

## **HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSE: A NARRATIVE REPRESENTATION OF TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES IN YVONNE VERA'S *UNDER THE TONGUE***

**Ifeoma Ezinne Odinye**

Department of Language and Literature  
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria

[ifeomaodinye@gmail.com](mailto:ifeomaodinye@gmail.com)

[ie.odinye@unizik.edu.ng](mailto:ie.odinye@unizik.edu.ng)

### **Abstract**

*The rights of the girl child to her body and freedom of choice raises a hot debate in the discourse of human rights. Patriarchy and male jingoistic attitude towards the female gender seem to have encouraged the violation of the girl child's rights. Despite several sexual orientations and gender identity rights awareness created in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the girl child's rights are constantly violated in many cultural milieux. Hence, this paper examines rape as a form of human rights violation which could lead to trauma. This research further explores how Vera's *Under the Tongue* imitates trauma through fragmentation, ellipses, repetition and massive construction of mental images to depict experiences. This paper also adopts psychoanalysis and feminist strategy of female bonding as a therapeutic measure for translating the traumatic memory of the girl child into narrative memory.*

**Keywords: Human Rights, Trauma, Psychoanalysis, Female Bonding**

### **Introduction**

In most African societies, rape is one of the most common forms of violence against the girl child. This violates article 1 and 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) which stipulates that all human beings irrespective of colour, origin, sex and background have equal rights and should be treated with dignity. Since rape violates human rights through forceful claim of the body, cruelty or other inhuman treatment; then, it should be considered as an act of violence which is undignified and destructive to the growth of the girl-child. Rape is a crime of control and violence which causes "trauma or physical and psychological damage to the victim" (Pederson 147; Kupferman, 16). P. Ebony sees it as an "act of sexual aggression" against the victim (16). United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes defines rape as "sexual penetration or intercourse without valid consent of the victim" (UN, 15). World Health Organization further defines rape as any physically forced or coerced penetration, the vulva or

anus, using penis or other body parts or an object” (qtd in Kalbfleisch, *Gender Power...* 50). One thing is clear, rape is a violation of human right because it is done forcefully without consent and consideration of human dignity. This is a serious issue since it encourages domination and oppressive control which could result to physical injuries, psychological or mental problems.

### **Childhood Sexual Abuse and the Narrative Representation of Traumatic Experiences in Yvonne Vera’s *Under the Tongue***

In *Under the Tongue* (1996), the traumatic sexual abuse of the girl character, Zhizha forms the focus of this discussion. In the novel, Vera deals with a taboo theme of incestuous rape which is rarely discussed publicly by families, friends and other social groups in Zimbabwe. Zhizha, the protagonist of *Under the Tongue* is a 10-year old child whose childhood has been repressed by her father’s action. Eagleton in exploring Freud’s psychoanalysis observes that “every human being has to undergo this repression of what Freud named the ‘pleasure principle’ by the ‘reality principle’, but for some of us, and arguably for the whole societies, the repression may become excessive and make us ill” (131). This clearly explains the condition of Zhizha in Vera’s novel.

Martina Kopf stresses a major concern of childhood sexual abuse which suppresses expression and obviously results to “soul death” (“Writing Sexual Violence...” 245). According to Kopf,

We do not always bear this failure of language in mind. Usually we associate such abuse only with its sexual dimension, perceiving only the physical, visible part of the drama. The part that is more difficult to discern – particularly owing to the extreme secrecy that usually accompanies family violence – is the violent assault on a child’s mental and spiritual growth in the world. This assault is particularly serious, as it attacks a symbolic order still under construction, a still flexible and fluid and as such specifically vulnerable system of values and meanings. (“Writing Sexual Violence...” 245)

The underlying message of the above quotation is that the girl child is burdened with her violent experience which forces her to unconsciously keep the act enclosed in her memory. Invariably, she is forced into the state of being complicit with the one who commits the crime of rape. This makes it impossible for her to narrate her violent experience. In essence, deep pain and confusion with uncomfortable feeling due to recognition or consciousness of shame, dishonor or indecent conduct overwhelm the child and leave her traumatized and silenced.

This, as observed by Kopf makes the trauma victims “not to have access to language as an adequate means to transmit what has been done to them, they will experience a loss of confidence in language itself as an integrating system of signs and signification. This loss of confidence occurs at a stage where the children are still growing into the system of language and signification” (246).

