

Reading Gender Violence in Valarie Tagwira's 'The Uncertainty of Hope'

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ABSTRACT

This paper makes an exposition of gender based violence in Valerie Tagwira's *The Uncertainty of Hope*. The paper exposes gender based violence beyond domestic violence and violence against women, inside and outside the home. Rather, the paper exposes gender based violence as it is experienced by both men and women. The paper engages theories of social constructionism and womanism in its discussion of the manifestations, experiences and responses by men and women to gender based violence. The use of womanism more or less as constructionism will expose the extent to which gender identities and relations are constructed and are constantly mediated.

The proponents of these theories claim to be anti-western and claim to be conscious of the individuality of experience and the gendered condition of being African. These theories are put to task in accounting for experiences of poor poverty stricken black men and men. In exposing the challenges of men, or what this paper will discuss as masculinities in crisis, the paper does not attempt to evade the fact of women's oppression but shows the different responses of both men and women to gender violence even outside the domestic arena. That men are often victims of other men is an issue that this paper does not hesitate to engage in. Men's subtle victimhood to women will also occupy a significant of the discussion of this paper.

Novel synopsis

The novel tells a disturbing story of violence in its many forms and as experienced by both men and women. The violence that is exhibited in the novel is squarely placed within the context of the economic struggles of post year 2000 Zimbabwe and 'operation murambatsvina' –a blotched government initiative that though planned with good intent, disturbed the lives of the same people that the initiative was expected to improve. The author shows the responses of both genders to abuse/violation from each other, institutions and government.

INTRODUCTION

Gender based violence is a thorny issue in Zimbabwe, to the extent that the Zimbabwe government developed the Domestic Violence Act 14/2006. However, although most gender based violence is experienced in the domestic arena by women, it is also experienced by men and outside the domestic space. This reflects a shortcoming in the scope and effectiveness of the Act in addressing gender based violence. In the same light, scholars like West (1999), Jacobs et al. (2000) and Gqola (2007), loosely associate the term with physical abuse (assault) and sexual harassment of women. The term gender based violence clearly alludes to the hostility meted on an individual by virtue of one's being biologically male or female. This researcher's concurrence with Cornwall (2005) who reiterates the

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view that studies on male-female relations or existentiality should shift from ‘women’ to ‘gender’ and attention should focus on the production of difference and the negotiation of relational identities. This study considers gender based violence beyond domestic violence and violence against women, inside and outside the home. The paper engages theories of social constructionism and womanism in its discussion of the manifestations, experiences and responses by men and women to gender based violence.

Chitando (2011a) correctly states that the word gender does not mean woman, hence the need to focus on gender based violence as hostility meted on or experienced by an individual at the level of being biologically or socially male or female. It is any interpersonal, organizational or politically oriented violence perpetrated against people due to their gender identity or location in the hierarchy of male dominated social systems such as family or government (O’Toole et al. 1997). Gender based violence can be manifested physically, emotionally, psychologically, or sexually. However, it is important to appreciate that most violence that may be considered sexual may also be experienced physically and emotionally, and thus, psychologically.

Cornwall (2005:1) observes that “the woman-as-victim narrative situates African women as powerless, inviting intervention on their behalf,” which is reflective of most of the literature produced even in Zimbabwe and the same literature which female writers aim to address by proffering their own representations of themselves and the experiences of the men they encounter. Cornwall also adds that images of men have been equally polarized - though there are a few exceptions. Flynn (1990), William and Frieze (2005), Johnson (2008) and Bary (2010) are among the few who acknowledge the victimhood of both men and women towards each other, governments, and larger institutions.

SIMILAR WORK BY OTHER SCHOLARS

Sadurkasa (1986) carried out a study on the status of women in indigenous African societies and made valid observations on the condition of African womanhood. Sadurkasa’s study is helpful to this current study for the observation that women in the extended family occupy roles defined by consanguinity as well as conjugality. Furthermore, the study makes clear that the position of ‘wife’ refers not only to the conjugal relationship to a husband but also to the in-law relationship to all members of the husband’s family. This observation is valid and shall be helpful in the analysis of gender based violence, particularly experienced by the women in Valerie Tagwira’s *‘The Uncertainty of Hope.’*

West (1999) discusses wounds of the spirit, black violence and resistance ethics. This researcher agrees with West that societies view male violence as being secured within the social fabric of culture and with West's findings on women's depiction and anguish of male violence. Points of departure, however, are found in West's support of the notion that gender based violence is always perpetrated *on* women *by* men and that West gives gender based violence a black race - as if white women (or men, for that matter) are never victims. In a similar study by Merrill (1999) focus once again lies within the woman-as-victim discourse. Merrill attempts to vindicate feminism within gender discourse, which depletes the very nature of gender and weakens Merrill's validity to gender discussions.

