

‘National Identity’ In Yvonne Vera’s *Without A Name* – A Study

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ABSTRACT

Zimbabwean author Yvonne Vera is well known. She was created in Bulawayo. She attended a university in Canada where she studied and earned a master's degree. She was the National Gallery's Director at the time. *Why Don't Carve Other Animals?* a 1992 publication of short stories, marked the beginning of her creative writing career. After that, she published five books: *Nehanda* (1993), *Without a Name* (1994), *Under the Tongue* (1996), *Butterfly Burning* (1998), and *The Stone Virgins* (2002). She also received the Commonwealth Writers Prize for the Africa Region for her book *Under the Tongue*. Vera frequently discusses the effects of colonial authority on Zimbabwe's ethnic group in her works, as well as the failure of women's hopes to gain Independence. Vera has made an effort to illustrate the colonial tactic of eliminating Zimbabwe's ethnic identity and establishing a colonial identity in *Without A Name*. *Without a Name* makes an attempt to analyze how Zimbabwe loses her ethnic name.

Keywords: *National Identity, Yvonne Vera, Commonwealth Writers, Zimbabwe, Without A Name.*

Introduction

Yvonne Vera is a renowned woman Zimbabwean writer. She received her Master's Degree in a Canadian university. She worked as the Director of the National Gallery. Her creative writing career began with an anthology of short stories called *Why Don't Carve Other Animals?* Published in 1992. Then she has written five novels namely *Nehanda* (1993), *Without A Name* (1994), *Under the Tongue* (1996) *Butterfly Burning* (1998), and *The Stone Virgins* (2002.)She is also a recipient of Commonwealth Writers Prize for Africa Region for her novel *Under the Tongue*. Vera presents the impact of colonial rule on ethnic Zimbabwe recurrently in her novels on one side and the disillusionment of the aspirations of women to achieve an independent status in all her novels. In *Without A Name*, Vera has attempted to present the colonial strategy

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of erasing the ethnic identity of Zimbabwe and creating a colonial identity. An attempt is made to analyze Without A Name as to how Zimbabwe is stripped of her ethnic name.

A Brief History of Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe is one of the most ancient African countries. According to some historians, Zimbabwe is known for its age-old civilization as it is traced to the original San stone-age hunter-gatherers. It is also reported that the Sans originated from the Homo sapiens, considered the thinking man or modern-day man. There is an argument that the genes patterns all human beings share are inherited from them. This suggests that, on the one hand, most of the other humans on the planet are descendants of that one gene type, and the human species of Zimbabwe are the ancestors of most of mankind now.

The historical monuments built of stone near the southern town of Masvingo are the source for naming the land as Zimbabwe. While the pyramids of Egypt are considered to be the foremost mad-made stone structure in the world, the stone structures in Zimbabwe are placed next to them in terms of chronology. The Zambezi River, the Limpopo River, and the Sabi River are the main rivers in Zimbabwe. Lake Kariba and the Victoria Falls are famous in Zimbabwe. The people of Zimbabwe lived in villages or rural places until the urbanization during the colonial rule. However, seventy percent of the people live in rural areas to date. Until the invasion of the British, Zimbabwe was the home of indigenous black people. In the beginning, called the Stone Age, the people belonged to the San clan. They were hunter-gatherers.

In the course of time, Bantu-speaking people displaced the San. The Bantu people are the ancestors of the present-day Shona-speaking inhabitants of Zimbabwe. It is noticed that there were several incursions into Zimbabwe. Thus, the people of Nguni and the people of Ndebele are found in Zimbabwe. The majority of Ndebele people are found living in southwestern Zimbabwe now. Socialization between Gaza-Nguni and the local Shona population resulted in the hybrid of the present-day Ndau group.

The creation of the Great Zimbabwe had four phases during the prehistory Iron Age. The farming communities in scattered villages were the mark of the first phase. There was no form of hierarchical organization in this phase. The second phase is of the seventh century, during which the external trade was introduced. There was a shift towards goods exchange value such

as gold and ivory. The third phase witnessed the increase in the volume of trade and the social differentiation in the villages. In the fourth phase, the state structures such as Mapungubwe and the social stratification emerged. At the end of these four phases, the state of Great Zimbabwe was established.

In the nineteenth century, Ceceil John Rhodes expanded British colonial rule to Zimbabwe. He used Charles Rude, Rochfort Maguire, and Francis Thomson to coax Lobengula Khumalo to enter into a treaty of friendship with him deceptively. Lobengula was promised guns, a gunboat, and some cash as a reward for the said treaty. The friendship treaty was such an act of falsehood and betrayal that the whole territory and the people were brought under the British regime by the show called The Rudd Concession, 1888. The Rudd Concession is a document that was signed by the then-king called Lobengula. Later, Lobengula realized that the British invaders deceived him by including some matters which were not discussed and agreed upon. Accordingly, his territory, sovereignty, its people, and the people of Mashona land went to the British invaders.