In presenting the painful forced narrative of a distressed girl-child who is raped by her biological father, Vera attempts to deal with the issues of trauma, identity and displacement in childhood. According to Judith Herman, ‘psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless’ (33). In *Under the Tongue*, Zhizha is powerless because, she is too young to defend herself during the rape. This powerlessness and her traumatic sexual experience cause a mental disorder marked by the distortion of Zhizha’s real identity. The term, “identity” is used in this study largely to refer to the way the girl character sees herself after her traumatic sexual encounter with her father. Zhizha’s repressed identity is thus influenced by the context, perspective and consciousness of her traumatic sexual childhood experience. Vera’s girl protagonist’s is unable to narrate her story of rape as a result of trauma. According to Kopf,

Trauma resists narrative representation. At the same time, it urges its own narration. In the form of traumatic memory, such narration is characterized by repetition: the impulse to re-live an act again and again. Traumatic memory adheres to the unconscious and the body from where it unfolds its catalogue of constrictive and intrusive symptoms, grouped under the medical diagnosis Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: flashbacks, re-enactments, amnesia, dissociation, displacement, numbing, etc. (246)

Zhizha’s inability to communicate her experiences suggests – repression. Repression “leads to a state of mind where an individual can no longer revive his or her pushed down memory” (Schmid, 3). Zhizha’s inability to recall her violent experiences is not an active repression where she consciously pushes her undesirable memory away. Her mental state is caused by dissociation which occurs just as the trauma is occurring, and not after undergoing the traumatic experience. According to A.M Ludwig, “dissociation represents a process whereby certain mental functions which are ordinarily integrated with other functions presumably operate in a more compartmentalized or automatic way usually outside the sphere of conscious awareness or memory recall” ( 93). Vera tells a gory tale, but the subtlety of her artistic vision is penetrating to clearly show that a deliberate repression of experiences by the girl protagonist is not possible.

Yvonne Vera's *Under the Tongue* (1996) is a good example of trauma novel. In this analysis, the researcher represents how trauma and pathological behaviour reflect in the behaviour and expression of the girl-child (Zhizha). *Under the Tongue* has many concepts of Freudian and Caruth's trauma theory ingrained in the character and experiences of the protagonist of the novel. Hence, this study displays Vera's inability to clearly narrate the protagonist's past traumatic experience using a linear plot structure as a result of her emotional state. This explains why Zhizha's story is narrated in fragments and alternating chapters. Hence, J. Hemmings maintains that "each fragment contains a message, a story, but resists a tidy or forced conclusion" (237).

Vera's *Under the Tongue* deals with the subject of incest and the continuous quest or struggle of the girl-child (Zhizha) to wriggle out of her traumatic state. In the novel, trauma is indefinitely continuous and insistently repetitive. This trauma is also depicted in the characters of the novel, Zhizha's mother and her grandmother who not only feel Zhizha's pain, but are reminded of their past traumatic experiences. In essence, these three female characters represent traumatized individuals in Zimbabwean society – Zhizha's grandmother who is abused by her husband, Zhizha's mother, who is exploited by her husband, and Zhizha, who is raped by her biological father. The quotation: "Grandmother protects me with her weeping, tells me of the many places, the many sorrows, the many wounds women endure" (*Under the Tongue*, 122) is a clear indication that the oppression of the female gender has been a major problem in Zimbabwe. Shamaila Dodhy observes that "in Zimbabwe, the political and economic crisis went along with sexual violence against girls and women. Through this aesthetic endeavour, Vera has protested against in-house abuse presented against the backdrop of fierce anti-colonial struggle" (234). In fact, Zhizha expresses fear concerning the issue of sexual abuse which has silenced the female gender. Zhizha confesses: "I am afraid to listen to Grandmother, to discover her places of silence. I know there is a wide lake in her memory, a lake in which ripples grow to the edges of the sky, a lake in which all our grief is hidden. Her word rests at the bottom of silent lakes but she will find the word and give it to me" (*Under the Tongue*, 70).

Obviously, Zhizha is psychologically and emotionally affected by her forced sexual experience. This indeed causes a mental disorder which affects her memory and her perception of things in the real world. Felman and Laub explain that "although real traumatic event takes place outside the parameters of normal

reality, such as causality, sequence, place and time; this trauma is thus an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after" ( 69). The above explanation clearly defines Vera's novel which is timeless and cyclic in structure – it has no beginning, no ending. Zhizha's dispersed thoughts keep echoing till the end of the novel. The explanation on traumatic event gives a clearer view to understanding Zhizha's mental condition in which she exhibits the symptoms of individuals who have experienced trauma. The protagonist is psychologically detached from her environment and speaks as one who has a mental disorder marked by anxiety or fear: 'I hear crushing in my stomach. Water pulling at my dream, pulling at rock, pulling at my sleep. I awaken. An embrace, once more, of lightening, entering my sleep' (*Under the Tongue*, 123). The above quotation is Zhizha's attempt to narrate her story of rape.

