphasis]".¹⁰¹ Despite the brutality of the system, Deliwe defiantly continues taking a personal and political stand against the settler system and its authority. By her defiance, she makes a personal and politically conscious choice to stand up to the new settler system and rebel against its laws and black minions. She however does not stop at lawlessness but also adds nudity to her arsenal.

In some western societies, such as those of England and Australia, baring one's buttocks has traditionally been considered an affront to the establishment, a means of demeaning the one to whom the nudity is exposed. In this regard, Musila (2007) highlights how: "Yvonne Vera's novels address themselves to these concerns with women's bodies and their lived experiences"¹⁰². Interestingly therefore, in addition to selling illegal liquor, we learn how Deliwe also resorts to her body, specifically its nudity, as resistance. This is illustrated by her nocturnal nude confrontation of the policemen that raid her in the middle of the night. Unashamedly, when the police pounce in search of illegal beer and patrons in her house, Deliwe employs her nudity "as a shaming strategy, [...] turned into a weapon".¹⁰³ Thus, cognisant of the police's nightly raids, and that a

“tactic depends on timing and must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into opportunities”,¹⁰⁴ we learn how Deliwe “always went to bed as naked as the day she was born. She liked to see the surprise in the policeman’s eyes [then] took her time dressing while the policeman shouted and called her a miserable wicked woman”.¹⁰⁵ In this way, Deliwe tellingly uses her nudity to protest the policemen’s nightly intrusions and harassment at a time when one should be free to do as one pleases. However, as Barbara Sutton’s (2007) examination in a different context of the role of naked bodies in relation to politics revealed, “naked bodies of resistance can lead to social outrage and violent punishment”.¹⁰⁶ As such, because of Deliwe’s nude protests, she is often brutally beaten and detained. In spite of which, she defiantly continues her personal and political stand against the settler regime.

Deliwe’s other acts of resistance are subtle and implicit. She does not only resist the colonial state’s organs of repression; she also rejects the Christian establishment. So, whereas for Tiyo Soga characteristics of African colonial modernity included being baptized as a Christian,¹⁰⁷ when Deliwe comes across a bible however, she throws it aside “on the other side of the floor as though she did not want to see it again”.¹⁰⁸ Reminiscent of *Nehanda* and *Kaguvi*, Deliwe also intentionally rejects Christianity as a symbol of oppression and domination. Markedly, whereas previously in *Nehanda*, blacks had constantly been aware of and sought their ancestors’ direction, in *Butterfly Burning*, this is no longer the case. Instead, the dead seem forever dead; never to be referred to again as black female characters such as Deliwe, Phephelaphi and Zandile rely only on themselves in pursuit of the future.

As earlier envisaged by the women at the river in *Nehanda*, fifty years after the First Chimurenga, the silence of the ancestral cosmos and the land’s colonisation, Zandile, Phephelaphi and Deliwe offer alternative resistance to colonialism. Their existentialist, politicised consciousness, socially reveals a counter-culture that constitutes them social actors who innovate alternative acts of resistance. What their lives animate is an existentialist reinvention of existence into a new ‘weapon’ with which to ‘fight’ against colonialism’s excesses. Their spirited and intentional alternative acts of resistance link their lives to the country’s culture of resistance and search for autonomy. It is women such as them and Vera, who were the country’s pathfinders in the fight against oppression and the search for alternative modes of resistance and freedom.

Conclusion

This essay has argued how Vera’s micronarratives of collective and individual action in *Nehanda* and *Butterfly Burning* explore alternative modes of resistance to those of her predecessors’ and the country’s master narratives. Beginning with *Nehanda*, it has demonstrated how with the Shona ancestors’ silence during the First Chimurenga, a culture of existentialist modes of resistance emerged. This is particularly as the paper posits that with the ancestors’ silence, the outcome was a seemingly existentialist response as counter- rebellion to both the colonisers’ Christianity and a silent ancestral cosmos. Subsequent to which notion of existence as resistance amongst some blacks, the paper has shown how in Vera’s

succeeding novel, *Butterfly Burning*, reference to the ancestral spirits is absent and Christianity is implicitly rejected. Instead, these are seen to have been replaced by some black women's existentialist agency in the form of their twin desires, civil disobedience and bodies as sites of resistance. The result of which is their innovation of alternative acts of resistance against culture, colonial domination and oppression.