Ouzgane and Morrell's (2005) editorial, *African Masculinities: Men in Africa from the late nineteenth century to present*, will be helpful to the current study in as far as it acknowledges the changing constructions of manhood and male disempowerment that redirects researchers' attention towards the acceptance of male victimhood to gender based violence. Muchemwa and Muponde's (2007) editorial will be helpful in so far as they, together with their contributors, i.e. Zenenga and Christiansen, concur with Cornwall's (2005) view that gender discussions and scholarship in Zimbabwe are currently skewed in favour of one gender (female). They add that this denies the existence of marginalized and emerging masculinities. This further means that by virtue of economic, socio-political, or other standing, men too can be defenseless victims of gender based violence - which is what this study seeks to unearth as represented in the novel under study.

Chitando (2011b) discuss gender based violence and shows the ugly face of violence against women. And yet she, like many others, also looks at gender based violence solely as violence against women, unable to acknowledge the victimhood of men. Javangwe (2011) chooses to view gender based violence with the same limited view as Chitando and all the other scholars who view gender based violence as violence against women only. Thus, much as their contributions are helpful to the assessment of the violation of women, they do not account for the experiences and responses of men in terms of gender based violence.

FINANCIAL STANDING AND SEXUALIZED VIOLENCE IN *THE UNCERTAINTY OF HOPE*.

Economic disempowerment seems to be the basis for the rampant gender based violence in '*The Uncertainty of Hope*.' Katy believes that an economic break-through would allow Onai to leave Gari and the abuse. The reason why Onai lives on despite all odds is that she is financially ill-positioned

to move away. Onai believes that she would have nowhere to go – ironic, considering that she turned to her mother, MaMusara, when she was thrown out of her home by Toro following Gari’s death. This defeats the depiction of Onai as a choiceless victim of violence. The way that Katy states, “if only there was a way for Onai to earn money to buy a house of her own and take care of her children... I’m sure she would leave him’ (p.17) shows that for, Tagwira, gender based violence is not just culturally enshrined – and that marriage is a financial institution. The ‘protection’ women need in marriage is no longer grounded on social expectation but rather on financial need.

Similarly, Melody admits to having an affair with a married man and concedes that although the affair is morally incorrect, she needs to survive. The affair is strategically well-knit in financial fiber as the man is said to provide for her financial needs. She also tries to console herself by blaming the economy for forcing her into a corner, as if it alone left her with no other choice – and perhaps the economy is to blame to some extent. Sheila delinquently takes to prostitution because she is more afraid of hunger than AIDS.

This same representation of women sacrificing themselves for financial reasons is also seen in Jackie, a college student in Phillip Chidavaenzi’s (2006) *The Haunted Trail*, who trades sex for material items in order to survive. The same representation of women selling sex for survival is also seen in the characters in Virginia Phiri’s *Highway Queen* and *Desperate*. The sex transactions are made to appear innocent because it is for a just cause and both men and women honor their sides of the bargain.

Society wonders why Onai ‘does not have the self-esteem to value her own life’ (p.13). As such, Katy warns faith to guard against being indebted to a man even in marriage. The way in which masculinities and femininities are negotiated by financial standing is the same way in which vulnerability to gender based violence is pegged. There is a sharp contrast in Tagwira’s representation of Onai and MaMusara on the one hand and Emily, Faith, and Katy on the other and also of Gari, Mr. Nzou and Silas vs. Tom and John. Tagwira shows how the gendered identities and vulnerabilities of these men are shaped by their financial and intellectual strengths.

