



SENSING THE AFRICAN WOMAN'S PLIGHT THROUGH IMAGERY: A READING OF YVONNE VERA'S *WITHOUT A NAME*

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ABSTRACT

Without a Name is replete with images appealing to human senses. Acoustic, olfactory, tactile, and visual imageries are artistically deployed in this narrative so as to take the reader on a semiotic journey to inform them, through signs and symbols, on what it means to be a woman in Vera's fictive setting. This paper seeks therefore to analyze Vera's use of imagery to make the reader sense the African woman's plight in a male-dominated and oppressive environment where unpredictable forces challenge her protagonist's dream of self-fulfillment. More precisely, through the lens of the semiotic theory, this paper sheds light on the various images used by Vera to make the plight of her female protagonist more perceptible to her readership.

Keywords: Imagery, patriarchy, women's suffering, dehumanization, human senses

RESUME

Without a Name regorge d'images faisant appel aux sens humains. Des images acoustiques, olfactives, tactiles et visuelles sont artistiquement déployées dans ce récit afin d'emmener le lecteur dans un voyage sémiotique pour l'informer, à travers des signes et des symboles, sur ce que signifie être une femme dans le cadre fictif de Vera. Cet article cherche donc à analyser l'utilisation d'images chez Vera afin de faire ressentir au lecteur le sort de la femme africaine dans un environnement oppressif dominé par les hommes où des forces imprévisibles défient le rêve d'épanouissement de sa protagoniste. Plus précisément, à travers le prisme de la théorie sémiotique, cet article met en lumière les différentes images utilisées par Vera pour rendre la souffrance de sa protagoniste plus perceptible à son lectorat.

Mots clé : Images, patriarcat, souffrance des femmes, déshumanisation, sens humains

INTRODUCTION

"Humans tend to process stories in terms of pictures their mind creates, and if you don't provide those pictures, your reader will probably tune you out." (Starkey, 2017, p.99)

Without a Name is replete with images appealing to human senses. Acoustic, olfactory, tactile, and visual imageries are artistically deployed in this narrative so as to take the reader on a semiotic journey to inform them, through signs and symbols, on what it means to be a woman in Vera's fictive setting. Acoustic images have to do with the hearing and they are meant to help the reader scrutinize the socioeconomic conditions of women relying on their hearing. Olfactory images relate to the smell and they are deployed to enable the reader to smell the odor in the repugnant

environment in which the protagonist is cast. As for tactile images, they help the reader fathom all that Vera's protagonist, Mazvita, feels in her physical body in an unfavorable social environment. Besides, through visual images, Vera wants the reader to visualize things happening to Mazvita by providing detailed description about them.

This paper seeks therefore to analyze Vera's use of imagery to make the reader sense the African woman's plight in a male-dominated and oppressive environment where unpredictable forces challenge her protagonist's dream of self-fulfillment. More precisely, through the lens of the semiotic theory, this paper sheds light on the various images used by Vera to make the plight of her female protagonist more perceptible to her readership.

Semioticians believe that people see the world through signs. As Chandler (2001) explains, "Although things may exist independently of signs, we know them only through the mediation of signs. We see only what our sign systems allow us to see" (Harrison, 2003, p. 48). It is from this crucial role that signs play in human interactions that the paper firstly explores Vera's creative representation of the African woman's suffering in *Without a Name*. The paper then interprets Vera's images as a means to dehumanize her characters for not protecting women against patriarchal derogatory representation.