In the beginning of the novel, the act of sexual abuse is not explicitly depicted in a plain language. It is metaphorically represented through the voice of Zhizha's father which constantly haunts her conscience and sleep; thus swallowing her power of expression. In the story, Zhizha presents her body as a physical environment, precisely, a landscape or territory that has been ravaged by a terrorist – "my voice meets rock, meets water, grows silent and dead" (*Under the Tongue*, 124). In fact, Zhizha confesses that "the moon is wounded by the darkness. The shadow of the moon has turned bright with the serenity of death" (*Under the Tongue*, 124). Zhizha employs the metaphors of water, moon, sky and rock to communicate the extent her body has been polluted and damaged. This properly conveys the message that her tongue ceases to function due to anxiety and fear. Zhizha confesses: "I touch my tongue. It is heavy like stone.... A tongue which no longer lives, no longer weeps. It is buried beneath rock. My tongue is a river. I touch my tongue in search of the places of my growing. My tongue is heavy with sleep. I know a stone is buried in my mouth, carried under my tongue. My voice has forgotten me" (*Under the Tongue* 1).

From the beginning of the novel, Vera employs the images of the tongue being frozen, immobile and utterly estranged part of Zhizha's body. From another perspective, it can be said that the metaphor employed in the above quotation virtually means that Zhizha's voice has been muted. The silencing that Zhizha experiences automatically allows memories and voices to permeate her enclosed mind. Her thoughts wander endlessly without direction or chronology; hence projecting a shift in movement or displacement representing a floating body displaced by the river – "the sky meets the river moving beneath stone. The river rises. Father pulls me down into the river" (*Under the Tongue* 125). In the end of

Zhizha's narrative, the readers learn that her secluded territory or landscape has been forcefully opened by her father while she is asleep – "he pulls at my dream and I sink beneath the pounding which falls through my eyes. It is night. Roots grow out of my stomach out of my mouth out of me." (*Under the Tongue* 125-126).

Though Zhizha's body, mind and spirit have been split open by violence; she is however willing to allow her grandmother's voice and consoling words to aid her narrative. Kopf observes that:

Grandmother's voice, which Zhizha recalls and evokes inside her, does not enter or penetrate her. It "remembers" her, "embraces" her, "follows" her. These terms suggest that this other voice respects and tries to rebuild the boundaries of Zhizha's self. The excessive appearance of voices makes us acknowledge right from the beginning that, whatever happened, it is significant on the level of language. (249)

Significantly, Vera's novel performs how trauma works by expressly exposing the failure to tell. In line with the above view, Kacandes observes that:

Literary texts can be about trauma, in the sense that they can depict perpetrations of violence against characters who are traumatized by the violence and then successfully or unsuccessfully witness their trauma. But texts can also 'perform' trauma, in the sense that they can 'fail' to tell the story, by eliding, repeating, and fragmenting components of the story. ("Narrative Witnessing as Memory Work," 56)

Zhizha as a traumatized girl and victim of family violence is passive and helpless. Her Grandmother perceives her as someone who is totally overwhelmed by her experience; but the fact remains that she is submerged in a complex internal struggle. This is seen in her mental language which constantly utters her muteness – "I bite hard my tongue....My voice is sinking down into my stomach. My voice is crumbling and falling apart. My voice burns beneath my chest" (*Under the Tongue* 123). The reader of *Under the Tongue* is a witness to the persuasive muteness that is marked by struggle to articulate words, a struggle to clearly narrate her experience in clear coherent language. Indeed, this muteness signifies an internal strife to recollect her experience and tell her story of rape.

Zhizha's narration does not create a space for the readers to distinguish between reality and her imagination since she encounters the same hallucinatory images

day and night. This creates confusion for the readers who make efforts to understand Zhizha's narration which is replete with obstacles - fragmented thoughts and words. This fragmentation keeps the readers floating on the narration as they try to move through Zhizha's mind, body and mental landscape. This most times brings difficulty in interpreting the images or rhythms found in her narration. Indeed, Vera's story acknowledges the persistence of silenced voices which clearly depict how trauma works – "I run, my mouth covered in silence (*Under the Tongue*, 142). Mother is turning into a single horrid sound, her voice beaten and lost, her shouts cowering in the midst of her dying. Her voice is crushed, turns into dust, rises in a piercing empty wail" (*Under the Tongue* 150).