Zimbabwe was rechristened as the Southern Rhodesia in 1890 as Cecil John Rhodes colonially conquered it. Then, his team was joined by the British South Africa Company. The British Missionaries have already entered Zimbabwe and started their missionary objective of converting the people of Zimbabwe through various strategies, among which educational institutions, Health Centres, and Churches were primary. The colonial rule was resisted by the people of Southern Rhodesia several times and in several ways. One such was called The First Chimurenga/Umvukela war, waged by some groups of Africans against the British administration and the white settler community to dislodge colonialism. But it failed. The first Chimurenga/Umvukela was assumed to be proof to pan-Zimbabwean national consciousness.

There were numerous uprisings and protests against the colonial rule from many fronts and organizations. The second Chimurenga/Umvukela war led to Ian Smith's signing the Unilateral Declaration of Independence proclaimed on 11 November 1965. The country was renamed as Rhodesia. It was not Independence in the true sense. So again several groups like The Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), the Zimbabwe African Nations Union (ZANU), the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) and South African National Congress (ANC) continued to fight against the British. As a result, the country became independent and regained its old name, Zimbabwe in 1980. Wangari Maathai observation may

sum up the struggle and reclaiming the ancient name of the country thus: “In the year 1965 alone, civil war broke out in Chad, the Southern Rhodesia government under Ian Smith unilaterally declared independence from Britain (only guerrilla war would eventually achieve black majority rule in 1980 when the country was renamed Zimbabwe”.[CA, 31-32]

III

National Identity in *Without A Name*

The theme of national identity is dealt with in Vera’s *Without A Name*. All the characters have a name in the novel. The just-born baby of Mazvita is the one who is without a name in the narrative. Before the birth of her baby, she has lived with Nyenyedzi in a village. When he refuses to move to the town/city, she leaves him behind and migrates to the town/city where she lives another man called Joel. While living together she gives birth to a baby who remains without a name. The time of the narrative is 1977. The characters, places, and actions are a mixture of reality and metaphor. While the reality of the characters, places, and actions reflect the life of the people of Zimbabwe on the eve of UDI, their metaphorical treatment implies the history of Zimbabwe from the colonial rule to the promulgation of UDI. An attempt is made to trace and identify them one after the other and to relate to each other.

Mazvita is a village girl. The plot of the novel revolves around her life in the village, her migration to the town in the hope of finding a secured job and true sense of freedom, and her struggle with her baby before and after its birth.

Her parents are living in a remote village. Yet she is found to be living with Nyenyedzi in the town around. Both of them are found courting each other at the beginning. When she plucks a mushroom and feels its softness, he rushes to her and pushes it down, reminding her that it is a poisonous mushroom and that he would get the edible ones for her. They are very intimately in love with each other, which is depicted in the novels as follows:

He touched her below her neck, above her firm breasts, and she curled her arm over his back and rested her hand there. She rested a closed hand over his back where a thin trickling sweat met her fingers. She gathered the warmth beneath his arm and spread it slowly across his back with her other hand. She listened. She heard the leaves turn silent. She listened. She heard him murmur “Howa’”. She was sure he had called. ... In the future, Nyenyedzi evoked that name when he wanted to hold her close, like today. (WAN 12-13) Such intimate lovers differ in choosing their place to live together. While Nyenyedzi prefers the village, she selects the city. He considers the town a good and proper place for them to live and cook together. There is an ideal of the land in his mind. He fears that if he moves from the ground, the land will be taken away from him. This is his sense of belonging and patriotism. According to him, an ethnic value is attached to the land. He explains about the importance of land which same as his village thus:

The land belongs to our feet because only they can carry the land. It is only our feet which own the land. Our hands can only carry clods of earth at a time. We can not carry the land on our shoulders. No one can take the land away. To move away from the land is to admit that it has been taken. It is to abandon it. We have to wait here. We have to wait here with the land, if we are to be loyal to it, and to those who have given it to us. The land does not belong to us. We keep the land for the departed. That is why we can on the land while strangers believe it can belong to them. How can something so vast and mysterious belong to anybody? Only that which we can carry between our fingers can belong to us. No one can own the land. (WAN 38)

The ethnic culture of Zimbabwe is also characterized by the sentimental and devoted attachment of the people of Zimbabwe with their land. It is noticed that hunting, cattle rearing, and farming corps jointly as a community work in ancient Zimbabwe. The sentimental attachment of the people of Zimbabwe with their homeland is transferred from one generation to the next till now. Steve Biko, a martyr for the cause of African liberation, has also explained the people’s attachment to the land as a part of their culture in his book *I Write What I Like*. He states that the attitudes of the Africans were not individualistic. It was rather not individualistic. It means that the land does not belong to the individuals. It belongs to the people collectively. There used to be a local chief on behalf of the people just to look after the collective farming in the lands. The cattle of the various families were free to graze in any field without any prohibitions or restrictions. The people also shared the labour on the farm in the community for which there was no wage. They used to share the corn or the produce from the land.

