

# Traumatic Memory and Legacy of Anxiety in Yvonne Vera's *Under the Tongue*

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## Abstract

In *Under the Tongue*, Yvonne Vera has described a traumatic event and depicts the difficulty, sometimes the impossibility, of transforming traumatic memory of the protagonist into narrative memory. This paper explores Vera's attempt to present the survivor's attempt to work through her painful memories, by articulating them in a monologue. She restructures accounts through the images picked up from the world of nature but when words come to her mind they lack sequential order to describe the extraordinary experience. The paper addresses a number of questions related to traumatic memory of a trauma survivor. This pain narrative is linked with the quest of the protagonist who struggles to come out of the state of trauma. It has been observed that in Zimbabwe the political and economic crisis went along with sexual violence against women. Through this aesthetic endeavor, Vera has protested against in-house abuse presented against the backdrop of fierce anti-colonial struggle.

**Keywords:** anxiety; narrative; pain; silence; traumatic memory

## 1. Introduction to the Contemporary Trauma Theory

“There is no present or future-only the past,  
happening over and over again-now”  
Eugene O'Neill.

In contemporary literary criticism, trauma theory plays a vital part in examining a text. Cathy Caruth, in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, cogently argues a link between literature and psychoanalysis. In line with Caruth's argument, Abraham and Torok in *The Shell and the Kernel* also emphasize on the relation between psychoanalysis and literature; Rand, in the introduction to this book, writes that their work “is a constant interchange between literature and psychoanalysis. This is a matter not simply of giving psychoanalytic interpretations of literature, but rather of transforming literature into a resource for clinical insight .... Thus literature can deepen psychoanalytic understanding by giving us nuanced and artful accounts of situations ... the study of fictitious life-scenarios in literature parallels the psychoanalytic search for ever finer means of comprehending people and their joys or sufferings” (Rand, Intro, 11-12). Using psychoanalytic theory in the study of literature is essential because it is a productive way of exploring psychology through depictions of emotional strife of characters, the memory of traumatic events, and the struggle to overcome anxiety. Both psychiatrists and psychoanalysts explore trauma theory and conclude that trauma is embodied in the event which afterwards return to life as forms of memory, nightmares, or flashbacks. In addition, contemporary trauma theory identifies what has not been fully absorbed by conscious, but acknowledged by unconscious, the unspeakable traumatic memory.

In my paper I use the term traumatic memory which is the memory of the emotional shock so it is different from narrative memory as it shifts back and forth in flashbacks and nightmares; pushes the protagonist deep into invented worlds, so traumatic memory is the memory of a traumatic event that was not completely established by the victim at time of its occurrence, which suggests that it cannot be consciously recollected by the victim when he or she wishes to do so. It is because as Felman describes “[t]he traumatic event, although real, took place outside the parameters of ‘normal’ reality, such as causality, sequence, place and time. The trauma is thus an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after” (1992, 69). Consistent to this idea, Meek writes, “[p]sychological theories of trauma have explained how the experience of physical harm or life-threatening situations can cause individuals to suffer behavioral and memory disorders over extended periods of time” (2011, 5). In *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, Judith Herman asserts that “to study psychological trauma is to come face to face both with human vulnerability and with the capacity for evil in human nature. To study psychological trauma means bearing witness to horrible events” (8). Further, Herman claims:

Psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless. At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force. Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning. Traumatic events are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life. (33)

Traumatic memory is a complex phenomenon as it is extremely unreliable because the survivor fails to establish sequence and connections between the event and the language. Now-a-days, the study of memory has become transdisciplinary as this phenomenon is being studied from varied perspectives. Antze and Lambek, the writers of *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, have drawn on a range of cases from child abuse to the Holocaust, suggesting that “memories are never simply records of the past, but are interpretive reconstructions that bear the imprint of local narrative conventions, cultural assumptions, discursive formations and practices, and social contexts of recall and commemoration” (1996, vii). The event must be acknowledged by the survivor, only then can the event be deciphered into a non-traumatic memory, a memory that than remains no longer invincible. The creation of the narrative is exceptionally difficult because the victims have phobias of the past. If the victim tries to relate the traumatic narrative there are chances of missing many details and adding something extra to it to prove the truthfulness of the situation. The transformation of traumatic memory into narrative memory requires a listener who can sympathetically listen to the traumatized individual, provide such a comfort zone where the narrator can flexibly speak whatever is stuck in the mind and is not letting the sufferer to move ahead in life. Talking about traumatic memory and the therapy of the survivor, Levine says, “the multidimensional structure of traumatic memory as it is stored in the brain and held in the body, ... misconceptions about so-called recovered memories have caused much unnecessary pain and suffering for patients and for their families, while also creating confusion and self-doubt for therapists who treat them” (emphasis original) (Intro, 2015). As opposed to traumatic memory, narrative memory is somewhat chronological in its structure. According to Cathy Caruth, a ‘traumatic narrative’ is “a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (emphasis original) (1996, 7).