*Under the Tongue* is perceived as an imitation of trauma due to the way it employs repetition and fragmentation in narrating the story. Zhizha, the only child of Runyararo and Muroyinwa, is presented as a child of war who faces series of sexual abuse at home, a struggle that leaves her in a psychological state where she has lost the ability to speak. In a painful and evocative manner, Zhizha presents the account of her rape in a non-chronological sequence thus presenting a fragmented flow of events. Zhizha speaks:

I hear breathing, violent, breathing, on rock. A rigid silence.  
Father ... between my legs.  
Wet between my legs, Blood-wet wetness. Not flowing wet. Slippery,  
Not so loud.  
He put mucus here, and blood ...  
Quiet.  
He put mucus between my legs ...  
Quiet.  
Am I going to die?  
Quiet.  
He broke my stomach ...  
He put blood between my legs. (*Under the Tongue*, 228)

Though Zhizha's reconstruction of her rape is not clearly named as 'rape or sexual abuse' in the novel; the use of constructed imagery and symbols aid in interpreting her experience. One thing is clear, Zhizha's narrative does not develop into a progressing story. It merely floats on the spot revolving around her constructed mental images; thus repeating her mental images in a circular structure without ending.

In narrating her story, Zhizha presents her traumatic past experiences in fragments. The fragmented thoughts of Zhizha evidently depict Vera's attempt to transform traumatic memory into a narrative memory. This imitation of trauma reflects Vera's creative skills in depicting the scene of rape with figurative aptness. The effect of the above narration is able to create mental images of rape or sexual abuse in the mind of the readers. To further the discussion on traumatic memories, Shamalia Dodhy and Hardev Kaur observe that "these traumatic memories refuse to become a part of the narrative memory, but become frozen in time and are perpetually re-experienced in painful, disassociated traumatic present" (82). Thus signaling the act of dissociation. Pierre Janet observes that "dissociation reflects a horizontal layered model of the mind. When a subject does not remember a trauma, its 'memory' is contained in an alternate system of consciousness, which may be subconscious or dominate conscious" (qtd in Schmid, 3).

Zhizha is aware of the dissociation which obstructs her reconstruction of past experiences through narrative memory. She confesses: "I wait beneath a fervent sky. The shadow of the moon is wounded by the darkness. I search for the moon which has left the sky. Memory has left the sky. It is night" (*Under the Tongue*, 124). Indeed, all good memories about Zhizha's childhood have disappeared from her thoughts that she is now surrounded with the darkness of the night (traumatic experience). Zhizha laments:

My eyelids collapse, heavy with sleep. I hear voices filled with tears. Darkness trembles with the memory of the moon. It is night. Grandmother cries for our origin. We met in water, she cries. Our dreams are birth and death. In the gathering darkness Grandmother's voice rises piercing into the night, is swallowed by the darkness, returns in one tremulous echo, rises again surging forward, tumbling in a cascade bright with moon seeking the forgotten, the departed, who wait to be remembered. (*Under the Tongue*, 124)

The pessimism of the novel is deepened in the above quotation. Then, the despair of the novel is further pin-pointed because the protagonist confesses her thoughts and feelings without fully recollecting her traumatic experiences. Zhizha is conscious of the fact that she is traumatized, but one thing is clear - she is unable to integrate her familiar experiences into existing meaningful narration because of her mental state. In view of the foregoing, Schmid explains that an "individual may be entirely unable to integrate a specific terrifying experience

which causes the memory to be stored differently, and therefore might not be available for the act of remembering” (1).

To capture traumatic experiences using the narrative memory, Zhizha substitutes her own created images (moon, darkness, skies, night, and voices) with her real experiences. In essence, Zhizha forms new memories to replace her physical (true) experiences, which are too sorrowful to recollect. Schmid further explains that:

With the help of conditioning and repeating to remember the same false memories over and over again the trauma survivor believes his new memories and integrates them into meaning scheme as his legitimate past. The real fragments of the traumatic event are pushed to the bottom of the memory system where they can only be remembered through the stimulation of a question or certain situation. (2)

Significantly, the emotional involvement of Grandmother in the story aids the trauma survivor in recollecting her distorted memory through constant repetition. As Zhizha recollects in bits, Grandmother urges her to voice her sorrow and free her mind. Zhizha’s narration has allowed her to tell her own story of pain which she has concealed for a long time. Significantly, this narration is creatively manipulated to motivate remembrance in order to depict her mother’s hurt and pain as part of life learning process.