1. Conceptualizing the African Woman's Suffering through Imagery

The African woman's suffering at the hands of men is the main concern of Vera's narrative. Actually, it is my contention that for Vera, understanding the plight of the African woman, "is a matter of what we take in with our 'mind's eye'; what we smell with our 'mind's nose', or touch with our 'mind's skin' (Rozycki, 1993, p.76). In this vein, *Without a Name* opens with a very short but telling statement in that it is charged with metaphorical details: "Heat mauled the upturned faces" (Vera, 1995, p.1). First and foremost, this statement suggests to the reader that the characters that they are about to discover are trapped into a setting with animalistic features. For, "to maul" is a verb associated with animalistic features. It means to attack and badly injure. This visual imagery denotes not only that Vera's characters grow in a hostile environment, but also that they are degraded and debased to the level of animals. Right from this opening observation by the narrator, the reader can picture in their mind the precarity of Vera's characters' setting. This environment eventually impedes Vera's protagonist from becoming a fulfilled woman. Moreover, there is a tactile imagery evoked by that opening sentence. Here, the heat can be felt by the reader's skin and it symbolizes suffering. Life in Vera's setting is made uncomfortable by the presence of the heat. The authoress has conferred upon it a devastating power as it causes injuries to her characters who are denied the strength to alter the course of things that come their way. Furthermore, the narrator provides

a crucial detail about the 'faces': they are upturned, deformed and distorted, certainly by socio-economic and psychological factors. The reader can see (visual image) the deformation on the faces and can feel (tactile image) the heat causing such effects. The authoress' craft to pinpoint the atrocity of Mazvita's social conditions is well painted through the aforementioned imagery. By so doing, Vera creates a plot through which she shows how psychological suffering affects the physical body.

The narrative voice stresses that: "[Mazvita] has suffered so much that her skin threatened to fall pitilessly to the ground. It hung from below to her neck, from her arms, from her whole silent body. The skin pulled away in the intense dry heat" (Vera, 1995, p.4). Such imagery is meant to inform the reader, in a tangible manner, about the protagonist's pain. Even though much of Mazvita's pain is psychological, Vera has made it tangible and visible through these imageries so as to make the reader move with compassion and sympathy toward this fictive vulnerable woman. The above passage reveals how Mazvita's psyche relates to her physical body. Psychic suffering affects the body and causes it to lose its attractiveness.

Besides, Vera's images are also acoustic. To highlight the hostility of the environment in which Mazvita dwells and struggles, the writer creates a plot where she makes it possible for the reader to perceive the sound the heat produces: "Heat thundered beneath her feet" (Vera, 1995, p.1). Indeed, heat in actual life does not produce any sound. However, Vera has used this exaggerated acoustic image to complicate the suffering of the traumatized woman, Mazvita, who seeks to reconstruct herself after being raped by a guerrilla soldier (Vera, 1995, p.30). One thing also worth mentioning here is that the heat's thunder-sound is heard not from the sky but beneath the earth. This is meant to convey the dichotomy and the paradox in the setting in which Mazvita has to perpetually struggle. This proves that Mazvita develops in a world where things are upside down; where for instance people like the guerilla soldiers who are supposed to protect their citizens, victimize them and rape them instead. Acoustic, visual and tactile images are combined to paint the soldier's act as follows: "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. I felt a gun, though I did not see it" (Vera, 1995, p.23-24). Vera through these details, wants the reader to see the tumbling into the grass; to hear the screaming of the vulnerable lady and feel the gun that Mazvita feels in her body. Actually, in the words of Sarkey (2017, p.99), these images force the reader to slow down to see, hear, touch and smell the world of Vera's protagonist.

Furthermore, the repugnance of the protagonist's setting and the trauma she has got from the rape compel her to find means to reconstruct herself. Therefore, she decides to move to the city of Harari. However, this eventually proveS a failure. The bus she takes to travel to Harari is placed in a heap of troubles. Buses are manufactured to move on wheels. Nevertheless, Vera decides to personify the bus that takes Mazvita.

This is the reason why this bus has been portrayed as “sitting in a rippling lake of rising heat and dust” (Vera, 1995, p.1). This visual image of the bus sitting in a lake, and the tactile image of the rising heat insinuate the fact that Mazvita’s attempt to escape the status quo will be fruitless. Though the bus moves, it is said to be in a static position, because it is far from leading Mazvita to a setting void of suffering. The rising dust, a visual imagery, prevents Mazvita from seeing. This suggests that the horizon is blurred for the protagonist; signaling therefore the absence of any alternative solution to get out of her plight.