In *Under the Tongue* (1996), Yvonne Vera, illustrates traumatic memory and anxiety of a person who has experienced and is still experiencing trauma. The study elucidates that the

emotional weakness of the protagonist is aggravated by an insidious sense of agony. The child is talking to herself. She, most of the time, finds it difficult to choose the right word which may help her to narrate the physical and psychological assault. Not only her pain, but frustration is obvious when she is unable to understand or to believe in what has happened to her. Her voice is choked because of severe shock. She has also lost the capacity to retrieve the incident and generate the language. She has literally become voiceless, so she is talking to herself, trying to clarify the foggy state of mind by understanding those things which are beyond her comprehension, making her experiences real and acknowledging their truth. She tries to speak but the traumatic memory is extremely unreliable and lacks sequential linearity, because the enormity of pain is too much to absorb the dreadful incident. Traumatic memory not only pulls down the narrator but it at the same time becomes a resource to approach, censure and deplore the incident; thus helping the survivor to assert one's identity. Initially Zhizha succumbs to multi-layered breakdown but after intense effort finally comes out of the state of repression.

## 2. About the Author

Yvonne Vera portrays Zimbabwe's landscape as a colonial state struggling for independence through the wounded body and painful movements of Zhizha. Besides this, the novel also presents the struggle of women in breaking down the silence imposed on them by deterring living conditions. In dismantling the oppressive structures of the society, they give voice to their silent trauma of living amid hostile environment. They try to resist the pressures in their own way and struggle to survive, thus balancing the sense of pain with the sensation of relief on overcoming the snare of traumatic memory. The linguistic brilliance and intimate poetic narrative are also emphasized in the literary text though it deals with a severely tragic incident. Vera has the "ability to bring together beauty and violence, without aestheticising the violence, without giving up on the beauty" (Rooney, 2008, 70)

## 3. Discussion:

In this study, I want to establish how the deferral of narrative is linked with the representation of trauma and anxiety of a young girl who has been sexually violated by her father. This study suggests the inability to recreate an experience of the past and to present the mental and emotional state of a person undergoing the agony of trauma. It is because of anxiety, Zhizha feels, that though she has many tongues in the mouth but they are "withered, without strength to speak the memory of their forgetting. Such tongues do not bleed. They have abandoned the things of life" (1996, 121). Her recurring fears and worries give her a persistent feel that something bad might not happen again. Though the perpetrator is dead, she is surrounded by grandmother who is taking special care of her but the intense feelings of anxiety are not hard to identify. These fears and worries are not just creations of mind but they are very real that is why they are not letting Zhizha to concentrate on the present.

She feels that her pain is so deep-rooted that the roots which have sprouted in her stomach have reached her mouth forcing their way to crack out of her. Anxiety is accompanied by panic disorder which involves intense and unprovoked feelings of dread and fright of recurring attacks. Zhizha is experiencing these frightening attacks even during sleep,

In the darkness I see just one red dot and I can store it anywhere inside my head, even under my eye. I watch it move inside my head till it disappears. It grows very small.

When I look at a small red dot it grows and fills my head. The darkness is very large. The darkness is very large. I am frightened. I hear Grandmother falling, dying. Runyararo ... (1996, 135-136).

She is suffering in silence, but both the mother and the grandmother are being helpful and supportive to her. They are tracking her skills to help her to overcome her panic. Her world has become constricted as she is constantly on guard that something might not happen again. Though she is a ten year old child, but she does not go out of her small house to play with her friends because she wants to live in a fixed territory, which she considers to be a safety zone, as she does not want to experience any other anxiety. These panic attacks are sudden and unexpected, it is seen that she is afraid to move her feet, to breath and to move her arms (1996, 133). Zhizha's monologue is a graphic representation of traumatic memory as Kopf says,

“ ... the narration unfolds from an inside perspective, however, leading us to Zhizha's mental language and her ways of perceiving, we as readers become witness to an eloquent muteness — a muteness that in fact is a long and passionate struggle for words, a struggle to name what happened and is still happening. It is a struggle to remember and to tell what made and makes her mute” (2005, 249-250).