Mother calls to me in a voice just like mine, she grows from inside of me...( *Under the Tongue*, 202). I change into me, and I say a e i o u. I remember all my letters. I tell my mother and she repeats after me and I laugh then I repeat after mother who repeats after me and I after her ... I have turned into mother, and she laughs, because she has become me. The letters flow from me to mother. My mother’s voice is resonant and searching. She says we live with our voices rich with remembrance. We live with words. (*Under the Tongue*, 203)

The above quotation suggests that Zhizha and her mother have similar hidden stories to tell by writing, pronouncing, spelling and repeating letters in order to communicate their pain to people. Both Zhizha and her mother have been silenced for a long which gives them the joy of articulating their thoughts together. Therefore, in this state of voicelessness, ‘it becomes challenging to express the psychological trauma which by its nature is “unspeakable” narrative

of the victim' (Dodhy and Kaur 74). Based on the foregoing view, Anne Whitehead suggests that "the more experimental forms emerging out of postmodernist and postcolonial fiction offer the contemporary novelist a promising vehicle for communicating the unreality of trauma, while still remaining faithful to the facts of history" (87).

*Under the Tongue* as a trauma fiction is a new genre which stems out of the 'theoretical movements of postmodernism and postcolonialism - together with a postwar legacy or consciousness' (Whitehead, 81). This consciousness in fiction is displayed in forms such as "intertextuality, repetition and a dispersed or fragmented narrative voice" (Whitehead, 84). Vera in presenting the fragmented thoughts of her protagonist obviously wants her voice to be heard, her sorrows to be seen and her pains to be felt by the readers. Therefore by documenting her repetitive and patterned thoughts, the readers get to understand her mental state.

The enormity of pain Zhizha suffers is psychologically damaging. This inner sorrow is associated with symbolic metaphoric images like tree, rain, clouds, rock, sky and lightening. The pain is burdensome for Zhizha that she relies heavily on her grandmother's feelings and thoughts:

Grandmother says how can we bury the pain which has visited us? It is deep and hidden. This is a tree whose seed has come from unknown lands. There is no water to banish it. This pain cannot be carried in the mouth. There is no mouth. It follows one like a shadow, this pain. It is hewn from rock and larger than memory. How can we carry it on our shoulders? It is swollen like clouds of rain. It is greater than all our yesterdays. It is lightening from a burnt sky. (*Under the Tongue*, 160)

The images Zhizha employs in her fragmented narrative are indeed ambiguous, but paint mental pictures which are experienced by the reader to understand the enormity of her pain. Zhizha's images are indeed made of solid, liquid and indestructible forms which are linked to nature. The totality of these physical elements of nature which make up her description shows that the pain she feels cannot be easily forgotten. The rhetorical question in the above quotation, 'how can we carry it on our shoulders?' is important in interpreting Zhizha's condition in order to represent the plight of the female gender in Zimbabwe. The use of the possessive plural pronoun "our" denotes that girls and women are oppressed in one way or the other in Zimbabwe. A striking comparison is made between

female oppression and male freedom in the novel – men are given the freedom to explore the society by engaging in guerilla war-fare as seen in the depiction of characters like Muroyiwa (Zhizha's father) and Tonderayi; while women are exploited by men as seen in the scene where Muroyiwa chases a butterfly: 'if there were any butterflies in the mountains, Muroyiwa would meet their delicate caress like a restored blindness. He was curious to meet butterflies amid the sound of death, the wailing voices of women, the distresses of children, the dry desperation' (*Under the Tongue*, 138). The butterfly signifies the female gender; while Muroyiwa is a patriarchal figure (Oedipal figurehead) symbolizing male suppression. The narrator in the quotation below further traces the patriarchal oppression of Muroyiwa to his father's oppressive attitude towards Zhizha's grandmother and other women:

VaGomba was blind. Muroyiwa had been born into his father's blindness and received it and contained him like a vessel. At birth, he had moved from calabash into the blindness and because of this for him the butterflies surrounding the mountains would be pitched louder than the sound of death. He had received many longings from his father's blindness. (*Under the Tongue*, 138)

The literal description of the word, 'blindness' in the above quotation signifies female oppression perpetrated by men in Zimbabwe. The literal objects of oppression are 'the butterflies' which symbolically denote women and girls. The quotation above indicates that men are blinded by their selfish quest for sexual satisfaction thereby causing untold pain to the female gender. All these images are figuratively used to enhance Vera's artistic style. Psychoanalysis will metaphorically refer to all the patriarchal figures as 'Oedipus' – the figureheads of colonialism and oppression.