FAMILIAL ABUSE AND RESPONSES TO GENDERED VIOLATION

The extent of the violence in Onai’s life is quite big. The violence she suffers is more psychological than it is physical, and the neglect she sustains from Gari is probably the greatest violation of her life. Gari made no effort to support the family financially. He claimed to provide accommodation,

yet the house was his parents' (meaning accommodation was not an expense for him.) The deprivation she suffered from not getting any financial support from her husband was a psychological violation, which made her vulnerable. As if that was not enough, she was accustomed to threats, which again violated her psychologically. The destruction of her sewing machine by Gari (although apparently physical) was also psychological because she valued the machine and it gave her the livelihood that Gari was unwilling to provide. After the death of Gari, Onai was placed under Toro's care without consultation or choice. As a result of this

What is astonishing about Onai's marriage with Gari is that the cycle of violence is never complete. There was never any making up, and Gari never appeared remorseful. And yet Onai made a conscious choice to live with Gari's violence. When Gari was asked by Silas if he wasn't worried about Onai finding out about his 'small-house' (Gloria), Gari declares that he wouldn't care less if she found out.

The nature of the relationships between the couples is premised on either financial standing, intelligence, or both. The nature of the relationships, too, plays a pivotal role in the exhibition of intimate partner abuse - which is only a figment of domestic violence. It also makes a statement on the mutation of both masculinities and femininities in the text and how they respond to gender based violence.

Tagwira's molding of male-female relationships brings out the womanism of her writing. Pickney (1976) observes that womanism is premised on the belief that blacks and whites cannot function as equals while inhabiting the same territory or participating in the same social institutions. Walker (1983:xi) adds that womanists are "committed to the survival and wholeness of an entire people, male and female." As such, womanism is meant to foster avenues for the strengthening of relationships between black men and women. The man that Gari is to Onai is different from the man he is to Gloria, despite the clear cut distinction of the moral standing of these women. Perhaps it was just the adventure of having a small house, considering he says that "a small house... was the best thing to happen to a man" (p.37). Gloria, despite being a prostitute, was financially stable and not 'totally dependent' on Gari - unlike Onai. The harshness of the presentation of Gari's character is probably Tagwira's advocacy for "milder" more reasonable masculinities John and Tom, who are more fitting to her womanist agenda.

Tagwira advocates sexual liberty. However, she presents a complex situation of two

women who are both in control of their sexuality. Despite the abuse in her life, Onai controls her sexuality to the extent of demanding Gari to use condoms. She acknowledges that female condoms gave her a sense of control and freedom. This is reflective of Coward's (1987) advocacy for women to gain control over their sexuality through condom use. Perhaps Onai takes control to the extent of pushing Gari into Gloria's arms (who is not worried about condoms as she realizes that they probably would not save her anyway.) Yet in spite of the complexity of the representation, and despite Onai's feelings of loss, she emerges the victor in the vicious web of violence. Although she may have lost everything material, she held onto life and thus survived.

Katy suffers emotional and psychological violence from the insults of "being barren" that she receives from her mother-in-law. Interestingly, her barrenness is not an inability to bear live young but her failure to bear sons. Katy is attacked as a woman who has failed to live up to expectation. She and her mother-in-law, despite being women, are unequally placed on the social hierarchy of life, hence Katy's vulnerability to another decision, she is dispossessed of her home, furniture, and her husband's bank cards.

THE GENDERED DIMENSION OF OPERATION MURAMBATSVINA IN *THE UNCERTAINTY OF HOPE*

Although the violence brought by Operation Murambatsvina was institutionalized, it was also gendered, sexualized, and experienced differently by individuals as either men or women. An example is Mr Ngozo, popularly known as Hondo, "a big muscular man" (p.85) whose war- veteran status had earned him respect in the community and whose warm personality had endeared him to many. He was personally violated by Operation Murambatsvina at the level of being a man - be it biological or by social construction. His war veteran's package had gone solely towards the extension of his home, which allowed him the privilege of being the provider and protector of his family. This was all put to waste when his structures were demolished. The destruction was a violation of his manhood at a physical, psychological, and emotional level "as he watched the house which had embodied his dreams, falling down." (p.151) But as with any other feminist representations, he fails to "come to terms with his losses and... handle it as a man" (p.85). In another way, Hondo's suicide may have been Tagwira's statement against the inability of men to adapt to change. She satirizes this inability by offering suicide as a way out when women who suffer even more, like Onai, never thought of suicide as a resolution.