In *Trauma & Recovery*, Herman elucidates three main stages of posttraumatic stress disorder: hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction, and the symptoms of all three manifest themselves in the character of Zhizha. Hyperarousal is described by poor sleep patterns, as well as a tendency to startle easily, both of which Zhizha determines when she wakes up in the middle of the night. The second state of post-traumatic stress disorder is intrusion, which manifests itself most interestingly in this text. Intrusion is defined as the repeated interruptions of a trauma, which Zhizha is certainly experiencing, as she says,

I know that an unspoken word has arrived and uncovered this silence. I know the word begins with me. I hold the word between my fingers. I hold tight and the word grows deep under my tongue. The word cannot be forgotten. It has grown large roots among us. Branches spout beneath the ground where memory is watered with death. This ground is stone but something grows on it” (161-162).

So Vera, in a very subtle way, reveals the intrusion of traumatic memory in the life of Zhizha: through the structure of the novel itself. The fragmentary narrative holds additional significance as it not only adds to the complexity of the work but the text becomes a site for investigating the theoretical junctions between trauma theory and black cultural studies. The above extract clearly reveals that the time has stopped at the moment of trauma. She is caught in a traumatic moment which “becomes encoded in an abnormal form of memory, which breaks spontaneously into consciousness, both as flashbacks during waking states and as traumatic nightmares during sleep” (Herman, 1997, 37). Zhizha reveals the symptoms of constriction which is the third state of post-traumatic stress disorder-- a state of surrender. It is that state when a person gives up to such an extent that “[t]he system of self-defense shuts down entirely. The helpless person escapes from her situation not by action in the real world but rather by altering her state of consciousness” (Herman, 1997, 42)

Anxiety is not playing a functional role in the life of Zhizha. Anxiety becomes positive when it lets a person stay alert and focused, motivating a person to take action. But in Zhizha's case it has become too overwhelming; not letting her come out of the cyclical thought-process in which she is focusing only on one bad incident of her life. So she has crossed the line of productive anxiety and has entered into the territory of anxiety disorder. It is visibly apparent as

she is hiding from herself, "I hide somewhere behind my eyes. I remember. I hide deep inside my head" (1996, 134). She feels guilty of what she is not questionable and responsible for. This has resulted in insomnia as she cannot sleep well, so feels extremely restless, and fatigued. Anxiety also results in digestive disorder, to which Zhizha repeatedly refers that the roots are growing in her stomach coming abnormally out of her mouth. She is constantly accompanied by her grandmother but she still feels lonely and isolated even in her own house which has "swallowed death" (1996, 170). Vera presents, through the eyes of Zhizha, the image of the house as a wild animal which instead of giving them protection has eaten up death like a fierce animal. With death she associates the word *decay* which "spreads the walls" (1996, 170). Though the grandmother is cleaning the house but the "decay clings to it and spreads a gloom that descends into air" (1996, 170).

Zhizha constantly feels that the danger is very near her and she has very little control over the changing situation because the murder which her mother commits is so sudden and reactive that she cannot really absorb the two shocking incidents of her life which have happened one after the other. The incident of murder is no less painful than the incident of rape because the former separated her from her mother as she is imprisoned and the latter separated her from her father. So it is a dual loss with which she is trying to cope. Though the mother has supported her by killing her husband who has assaulted her daughter, but what she needs badly is the physical presence of her mother, "I long for her never to depart" (1996, 218). The arrangement of words in small sentences of traumatic memory visibly reveals the fear of uncertainty and anxiety being experienced by Zhizha. About the experience of trauma, Murray says, "Vera conveys the experience of trauma as a kind of fragmentation of the body which, in turn, reflects the disintegration of the victim's world" (2010, 492)

The anxiety level of Zhizha is increasing no matter how much emotional support she is getting from grandmother who is unable to reduce Zhizha's plight. Zhizha repeatedly remembers her father's murder and the fact that he was slayed by her mother with a knife, as if the knife is moved sharply on the rock,

A knife moves sharply on rock. I hear a cry like falling water, then silence.  
I call in the night...Mother...Mother.  
A knife moves sharply, over rock.  
Mother ...  
I turn in my sleep. I listen. There is silence (1996, 141).