Moreover, colors represent another important visual image Vera uses to conceptualize suffering. Colors are known to possess emotional and psychological properties (Madden et al. 2000, p.90). Colors in Vera’s narrative are associated with meaning. For instance, black in most African societies may denote negativity, obscurity, bereavement, and lack of joy. Black is a visual sign of sorrow inasmuch as people wear it during funerals. It is, therefore, crucial to note that the black color is used to portray the place where Mazvita cooks, “the place is black with smoke” (Vera, 1995, p.37) The image reveals the repugnance of the cooking place. Owing to the lack of financial means the protagonist cannot use adequate cooking gadgets that will not stain or pollute the place. Through this representation, the writer subtly points out that Vera’s protagonist cannot afford a good cooking stove because of her socioeconomic destitution.

Red is another color that the skillful reader cannot overlook in *Without a Name*. Red is a color that easily attracts people’s attention. In some cultures, red stands for love. But in some African cultures and traditions, red denotes danger and is often associated with death. Along with black, red is a visual imagery that can convey sorrow. The following quotation: “The bus was fierce red” (Vera, 1995, p.1) must not be taken for granted. It is my contention that it is meant to show the jeopardy in which the passengers in the bus are. The modifier “fierce” is meant to draw the reader’s attention to this jeopardy. This visual image implies that all the characters in the bus are not safe. Such insecurity might be related to the characters’ economic destitution which prevents them from traveling in a safe condition. This shows that Vera’s characters’ not only the females, are trapped in an environment in which economic forces endanger their lives.

Vera sheds more light on female suffering when she portrays motherhood as a heavy load. She substantiates this in the following excerpt: “It was heavy to be a mother” (Vera 40). The baby that comes unexpectedly is a hindrance to her journey to success. “[The baby] pulled her back from her design to be free” (Vera, 1995, p.64). “Pulling back” visually displays how Mazvita fruitlessly struggles hard to move forward. The presence of Mazvita’s child, here, is represented as a force dragging Mazvita behind. In the face of such a situation, Mazvita takes a decision that transgresses the norms of

traditional moral codes. Socioeconomic conditions force her to kill the innocent child whom the authoress represents as a force impending Mazvita's self-fulfillment.

Furthermore, Vera is to be praised for her ability to combine several images in a single sentence in order to have the reader sympathize with the African woman. Vera's uses of images corroborate Burroway's statement according to which a writer must show, not tell. What this means is that "it is crucial to address the senses". For her, vivid writings should contain concrete and significant details (Burroway, 2014, p.10). This is what Vera seeks to do. Mazvita's suffering is more perceptible to the reader when the author brings together in the following excerpt visual and tactile imageries: "[Mazvita] could no longer move her head forward because the pain threatened to collapse her whole body, to sink her into the ground, to bury her" (Vera, 1995, p.10). The sensible reader may sense the fight between the leading character and the forces that seem to overpower Mazvita. Here, the reader can picture Mazvita completely defeated, on the verge of being annihilated. At the same time, the reader can feel in their body the pain of Vera's protagonist.

If suffering is easily conceptualized through visual, tactile and acoustic imageries, olfactory imagery is used as well to inform the reader about Mazvita's suffering. Breath is so vital to life. There is no life without breath. Through olfactory imagery, the author represents suffering in the sense that the air which is a source of life has been replaced by poverty and loneliness: "[Mazvita] breathed the poverty and the loneliness" (Vera, 1995, p.18). Mazvita incarnates poverty and loneliness. Since olfactory imagery basically informs about the smell, Vera deploys it to make room for the reader to use their sense to figure out how Mazvita abhors places her fate takes her to. For instance, she feels uncomfortable with the smell of tobacco at her working place: "At the end of the day Mazvita felt weak, felt faint and frantic from the tobacco smell which spreads towards her, like a decay" (Vera, 1995, p.22). Likewise, she expresses the same discomfort while in Joel's room: "Paraffin, life in Harari, life with Joel. She thought, she breathed, she slept. The paraffin was inescapable" What is more is that she "swallowed the harsh paraffin smell" (Vera, 1995, p.72-73). This food-like imagery depicts the extent to which Mazvita hates Joel's room.