Notes

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- ² Y. Vera, *Butterfly Burning*. Harare: Baobab Books, 1998.
- ³ F. Veit-Wild, *Preachers, Non-Believers: A Social History of Zimbabwean Literature*. London: Hans Zell Publishers. 1993.
- ⁴ S.M. Mutsvairo, *Feso*. Harare: Longman. 1982. [1956]
- ⁵ N. Sithole, *Amandebele kaMzilikazi [Mzilikazi's Ndebeles]*. Harare: Longmans in association with the Rhodesia Literature Bureau. 1982.
- ⁶ P. Mahlangu, *UMthwakazi: izindaba zamaNdebele zemvelo [The Ndebele nation: Tales of the origin of the Ndebele]* Salisbury: Longmans in association with the Rhodesia Literature Bureau. 1978.
- ⁷ L. Vambe, *An Ill-Fated People: Zimbabwe Before and After Rhodes*. London: Heinemann. 1972
- ⁸ S. Samkange, *Year of the Uprising*. Salisbury: Heinemann. 1966.
- ⁹ According to Veit-Wild, these are those born between 1940 and 1959 they went to school in the 1950s and 1960s and began their writing careers in the 1970s. See F. Veit-Wild. *Preachers, Non-Believers: A Social History of Zimbabwean Literature*. London: Hans Zell Publishers. 1993.
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- ¹¹ W. Katiyo, *A Son of the Soil*. London: Rex Collins. 1976.
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- ¹³ G. Kahari, *The Search for Zimbabwean Identity: An introduction to the Black Zimbabwean novel*. Gweru: Mambo Press. 1980.
- ¹⁴ P. Kaarsholm and B. Frederiksen, "The transition from resistance to establishment culture in Zimbabwe, 1965-1985" quoted in Veit-Wild, *Preachers, Non-Believers: A Social History of Zimbabwean Literature*, p. 263.
- ¹⁵ See Veit-Wild, *Preachers, Non-Believers: A Social History of Zimbabwean Literature*, p.6.
- ¹⁶ Veit-Wild, *Preachers, Non-Believers: A Social History of Zimbabwean Literature*, p.263.
- ¹⁷ Veit-Wild, *Preachers, Non-Believers: A Social History of Zimbabwean Literature*, p.256.
- ¹⁸ C. Hove, *Bones*. Harare: Baobab Books. 1988.
- ¹⁹ S. Chinodya, *Harvest of Thorns*. Harare: Baobab Books. 1989.
- ²⁰ See www.mazwi.net/essays/words-are-like-weapons.
- ²¹ G. Musila, "Embodying Experience and Agency in Yvonne Vera's Without a Name and Butterfly Burning," in *Research in African Literatures*, 38 (2) 2007, pp. 50-63.
- ²² M. Maodzwa-Taruvinga and R. Muponde, "Sign and Taboo: An Introduction," In R. Muponde & M. Maodzwa-Taruvinga. *Sign and Taboo Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera*. Harare: Weaver Press. 2002.
- ²³ L. Bull-Christiansen, *Tales of the Nation: Feminist nationalism or Patriotic History? Defining National History and Identity in Zimbabwe*. Goteborg: Nordiska Africa Institute, 2004.
- ²⁴ Musila, "Embodying Experience and Agency in Yvonne Vera's Without a Name and Butterfly Burning," p. 52.
- ²⁵ M. Samuelson, "Yvonne Vera's Bulawayo: Modernity, (Im)mobility, Music, and Memory," in *Research in African Literatures*, 38 (2) 2007, pp. 22-35.
- ²⁶ Maodzwa-Taruvinga and Muponde, "Sign and Taboo: An Introduction", 2002, p. xi.
- ²⁷ J. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*. trans and intro. Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Washington Square Press. 1992.
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- ³¹ Vera, *Nehanda*, p. 100.
- ³² D.Sweetman, *Women Leaders in African History*. London: Heinemann. 1984.
- ³³ Vera. *Nehanda*, p. 88.
- ³⁴ See Sweetman, *Women Leaders in African History*, p. 6.
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- ⁴⁰ Shaw, "Conceptualising resistance: Women's leisure as political practice", p.186.
- ⁴¹ Shaw, "Conceptualising resistance: Women's leisure as political practice", p.186.
- ⁴² See R.Young, *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press: Oxford. 2003.
- ⁴³ D.E. Cooper, *Existentialism: A Reconstruction*. Blackwell: Oxford. 1999.
- ⁴⁴ Vera, *Nehanda*, p.106.
- ⁴⁵ See www.usp.edu.sg/post/Zimbabwe/religion/grund2.html.
- ⁴⁶ See www.usp.edu.sg/post/Zimbabwe/religion/grund2.html.
- ⁴⁷ Vera, *Nehanda*, p.106.
- ⁴⁸ Vera, *Nehanda*, p77.
- ⁴⁹ Vera, *Nehanda*, pp.106-7.
- ⁵⁰ Vera, *Nehanda*, p. 107. My emphasis.
- ⁵¹ Vera, *Nehanda*, p. 103.
- ⁵² Vera, *Nehanda*, p. 109.
- ⁵³ Vera, *Nehanda*, p.108.
- ⁵⁴ Vera, *Nehanda*, p. 112. My emphasis.
- ⁵⁵ Vera, *Nehanda*, p. 113.
- ⁵⁶ K.Mangwanda, "Re-mapping the colonial space: Yvonne Vera's *Nehanda*," in R. Muponde & M. Maodzwa-Tarvinga, *Under the Tongue and Without A Name. Sign and Taboo Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera*. Harare: Weaver Press. 2002, pp.195–203.
- ⁵⁷ See www.postcolonialweb.org/zimbabwe/vera/greenwald1.html.
- ⁵⁸ Vera, *Nehanda*, p. 117.
- ⁵⁹ Vera, *Nehanda*, p. 113. My emphasis.
- ⁶⁰ Vera, *Nehanda*, p. 117.
- ⁶¹ Mangwanda. "Re-mapping the colonial space: Yvonne Vera's *Nehanda*," p. 195–203.
- ⁶² Vera, *Nehanda*, p. 112.
- ⁶³ Veit-Wild. *Preachers, Non-Believers: A Social History of Zimbabwean Literature*, p. 257
- ⁶⁴ Vera, *Butterfly Burning*, p. 3.
- ⁶⁵ Vera, *Butterfly Burning*, p. 40.
- ⁶⁶ Vera, *Butterfly Burning*, p. 56.
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- ⁶⁸ Vera, *Butterfly Burning*, p. 6.
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- ⁷³ Bull-Christiansen, *Tales of the Nation: Feminist nationalism or Patriotic History? Defining National History and Identity in Zimbabwe*, p.16.
- ⁷⁴ Samuelson, "Yvonne Vera's Bulawayo: Modernity, (Im)mobility, Music, and Memory," p.23.
- ⁷⁵ Vera, *Butterfly Burning*, p. 6.
- ⁷⁶ Vera, *Butterfly Burning*, p. 6.