Runyararo considers Muroyiwa to be as lifeless and hard as a rock is. The cry of *falling water* is very loud; this shows that a loud and painful cry must have come from the dying man. Zhizha is not a direct observer of the scene. When all this happened, Zhizha must be sitting with her grandmother in the next room. She heard the sound of *thud* which made her feel as if she has fallen hard on the ground. This is because though the father has victimized her, but becoming fatherless is another shock which she has received. This has made her life full of roots which are "growing in knots, tightening" (1996, 141) making her existence complicated. So while reading the novel, the reader can feel the anxiety of Zhizha both through form and content of the work. Vera has beautifully balanced between beauty of language and pain of traumatic memory of Zhizha. So in this way, Vera transforms ambiguous and perplexing language of the narrative to flow smoothly carrying the process of telling, listening and witnessing the suppressed memories to flow again. Talking about Vera's poetic fiction Attree says, "It is not just what is contained in language but the way it is shaped and presented that can fundamentally alter the way we read a novel, not just with our eyes, but with our ears as well" (2002, 67).

In the traumatic memory, motif of knots is repeated at regular intervals which give the novel an appearance of a dirge. The writer makes the reader familiar with particular images—*stone, river, water, tongue, sea, roots* whose meanings keep transforming. The pain narrative of Zhizha “contains not only her discourse but also those of her mother and grandmother ... discordant though similar discourses intersect in Zhizha’s narrative” (Ortega-Guzmán, 2007, 110). The speaking of trauma is rooted in the spaces of narrative and slippages of language which cannot be ignored by the reader who is touched by the discourse of pain. Masculinity also supplements the aesthetic experience of the literary text. The masculinity of the language is combined with the motif of water. Water not only purifies the body but is a life-giving force too and symbolizes vitality. Water fused with music signifies purging, liberating and life-sustaining energy. Rhythm and rhyming words are consistently juxtaposed with silence and stillness, the disparity symbolizing the conflict between existence and expiry. Vera by associating women with water, music, and light manifests it clearly that if Zimbabwean women can struggle and die for independence in the battlefield than they can also enjoy freedom and integrity at emotional and intellectual level. Vera “dares openly to discuss pains that the victims of violence themselves may feel unable to articulate. And she does this from behind the shield of fiction ...” (Norridge, 2013, 33). Zimbabwean women can restructure the stereotypical roles of women of which they are forcibly associated with. Thus these interwoven narratives of Zimbabwean women, who have been silenced for a long time, search for language and speech appropriate to convey generational trauma. “Vera stresses the need to overcome the cruel past through the challenging work of self-generation and cultural re-building, in a process that involves self-articulation” (Amstrong, 2015, 248) by showing how the protagonist learnt English vowels *aeiou* in front of mirror from her mother and how the mother compels her to speak the word *duck* emphasizing on the letter *k* so that her tongue may touch the palate of her mouth helping her to regain her lost voice. Bessel A. van der Kolk intensively examines traumatic memory. He concludes that the interviews of traumatized people as well as brain imaging studies confirm that “traumatic memories come back as emotional and sensory states, with limited capacity for verbal representation. We have proposed that this failure to process information on a symbolic level, which is essential for proper categorization and integration with other experiences, is at the very core of the pathology of PTSD” (28).

As the novel opens Zhizha shares her feelings with the reader through a monologue. She is much concerned about the physical loss of her sense of speech. This impairment is adding to her emotional pain as she cannot express herself to her grandmother, the only relation around her to soothe her anguish. She is unable to understand the cause behind tongue becoming lifeless. She thinks that it is like a dead thing that has to be buried. The first time she takes the name of the father, she associates him to lightening which has been so horrifying that she, out of extreme fear, bit her own tongue while holding her breath inside her body. What has happened is quite unimaginable so she is surprised in thinking if it is really her father or someone else “fallen from the sky” (1996, 123). It is hard for Zhizha to reconcile with the fact that perpetrator is her father. After the incident, she has not directly come in contact with the perpetrator, who is her real father because he has been killed by his wife right after she comes to know about his vicious act. Zhizha has started hating him and several times uses the word *rock* for him. She does not know how so much “[s]alt spreads through [her] eyes” (1996, 123). She never forgets to use the pronoun *my* whenever she is talking about herself, but she has never used the personal pronoun *my* with father which signifies Muroyiwa is just a father not her father because he behaved so ferociously and wildly. She, with her closed eyes and withheld breath, cannot recognize his voice who is speaking to her in “unremembered voice” (1996, 123) that have destroyed her peace of mind to