Despite Tagwira's attempt at fairness in her representation of characters, her treatment

of men remains rather harsh and she confirms traditional stereotypes of women. Apart from Gari, there is also Assistant Commissioner Nzou, whose masculinity is as salty as Gari's. He hides behind the institutionalized undertakings of Operation Murambatsvina to instill his own violence. He violates not only other men but women and government by sabotaging its efforts at making a better Zimbabwe. The ugliness of Nzou's character is seen when he insults a woman, thereby violating her emotionally, for not driving fast enough for him. He goes so far as to call her "brainless idiot" (p.66). Furthermore, he emasculates other men by verbally assaulting them on the auspices of being a senior member of the police force.

Gari forcefully goes out of his way to remind himself that he is a man. The extent of his desperation and the crisis of his masculinity is seen in his choice of Gloria over Onai because Gloria made him feel like a man (by providing sexual needs that Onai had neglected through her insistence of using condoms and by not making demands with monetary implication). In contrast, Onai made him feel like a failure (always asking for money and complaining about him not acting out his duties well). His desperation is also shown in his statement to Silas on their impending retrenchment: "*tiri varume*, we are men. We must not act like a bunch of women. We face the problems when they come." Ironically, when the problems do come, his first thought is to either walk away or beat up his wife. Gari acknowledges that his impending retrenchment was "an attack on his manhood. What would happen to him if he stopped earning a regular salary." (p.37)

If anything, Gari is an example of failed masculinity, not so much for his upbringing (as theorists of the cycle of violence may argue) but for his failure to come to terms with the reality of poverty and the need by his dependants for his support. This study is cognizant of sub cultural theories of social *constructionism*, particularly the culture of violence and integrational transmission of violence theories as explained by Dekeseredy et al. (2006). The 'culture of violence' theory argues that within large societies subgroups learn and develop specialized norms and values through differential association and organization that justify the use of physical force. On the other hand, the 'intergenerational transmission of family violence' theory contends that people who were exposed to violence in childhood are likely to perpetrate it later on in life. Gari consoles himself in saying that he turned out ok despite having his father around most of the time; hence, he has no reason to feel bad about not spending time with his children.

The killing of white people; however, racial was sexualized/ gendered in so far it

emasculated white people, made them vulnerable and drove them away from what they called home. The murder of white farmers, particularly *male* white farmers, was meant to emasculate them in a physical and psychological way. As O'Toole et al. (1997) point out, gender based violence can also be politically motivated yet be an attack on one's gender identity.

Gloria's conscious decision to steal Gari from Onai and infect him with HIV was a gendered violation. She unrepentantly acknowledges that there is no likelihood of her being HIV negative considering the life she had lived. She needed a man to look after her when HIV eventually made its claim on her. It was 'payback time for all the men to whom for so little money, she had given so much pleasure. Gari would have to pay the outstanding dues for all of them.' (p.39) By stealing Onai's husband, Gloria, too, added to Onai's psychological violation. Gloria is a clear cut example of a woman causing so much gendered violation of marriage as an institution and to both Gari and Onai at individual sexualized levels.

The 'mad-man,' who is later revealed as Tapiwa Jongwe, reveals through his thoughts that begging was an act of his own contrition to deal with his guilt for the death of his pregnant wife. Tagwira juxtaposes the troubled masculinities of Tapiwa and Gari to the effect of showing that the individual is actively involved in the construction of his own consciousness and world view. Tagwira also makes a statement towards the mediation of masculinities by making Tapiwa the provider of a better life for Onai.

Onai makes a cognizant effort to live in a troubled marriage, despite the availability of other options in her life. She "emphatically denied that there was any violence in her home." (p.45) Although Onai thinks of how displaced she would be in a society that despised single and divorced women, continuing to live with Gari was a deliberate choice - as was her choice to have protected sex with her husband, dismissing the view that Onai was a passive victim of domestic violence.

This representation of women having choices but deciding instead to comply with the norm is also evident in Westerhoff's *Unlucky in Love* where Rumbie blames society for pressing women into marriage and despising them for walking out or failing to get in at all.