Depression and anxiety are products of oppressive power caused by the actions of Oedipal figureheads. Vera's novel is replete with emotional anxiety. Anxiety is a disorder caused by trauma. Zhizha is heavily touched by trauma which damages her psyche and makes experiences difficult to be explored through language. Zhizha, the girl character fears that she might be entangled in another traumatic event. This intense fear creates frightening attacks (hallucination) which she dreads day and night. Thus, the conjured images of 'darkness' and 'red dot' forming shapes in her body denote nervousness. The quotation below is replete with signs of hallucination. As a result of the protagonist's unstable mental state, she constructs unrealistic images that define her thoughts:

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 ... (*Under the Tongue*, 135-136).

Repression is an essential feature of trauma which is perceived to be a reaction to traumatic events or situations. Zhizha's repression is an involuntary rejection from the consciousness of her painful or disagreeable ideas, memories, feelings or impulses about her rape. The inability of Zhizha to voice her experiences is an indication that she is frightened by her father's savagely violent action which disassociates and fragments her mind (thoughts). This explains why her grandmother beckons on her to control her fragmented thoughts and liberate her mind from the horrific experience. Zhizhi uses monologue to narrate her grandmother's advice:

Grandmother says it is sometimes good to forget, to bury the heavy things of now, the things which cannot be remembered without death becoming better than life. Such things are for forgetting, for burying beneath the earth. But a woman must remember the moment of birth and death. (*Under the Tongue*, 131)

To explore *Under the Tongue* in the light of Freudian trauma theory, it is very obvious that Zhizha, the girl character experiences traumatic neurosis. This psychological hurtful condition is because of an alteration in her father's integrity. As a result, Zhizha loses faith in humanity since her nightmares incubate the image of her father with horrible imagery that refutes her sense of perception. Zhizha wants a better future but the continuous remembrance of her traumatic experience alters her identity keeping her perpetually in delusion.

Undoubtedly, the memory of the horrific rape leaves Zhizha silenced and traumatized throughout the story that she continuously feels confused by her disturbing thoughts. Again, the tragic death of Muroyinwa, her father immediately after the violation of Zhizha's body adds to her shell shock. These two traumatic events indeed torment her reality and dreams. Zhizha is affected by delusions to the extent that she hallucinates and loses her identity through nightmares. Zhizha sees the image of her father in her sleep violating her body and she speaks,

Father speaks in an unremembered voice. He has swallowed sleep. I see father waiting in my sleep. I see father in the midst of my cry. I see father. Father.... He calls in a whisper and cry. Father... His voice is full of the unknown things of my growing destroying sleep. His voice says death is also life. He calls my name in the midst of night. Father...His whisper is heavier than night, than dream, than silence. He carries death in his arms, banishes morning. (*Under the Tongue*, 123-124).

The above quoted lines are replete with ellipses, single word, short sentences, empty spaces and single lines. Kopf explains that Vera employs the above stipulated forms to 'translate traumatic memory into narrative memory' (250). Kopf goes further to state that in Vera's novel, paragraphs are interrupted which consist of "torn sentences, short and sharp fragment or flashbacks" (250). In *Under the Tongue*, Zhizha is indeed a good example of trauma victim because the incestuous rape threatens her mental and physical freedom thereby creating insomnia and nightmares. S. Felman and D. Laub are of the opinion that:

Trauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect. The survivor, indeed, is not truly in touch either with the core of his traumatic reality or with the fatedness of its reenactments, and thereby remains entrapped in both. (69)

To depict vividly the effect of trauma on her protagonist, Vera avoids the use of linear plot structure. She employs a very loose plot structure and unconventional metaphoric forms to depict the condition of the trauma victim. In exploring trauma, Freud and Caruth employ literary metaphors to identify and explicitize its damaging consequences to the psyche. Both Freud and Caruth explain that traumatic event is so overwhelming on its victim to the extent that the victim loses the ability to speak. In *Under the Tongue*, Vera's depiction of the emotional state of the girl-child shows that severe traumatic experience resists language while fiction adopts language for narrating traumatic events" (Dodhy and Kaur, 78). The above view explains the readers' difficulty in comprehending the structure of the plot and character delineation. Zhizha seems to be entangled in a crisis that threatens her survival. She cries often as 'salt spreads through her

eyes...’ (*Under the Tongue*, 123). All these considered, Caruth observes that for “individuals who undergo trauma, it is not the moment of the event, but of the passing out of it that is traumatic” (*Explorations in Memory* 4). It is obvious that Zhizha is restless and sorrowful about her situation. She confesses,