The reason for Nyenyedzi to refuse to accompany and move to the society reflects the sense that the true Zimbabwe culturally exists in the villages. He also points out how one carries a

foldable knife in the pocket. There are also robbers who do not hesitate to kill people for money. He reminds her that even the parents are not spared from such a heinous killing.

But Mazvita is contrary to him. She belongs to a village called Mubaira in Mhondoro. She came to the present village in search of a job. She also states that the war was very bad in Mhondoro, so it was hard even to close one's eyes and sleep. I left her village to reach the city somehow; thus, she could not think of returning to her home village.

She also states that she cannot live in the village. She cites three reasons for not willing to remain in the village. She feels that life is under threat in the villages where there is a war. The women are not safe in the villages where the soldiers abuse the women. She has had personal experience of being tortured by a soldier. She narrates one such experience to Nyenyedzi in her justification to move to the city thus:

I walked in the early morning to carry water from the river. I only had my arms, because my legs were buried in the mist, but I felt the mist moving upward, toward my face. It was strange to walk separated like that. Then I felt something pulling me down into the grass. This something pulled hard at my legs, till I fell down. I saw nothing, because the mist was so heavy. I tumbled through that mist, screaming into the grass. I had forgotten about my legs. It was a man that pulled me into that grass. He held a gun, though I did not see it. After that experience I decided to leave.” (WAN 30)

She strongly feels that the sense of freedom is more prevalent in the cities than in the villages. The infrastructure, transport, and other developmental works are seen as a reflection of freedom. The value of freedom is manifested in the life of the people in the cities. Lastly, she wants a better and more dignified job than the one she is in the village. She was working on a farm behind the storehouse in the village for some time and is made a maid to prepare tea in the kitchen for the foremen and assistants. Now she wants freedom from the suppressive atmosphere of the village and moves to the city called Harare. On her arrival in Harare, she notices the display and reflection of an atmosphere of freedom with an ironical undertone the illustration of which is given below:

She felt freedom eagerly anticipated. It moved over her just. The buildings were so high they made her want to crouch, or bury herself in the ground, anything but to walk up straight. She collapsed in a heap on the pavement and watched the cars move fast. She sat curled on the cold cement block. Multitudes of feet moved by. Harare was a pestilence. Feet swished past. The city was unapologetic. The city was on time. Harare was festive. Roads were four-wheeled, black-tarred and moving. ... It was rare kind of freedom this, to be so busy and purposeful. She wondered what happened to the aged, in this city so determined to be free, for the old tempered movement, tempered dream. The city was a place hid its old. Perhaps no one ever lived long enough to be toothless ... Feet moved of free-flowing cloth. Men and women wore trousers. REVOLUTION --- a small tag along the waist, in black and white. The widened bottoms of the trousers turned and turned. It was also an era for turntables and long play. Freedom came

in circles. Endless and dizzying. What was freedom if it could be curtailed and contained and passed around? Freedom was a thought tantalizing and personal. You had to wear your own freedom to be sure it had arrived. 1977. It is how it was expressed. People walked into shops and bought revolutions. (WAN 54-55)

What Mazvita witnesses in Harare is the personalized view of freedom. The city has developed in terms of material and business growth. The shops, roads, and vehicles and the attitude of the people in being the consumers of the colonial material world are seen by Mazvita to be manifestations of freedom. The life of the people in the city at the juncture or in the name of freedom is in contrast with that of the people in the villages and in the pre-colonial period. Yet another picture of freedom is provided, which is full of ironies:

Harare, Newspaper headings covered the dark alley, promised no freedom to the agitated people. But there were ample signs of freedom the people had already claimed for themselves – empty shells of Ambi, green and red. The world promised a lighter skin, greater freedom. It was 1977, freedom was skim deep but joyous and tantalizing. Ambi. Freedom was coy and brash, spread between palms, shared and physical. Freedom was a translucent nose, ready to drop. Freedom left one with black-skinned ears. A mask. A carnival. Reality found a double, turbulent and final. Freedom spoke from behind a mask, but no one asked any deep questions, no one understood what freedom truly was. To be sure, it was boisterous. Ambi would do for now, certainly. No one questioned the gaps in reality. If there was a gap anywhere, there was an opening too. Freedom was any kind of opening through which one could squeeze. People fought to achieve gaps in their reality. People danced in an enviable kind of self-mutilation. (WAN 32-33)

There is a long interpretation of the notion of freedom in the ensuing part of this chapter. Freedom, extracted by force like something squeezed out of a tube, is viewed as better than nothing. It is also perceived as being purchasable and sensual. It provides two different pictures about the impact of freedom. On the one hand, the people are in amazement greeting each other and are found engaged in in laborious work without any amazement.