such an extent that she sees the image of father as she says, "Father calls in my sleep. My voice grows still, and waits in a trembling quiet" (1996, 124). She is not only having hallucinations in which the sadistic behavior of father is violating her body but also finds him in her nightmares too. Right after thinking about his act of violation she turns towards his death which is very shocking as he "died in his sleep" (1996, 125). Though he cannot do anything in self-defense but he has pulled her also "down into the river" (1996, 125) before dying. Zhizha openly declares

Father

I do not want to see father, ever. (1996, 125)

These lines come in the end of the novel as if the speaker is making some kind of announcement, which has taken a form of firm decision as she has come to a conclusion that she does not wish or desire to see her father again. There is not only fear but hatred also for the father explicitly stated in this declaration. It is her independent decision; she has not taken any suggestion nor sought any advice either from mother or from grandmother. To translate traumatic memory into narrative memory, Kopf finds that Vera uses "short sentences, single words, empty spaces between single lines, lacunae. Paragraphs of prose narrative are interrupted and split by paragraphs that consist of torn sentences, short and sharp fragments, flashbacks" (250).

Zhizha wants to be seen by no one as she says, "I hide under my tongue" (1996, 142). She is hiding away not only from the memory of her father who has traumatized her but also from herself and from the rest of the community. She emphasizes that she has gone into such deep recesses of herself where no one has access, "I hide deep in the darkness inside of myself where no one has visited" (1996, 142). She wants to relate the painful experience but she cannot find suitable language so she says, "the something, the nothing" (1996, 142). Getting stuck with this idea, she realizes that she is familiar with this nothing and something as she says, "I know this nothing is something, someone" (1996, 142). Then she thinks of the door which was closed with familiar arms which were resisted by her—resulting in fresh wounds. The memories are so painful that she wants to run away from them; she feels as if she has fallen from a great height. (1996, 142-143). The phrase *I run* is repeatedly used by Zhizha to emphasize that she wants to escape, wants to go far away where she can forget all the harrowing memories of physical assault by her father. She is not only avoiding the sight of the dead father but she does not want even to think about him. No matter she is putting in effort to escape from painful thoughts but the "scar" (1996, 142) on her body reminds her of "the heavy things of life" (1996, 152-152).

#### 4. Conclusion

It has provided a new insight to the existing body of knowledge by highlighting how Vera negotiates voice of silent narratives amid dominant socio-political narratives. Zhizha is finding the environment rather suffocating suffused by political violence and private threats. Her abuse befell at the time when Zimbabwe has been fighting war of independence with Britain. The political promise was broken, as the independence was not followed by peace and liberty instead it was replaced by years of civil war, similarly the father of Zhizha also breaks a tacit promise of safeguarding and protecting the life and honour of the child. It has been observed that in Zimbabwe the political and economic crisis went along with sexual violence against women. So the political unrest brought noticeable increase of emotional trauma to the women of Zimbabwe. The novel ends on hopeful note that "1980 was a time to shorten distances of desire. Even those who had been restless and unconvinced found it necessary to open their windows an inch wider..." (1996, 234). Hence the writer wants to suggest that things are changing and will change with the

passage of time. Instead of shutting down the windows one can now open those windows wider though not fully open but just an inch which will let the fresh air enter inside the suffocating and degrading restrictions. She also hints at the idea that the economic decrepitude also not lets one enjoy one's life and makes one feel lonely. Hence it is political, private and economic comfort which together make life pleasurable and comfortable.

I have studied Black woman's fictional narrative in the light of trauma studies. Future researchers can analyze white woman's fictional narratives and can see the consequences of trauma in their race. The cultural differences which mark the mental make-up of a person will be completely different because the white writers have not experienced generational trauma of colonialism like Yvonne Vera or slavery like Toni Morrison. A comparative study can also be done between black writers and white writers who have taken up issue of pain being borne by women within four walls of the house.

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