Heaviness grows on my forehead pulling me away into darkness so complete and I cry, my crying seems to come from ears. The darkness is taking me away. A brilliant light falls into my eyes like breaking glass, so I close my eyes again and creep back into the darkness where perhaps my mother will come and find me. (*Under the Tongue*, 217)

In spite of Zhizha’s sorrowful state of mind, she needs to construct her own story. The flashbacks in narrative construction help her to reestablish the lost trust she has about reality. Recurring intrusion of nightmares are evident in the novel. These nightmares are displayed in constant repetition of words by Zhizha which becomes a pattern in the structure of the novel. The frequent occurrence of horrible nightmares heightens her death instinct - “I hear crushing in my stomach. Water pulling at my dream, pulling at my rock, pulling at my sleep. I awaken. An embrace, once more, of lightning, entering my sleep. A burning grows deep beneath the sky. A shadow grows on my chest, struggles to depart. I die in my sleep” (*Under the Tongue*, 123). The above quotation is an attempt by Zhizha to construct her rape narrative through nightmares. However, these nightmares are not coherent at all because she is overwhelmed by her traumatic experience. From Zhizha’s nightmares, it is obvious that she is powerless over her situation.

In conclusion, it is evident that *Under the Tongue* depicts narrative failure which is seen in Zhizha’s inability to tell her story in a plain language. Significantly, Vera’s novel is able to depict the acts of recollection, listening and witnessing. These three acts are very important in the novel because they aid the readers in interpreting Zhizha’s story.

### **Female Bonding and Assertiveness as a Strategy for Emancipation from Patriarchal Oppression in *Under the Tongue***

Female bonding is perceived as a womanist concept which emerged as a result of the unjust treatment or oppressive acts against the female gender. This concept expresses female friendship and cooperation in the works of feminist writers. Patricia Collins sees female bonding as “a source of achieving a united voice”

(*Black Feminist Thoughts...*, 96). According to Audre Lorde, it is “a source of power, strength and nurturance, and it is there to be tapped by all women who do not fear the revelations of connection to themselves” (“An Open Letter...” 138). In Chioma Opara view, it is “a facet of female power” (“Three Dimensional Difference...” 34).

In *Under the Tongue*, Vera delves into womanist ideology by depicting female bonding through relationships. This bonding signifies sisterhood which denotes a common way of collectively sharing female sorrow which emanates as a result of oppression or violence. Vera’s womanism is perceived in the relationship Zhizha shares with her grandmother and mother. This is indeed called connectedness since these three female characters encourage themselves to be strong despite oppressive circumstances. Their collective stance in defending and encouraging themselves signifies female bonding. This connectedness is articulated by Zhizha: “I listened to her cry which carries all my sorrow of yesterday and I know that I have brought this river to her. I am inside Grandmother. I am Grandmother” (*Under the Tongue*, 124).

This female connectedness or bonding also explains the reason Runyararo killed her husband to revenge her daughter’s humiliation. According to the omniscient narrator, “mother. I remember her unspoken sorry lost and forgotten. She killed her husband, grandfather says” (*Under the Tongue*, 163). Both Zhizha and her grandmother feel agonizing pain. As a witness to the traumatic sexual experience, Grandmother words help Zhizha to find her voice amidst traumatic silencing that characterized her thoughts. Grandmother lends her voice to Zhizha’s plight by urging her to speak out her feelings. Zhizha’s confession buttresses the above view: “I know that Grandmother will heal me with her word, her word that is for remembering all that has visited her suffering, that has accompanied my growing...” (*Under the Tongue*, 132). The relationship between Zhizha and her grandmother is indeed the “psychological process of dealing” with her problems (Eagleton, 138). This special relationship between Zhizha and grandmother reflects Freud’s stance on ‘speaking out thought or experiences’ (narrative memory) which is a way trauma survivors should begin their healing process. This is achieved by Grandmother’s stimulation of her own plight.

## **Conclusion**

It is worthy to note that human rights have been grossly abused in Vera’s *Under the Tongue*. Girls and women have been sexually abused, molested and silenced.