Mazvita arrives in Harare. She is new to this place and thus knows none here. A man approaches and offers to take her to his house. On her consent, he takes her on his bicycle to his house. He introduces his name as Joel. He is described as being quick in his speech, movements and in everything. In other words, he is presented as typical of the city characterized by quickness. He has not informed her about his job and his personal matters. They live happily for a few days. Then Mazvita realizes that she is pregnant and Joel is not the father of the baby. Although he is indifferent regarding her pregnancy at the beginning, he decides to send her from his home and thus instructs her to leave him. She leaves Harare and returns to the hilly village from where she came to Harare. She sees the smoke in the midst of

the huts there. The grass is burnt. She gathers the burning grass. She releases the child there, suggesting she has thrown the baby in the fire.

Conclusion

There are only three major in addition to the Mazvita's baby. The three major characters have a name. Mazvita is the central woman character. She originally belongs to a village called Mubaaria in Mhondora. She comes to another village called Kadoma to work in a tobacco store house there. Then she is assigned the work of making tea for the foremen and assistants in the farm. She is a metaphor of the mother country in the narrative. She is swayed between the ethnic people and the so-called civilization of the colonial cities namely the Southern Rhodesia.

Nyenyedzi also works in the tobacco farmhouse. He is filled without diminishing and uncompromising love and attachment with his land. This land is a symbol of ethnic nation and culture for him. It means his ancestors and their ethnic life. Although there is a war against the colonial rule and the settlers' domination of the people of villages and the colonial army to contain such resistance, he wants to remain in the village. He and Mazvita fall in love and live together with a lot of love, admiration, and affection for each other. While Nyenyedzi wants to live his life with Mazvita in the countryside, which is a symbol of his ethnic country for him, Mazvita wants Nyenyedzi to go with her to Harare because she feels that there is freedom and new and ample opportunities for independent jobs in the city. They part with each other because of the lack of consensus between them.

Joel is also a Zimbabwean but has settled in Harare. He has accustomed himself to the city way of life. Symbolically, he is a South Rhodesian. It must be noticed that the ethnic Great Zimbabwe was named Southern Rhodesia after Cecil John Rhodes, who was the first to colonize the Great Zimbabwe, although the European Missionaries had already invaded the Great Zimbabwe. The Southern Rhodesia symbolizes or manifests the colonial notion of Civilisation and Development in terms of materialistic progress.

What is most significant in the novel is the symbol of the baby of Mazvita. Mazvita is the mother of this baby. Who is the father of this baby? Is it Nyenyedzi who is the father of this baby? He may be regarded as the biological father of the baby. However, the claim is bound to become invalid and unacceptable because Mazvita is living with him at the time of the baby's birth. Is it Joel who is the father of the baby? He may be regarded as the situational father of

the baby because it is during Mazvita's stay/living with Joel that she realizes and gives birth to the baby,, although Mazvita was already pregnant before she began to live with Joel.

Mazvita is a metaphor for the motherland. The name Zimbabwe is derived from a Shona term *dzimbabwe* or *dzimbabwe*, meaning house of stone, because the town was built of unbounded granite quarried from the surrounding hills, with walls up four metres thick in place".[17-18] It is the largest pre-colonial state in southern Africa during the ancient times. The subsequent name of the Southern Rhodesia in 1890 was a colonial creation. It is more of the colonial nature than of the ethnic nature. Then, the country was renamed as Rhodesia after UDI. The historical setting of the novel *Without A Name* post-Rhodesia and pre-Zimbabwe Independence time. Rhodesia is a colonial creation where the colonial project of civilization was undertaken. In other words, it endorses what Maathai writes about the identity of the British colonies of Africa in a chapter entitled *The Crisis of National Identity*:

The modern African State is a superficial creation : a loose collection of ethnic communities or micro-nations, brought together in a single entity, or macro-nation, by the colonial powers. Some countries include hundreds of micro nations within their borders; others only a few. Kenya has forty-two; Nigeria, two hundred and fifty; Cameroon, at least two hundred; Mozambique, more than ten; Gabon, more than forty; Zimbabwe, fewer than ten; and Barundi and Rwanda, three. (CA 184)

Zimbabwe Whereas Nyenyedzi is a representative of ethnic Zimbabwe, Joel is a representative of Rhodesia. The baby represents the freedom this country is going to gain in 1980 as Zimbabwe. Thus, naming the baby after Nyenyedzi as its father or after Joel exclusively becomes controversial. The doubt of whether the new Zimbabwe would be ethnic or colonial will remain forever. So, the baby becomes and remains without a name.

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