The more Mazvita's pain grows, the more elusive her dream of freedom becomes. Talking about Harari, the city the protagonist Mazvita has dreamt of getting 'freedom', Vera discloses its predicaments in a form of irony. Visual and acoustic imageries are deployed to highlight the hidden dangers the city harbors. For instance, the narrative voice tells the reader that the freedom Mazvita claims is just an empty shell. The following excerpt shows this: "Freedom spoke from behind a mask" (Vera, 1995, p.26). A mask is used to disguise one's face. So, freedom speaking from behind a mask has to do with the fact that freedom cannot be appraised in its real way. It deceives people, and when one is not beforehand prepared to stand city

challenges, one can easily collapse. The authoress resorts to visual imagery to show that Mazvita is denied real freedom in Harari just as a mask is used to deny a third party someone's real face.

Another important point worth mentioning about how Vera constructs Mazvita's plight is when Vera compares Harari with a hurricane. In her comparison about Harari, she writes: "A new life began, grew around you, embraced you like a hurricane." (Vera, 1995, p. 45). The four forms of imagery apply to the hurricane because I assume that when a hurricane blows, the eyes can see things that it blows away, the nose can smell dust it carries, the ears can hear its whiz and the body can feel it. Hurricane is a very powerful and devastating wind that destroys everything on its way. Thus, through the use of images, the writer has been able to allow the reader to have a picture of Mazvita's plight as she struggles against all odds to reconstruct herself after horrible victimizations first at the hands of a guerilla soldier who raped her and then at the hand of Joel who abuses her.

2. Dehumanizing the Human through Imagery

Vera does not only use images to conceptualize suffering but also to dehumanize her characters, especially the male ones, to criticize the inhumanity of a society which treats females less than a human. David Smith (2016, p.1) proposes that we dehumanize others by attributing the essence of a less-than-human creature to them. For instance, in the opening sentence, Vera dehumanizes her characters as she denies them full human attributes. She denies them full human personality as they are perceived by her just as "faces". As we read, "Heat mauled the upturned faces" (Vera, 1995, p.1). The writer wants these characters to be perceived that way not just because they are dehumanized by things happening to and around them but most importantly because they refuse to protect women as it happens in the case of Mazvita who is victimized by two different men both in rural and urban settings. The first man, a guerilla soldier, rapes her in her village and the second one Joel, turns her into a means to an end in the city by making her his housewife. Nevertheless, she is sent away unexpectedly because a pregnancy has been discovered six months after her arrival into his house.

The dehumanization of Vera's characters becomes more perceptible when she designates them using parts of their body or when she refers to them as lifeless things or animals. In my opinion, this is a strategy to introduce the reader to the psychological imbalance of Vera's protagonist. By so doing, the protagonist appears to the reader as someone who has lost the sense of social cohesion and the ability to relate to people as a fellow human being. Mazvita has been made to see most male characters not as full human beings since the day she has been raped. They are perceived by her as inanimate things or objects. For instance, the conductor in the bus taking Mazvita to the city is portrayed not as a human being but as a shape: "The

shape that was the conductor" (Vera, 1995, p.2). Elsewhere, another conductor is perceived by the narrator as "an excited locust" (Vera, 1995, p.54). About Joel the gentleman who turns Mazvita to a means to an end we read, "this man was like a machine" (Vera, 1995, p. 50). The man is thereby devoid of life and humanity. This is reinforced by the way he proposed to Mazvita. The narrator stresses that "there was no discussion, no agreement, no proposal. They just met and stayed together." (Vera, 1995, p.50)