This has greatly traumatized them leading to perpetual muteness, fragmented thoughts, neurosis and emotional problems. Zhizha, Runyararo and Grandmother are depicted as victims of male violence. Zhizha is raped by her father, Grandmother is continuously made fun of for giving birth to a sick son by her husband, and Runyararo is sexually starved and humiliated by her husband's inhuman rape. The above oppressive abuse of the female gender pushes Vera to imbue Runyararo with feminist radicalism. This is seen in the violent feminist stance Runyararo takes in revenging her daughter's rape. As a radical feminist, Vera presents Runyararo as a woman pushed to the wall by her husband's violent act. As a core radical feminist, Runyararo resorts to killing her husband. By the above depicted act of violence by Runyararo, Vera comes to us as a radical feminist in ideology. The above act by Zhizha's mother denotes female bonding, a practical way of showing female solidarity which aims at destabilizing patriarchal stronghold for female liberation. Significantly, Zhizha, Grandmother and Runyararo have shared sentiments which are rooted in their history of violence perpetrated by men. Hence, the strength of their relationship, friendship and love is solely knitted together by their shared oppression. This helps in awakening the consciousness of the victim, Zhizha. Indeed, Grandmother constantly urges Zhizha to articulate her pains to achieve a certain level of purgation of emotion. Through Grandmother's connection with Zhizha, the readers are able to understand the enormity of the violence that silences the female gender. Therefore, in working together through listening and witnessing, female solidarity is depicted because the female characters bond together to liberate themselves. Vera's depiction of female bonding indeed reveals the strength women display to dismantle and confront male chauvinism. Vera's underlying message on female bonding is to depict a struggle – a fight for female liberation in Zimbabwe.

### **Works Cited**

- Caruth, C. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.
- ... *Unclaimed Experience*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.
- Dodhy, Shamaila. "Traumatic Memory and Legacy of Anxiety in Yvonne Vera's *Under the Tongue*". *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*. IX. 1. (2017): 234-242.

- Dodhy, Shamalia and Kaur, Hardev. "Witnessing Trauma through Discordant Chronology of Words in Yvonne Vera's *Under the Tongue*". *KEMANUSIAAN the Asian Journal of Humanities* 25.2 (2018): 73-89.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008.
- Ebony, P. "The Truth about Date Rape". Wikipedia.com. 15 May 1997. Retrieved 18 April 2015.
- Felman, S. and D. Laub. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. London: Taylor & Francis, 1992.
- Hemmings, J. "How all Life is Lived in Patches". Quilting Metaphors in the fiction of Yvonne Vera. *The End of Unheard Narratives: Contemporary Perspectives on Southern African Literatures*. Ed. B. Weiss. Heidelberg, Germany: Kalliope Paperbacks, 2004. 235-250.
- Kacandes, Irene. "Narrative Witnessing as Memory Work: Reading Gertrud Kolmar's *A Jewish Mother*". *Acts of Memory*. Eds. Bal, Crewe and Spitzer. 55-71.
- Kalbfleish, P.J and J.C Michael. *Gender Power and Communication in Human Relationships*. London: Routledge Pub., 2012.
- Kanu, I. A. Igwebuike Philosophy and Human Rights Violation in Africa. *IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. Vol. 3. No. 7. pp. 117-136. 2017.
- Kupferman, T. *Privacy and Publicity*. London: Macklermedia Pub., 1990.
- Lorde, Audre. "An Open Letter to Mary Daly (1980)". *Feminisms: A Reader*. Ed. Maggie Humm. New York: Harvester WheatSheaf Press, 1992. 137-139.
- Ludwig, A.M. *The Psychobiological Functions of Dissociation*. *Am. J. Clin. Hypn.* 26 (1983): 93-99.

- Opara, Chioma. "Three Dimensional Differences in Flora Nwapa's Women Are Different". *Flora Nwapa: Critical Perspectives*. Eds. Ebele Eko, Julius Ogu and Emelia Oko, Calar: University of Calabar Press, 1997. 88-89.
- Pederson, D. "Psychological Functions of Privacy". *Journal of Environmental Psychology*. 1.17 (1997):147-156.
- Schmid, Michael. "Narrative Memory and the Impact of Trauma on Individuals with Reference to One Short Sequence from *Memento*". *Abgabetermin*. 28. 5 (2004): 1-11. <https://www.grin.com/document/66502>
- Universal Declarations of Human Rights*. United Nations General Assembly, December 10, 1948.
- United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crimes*. UN Document. New York: 2000. *Treaties.un.org*. Web. February 6, 2015.
- Vera, Yvonne. *Under the Tongue*. Harare: Baobab Books, 1996.
- Whitehead, A. *Trauma Fiction*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2004. <https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9780748618576.001.0001>
- World Health Organization. "Sexual Violence". 15 April 2015.