Whenever people are subjected to violation it is often assumed that they are passive recipients of that violation unless they react violently, or at least in some visible manner that shows their consciousness. Hollander and Einwohner (2004:538) cite Pitts (1998), who defines

resistance as “expressive behavior that inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or prevents alternative to cultural codes” and Weitz (2001) who views resistance as “actions that not only reject subordination but do so by challenging the ideologies that support that subordination.” Hollander and Einwohner however, make clear that resistance does not have to be obvious or seen by others as it may be deliberate or unintended. Indeed, Calgary Women’s Emergency Shelter (2009) agrees with Hollander and Einwohner (2004) on the view that resistance is not always visible. Calgary Women’s Emergency Shelter adds that people sometimes do not notice resistance and assume that victims are passive and that the passive victim does exist in real life.

Patterson (2010) concurs with the definition offered by Hollander and Einwohner (2004) and Calgary Women’s Emergency Shelter (2009) but adds that resistance, especially in the case of women, is often conceptualized as an exit from the abusive relationship which obscures the experiences of women who are unwilling and or unable to leave the relationship, like Onai. Patterson further asserts that resistance can be violent, non-violent, active, or passive - and also that not all resistance is effective. Onai responded each time to the unfairness that she went through, although her responses were not exactly aggressive or visible, there was a lot of dialogue in her mind as revealed through her thoughts and in her mind is where she debated the course of her life. Hondo’s suicide can also be read as resistance.

Emily and Faith are punished by the police for organizing and participating in a ‘peaceful march’ against gender violence. For this act, “they are charged with public disorder and inciting violence and then locked up in cells’ (p.203). A similar trend of women being incarcerated for reacting or responding to violence is seen. The Zimbabwe Women Writer’s *The tragedy of lives*. Whenever women and weaker men attempt to speak out against violations they are punished for being out of line, like the men who were violated by operation Murambatsvina and its perpetrators.

Tagwira takes up a womanist stance in the articulation of issues in her text. She presents women supporting one another more than destroying each other. Womanism advocates that women should support one another and that men and women of color should work together (Walker 1983). Where women do destroy, each other Tagwira is quick to offer an explanation, as with Gloria and Melody. Emily encounters many victims of domestic violence, all of them female. Even then, she seems to believe that there are times when women deserve to be beaten up. For instance, she consoles an 18-year-old victim and says she was right to report her husband

because “assaulting one’s wife over such a petty issue is gratuitous and cruel” (p.185) as though suggesting that there are more serious issues that a woman deserves to be beaten for. MaMusara, on the other hand, welcomes Onai back home after she is thrown out by Toro, while Katy remains loyal to Onai throughout all her ordeals, which brings out the motherliness of women advocated by womanism. The Kushinga Women’s Project, though meant to be womanist, is also feminist in its operations as it is there solely to provide counseling and support services for women. Ironically, there is no similar structure for men. Perhaps if there was men would also get help and manage their situations better than to opt for suicide.

THE MIGRANT VICTIM OF GENDER VIOLENCE

The theme of migration is lucid in *The Uncertainty of Hope* and has an impact on the gendered lives of those violated by the poverty caused by poor government policies. However, the escape of women and men from the violation by poverty makes them even more vulnerable to other forms of violence. John reveals the violation meted on both the men and women whom he smuggled into South Africa. He explains how they were used as domestic workers, unfairly paid and made to work under poor conditions. Others found themselves working as sex slaves. The theme of migration also manifests itself in several instances where the first option to manage a problem is to move away from it, such as Faith’s encouragement for Onai to leave Gari, John’s escape to South Africa after his arrest and Tom’s attempt to establish businesses outside Zimbabwe where the economy is more stable. Hondo’s suicide may also be viewed as a migration and an escape; speeches at his funeral imply that he has gone to a better peaceful place.

CONCLUSION

Consciously or subconsciously, Tagwira acknowledges the victimhood of men, just as women, to gender based violence. Through her being apparently a pro-womanist writer, perhaps she advocates that societies stop being biased towards women even though they are the most affected by gender based violence. However, by the end of the novel, there is still no solution to gender based violence. Emily is right in thinking that it was not enough for women to have their husbands arrested as the problem ran deeper and demanded a more complex solution. Indeed, nothing will change as long as vulnerable women find themselves entirely dependent on abusive husbands. The power of education to change or loosen the hold of gender based violence, just as other evils in society is revealed in John’s warning to Faith that there is nobody better at causing public unrest than that rowdy scholarly lot who imagine that they know better than everyone else. John’s attitude is reflective of those who

refuse to look at gender based violence as violence against men and or women and who choose to look at, such as a backlash to feminism.

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