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- ⁷⁹ J.P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness. Transl. and intro.* H. E. Barnes. New York: Washington Square Press, 1992, p. 567.
- ⁸⁰ Veit-Wild, *Preachers, Non-Believers: A Social History of Zimbabwean Literature*, p. 249.
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- ⁸² Vera, *Butterfly Burning*, p. 7.
- ⁸³ Vera, *Butterfly Burning*, p. 7.
- ⁸⁴ Vera, *Butterfly Burning*, p. 37.
- ⁸⁵ Vera, *Butterfly Burning*, p. 7.
- ⁸⁶ Vera, *Butterfly Burning*, p. 6-7.
- ⁸⁷ Vera, *Butterfly Burning*, p. 7.
- ⁸⁸ Lunga, "Between the pause and the waiting: the struggle against time in Yvonne Vera's *Butterfly Burning*," p.195.
- ⁸⁹ L. Attree, "Language, kwela music and modernity in *Butterfly Burning*", in R. Muponde & M. Maodzwa-Taruvinga, *Sign and Taboo Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera*. Harare: Weaver Press. 2002, p. 73.
- ⁹⁰ See www.iep.utm.edu/s/sartre-ex.html.
- ⁹¹ M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*. New York: Vintage. 1978/1980.
- ⁹² Vera, *Butterfly Burning*, p. 40.
- ⁹³ Vera, *Butterfly Burning*, p. 38.
- ⁹⁴ A. Appadurai, *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis, London: Public Worlds, Volume 1. 2005, p.111.
- ⁹⁵ Vera, *Butterfly Burning*, p. 49
- ⁹⁶ Musila, "Embodying Experience and Agency in Yvonne Vera's *Without a Name and Butterfly Burning*" p. 53.
- ⁹⁷ Lunga, "Between the pause and the waiting: the struggle against time in Yvonne Vera's *Butterfly Burning*," p. 194.
- ⁹⁸ Gagiano, "Buried Hurts and colliding dreams in Yvonne Vera's *Butterfly Burning*," p. 46.
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- ¹⁰⁰ Vera, *Butterfly Burning*, p. 59.
- ¹⁰¹ Vera, *Butterfly Burning*, p. 60.
- ¹⁰² Musila, "Embodying Experience and Agency in Yvonne Vera's *Without a Name and Butterfly Burning*," p. 50.
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