While in Harari the capital city of the fictive Zimbabwe, the citizens are perceived by the narrator not as full human but as "faces": "Mazvita walked quickly through the impassive faces" (Vera, 1995, p.10). Later on we read, "A violent wind carried Mazvita forward" (Vera, 1995, p.35). Mazvita is debased through this visual and tactile imagery to the level of leaves or commodities that can be carried away by wind. This implicitly shows the fact that Mazvita's psychological wound is a form of dehumanization. By dehumanizing her characters, the authoress levels a critique against those who victimize her protagonist and prevent her from socializing with people. Besides, this portrayal highlights the impact of the setting on Vera's protagonist, the socioeconomic realities in the city where she does not have anywhere to stay, added to the past trauma of rape have not allowed her to be in the mood to well see. Elsewhere, the dehumanization is more accented as the people walking the street are perceived as ghosts "[the] people walked the street ... like ghosts" (Vera, 1995, p.27). This is a metaphor for death associated with Vera's setting. It is vera's skillful way of condemning any society who victimizes women.

Interestingly enough, while Vera denies her characters human attributes and life, she endows inanimate beings with them. As we read: "Small stones looked out from the mud" (Vera, 1995, p.1). Actually, these stones stand for Vera's characters in the mud of socioeconomic status quo. These stones are made to share the attributes of humans to imply that Vera's characters are debased and degraded to the level of these stones. In other words, the metaphor implies that it takes a stony heart to refuse to treat women as humans. Furthermore, the striking point about the dehumanization of Vera's characters is portrayed in vivid acoustic imagery through Mazvita's refusal to name her child.

The importance of names is obvious in every culture. However, Mazvita goes against this social code by refusing to name the child she gives birth to in Harari, a city where she expects to find meaning to her life. Her refusal to name the baby is not just out of hatred but is to comply with the authoress' agenda of dehumanization. As we read, "[Mazvita] had no name for the baby. (...) A name is for calling a child into the world, for acceptance, for grace. A name binds a child to her mother. A name is for (...) a promise. She had no promise to offer this child" (Vera, 1995, p.75). Through this monologue, Mazvita, shows her disaffection **with** her baby. She is not ready to be bound to the newborn because she has been dehumanized herself. To complicate

her situation, and to provoke the reader's sympathy for her, the authoress has had her direct the affection she should have given her baby to mushrooms: "The mushrooms stood meek beneath the decaying log that was partly buried in the ground, and she had bent forward and touched them fearfully, touching their floating beauty" (Vera, 1995, p.5). This passage paints the affection Mazvita should demonstrate toward the people in her community. Due to her psychological wound, the affection is rather directed to things. She wholly sees mushrooms but denies human beings their full appearance as humans. Once again Mazvita shows affection to the mushroom as humans. The narrator remarks that "There was nothing like pulling that mushroom. It accepted her gently hand" (Vera, 1995, p.6). It curious to see that Mazvita expresses affection to mushroom because she finds acceptance with them. This is what she does not find in Joel who sends her away. By making Mazvita find "gently hand" acceptance with mushroom rather than with humans, the authoress skillful makes mushrooms better than the humans who are not ready to offer help to her protagonist. Indeed, she has been successful in her project of dehumanizing them for that purpose.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper has been to analyze Yvonne Vera's use of imagery to conceptualize women's suffering and to dehumanize her characters. I have come out with the fact that the authoress has been able to make her reader sense the African woman's plight in her fictive male-dominated and oppressive environment. The paper has highlighted the various images the authoress has created to allow the reader to see, to hear, to smell and to touch the world of Mazvita who has been abused by men. The reader can picture in their mind the suffering of a traumatized woman who seeks by all means, but to no avail, to reconstruct herself, due to her inability to alter the course of things happening in her environment. By so doing, the writer has complied with the vision of semioticians who believe in signs and symbols to interpret their world.

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