

## DREAMS AND NIGHTMARES: URBAN GEOGRAPHY IN YVONNE VERA'S *WITHOUT A NAME*

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### **ABSTRACT**

Initially, African writers confirmed social and political commitment by using their literary texts to celebrate the heroic grandeur of African past and anti-colonial struggle. Currently the writers have shifted their focus to depict the postcolonial disillusionment among African nations. Yvonne Vera's *Without a Name* is appreciated for its lyricism and interiority. In this paper, an attempt is made to examine how the text, both thematically and stylistically, presents pathologized urban life that engages in the oppression on its dwellers. With the context of political and financial crisis in Zimbabwe of 1970s when death and decay overwhelm the existence, the phenomenon of stressful and hectic existence that accompany it aggravate the situation. I read Mazvita's shift to Harare as an attempt to run away from Nyenyedzi's idealization of the land to urban anonymity and upward mobility, where there is unquestionable dominance of human reason, in hope to forget her painful past. Female resistance and heroism are represented through the protagonist who gets inspired by the centre of the city but is disillusioned to see the margins of the urban space. The city which is considered to be a symbol of development is essentially characterised by indifference, emotional deprivation, flatness and hollowness. The crisis of humanity is accentuated by non-linear story line of a woman's life that dreams for freedom but confronts unexpected nightmarish life, masked under the garb of glamorous and colourful of city life.

**Keywords:** city; dream; human; life; world.

### **Background of the Study**

Yvonne Vera is one of the greatest writers of post-independence era in Zimbabwe. Her novels have penetrated thin walls of consciousness because she subverts the genre by presenting seamless episodes with no sequential order. Her work is situated in Zimbabwean past, discussing taboo subjects like incest, rape and abortion through intimate descriptions of personal lives of women. Born to an educated family in Bulawayo, Vera joined her Canadian husband in Toronto, where she did research on African prison writing for PhD dissertation at York University in 1995. Vera began composing short-stories whilst working on her Master's thesis and published a collection of short-stories and two novels whilst working for her doctorate. On completing her studies, she returned to Zimbabwe to focus on her writing while serving as the Director of the National Gallery in Bulawayo. Her short stories and award-winning novels do not confirm the nostalgic image of Africa but her work focuses on private experiences of women in the background of the civil war. *Without a Name* is written against the backdrop of collapsing colonialism and vicious guerilla warfare in late 1970's Rhodesia, Southern Africa. Stylistically *Without a Name* is a novella in which bits and pieces are joined together which erratically oscillate in time and space with narrative threads that gradually bind into a circling pattern. Probably it is essential to work around the orbits of narrative because the events described are too painful to linearly imbibe them. It is observed that in "Vera's work orality is generally portrayed in terms of the overall tone in her narratives, the non-linear narrative structure, and other formal devices such as repetition, piling, and parallelism" (Ortega-Guzmán, 2011, 105). The incoherent and disconnecting narrative reflects the unpredictability of urban life with a constant threat of annihilation and deliberate amnesia of the city. Commenting on Vera's style Brendt says,

Her fictional work is distinguished by a lyrical prose that relies on oral narrative traditions, and that introduces symbols and metaphors which break up the linearity of time and events to dramatize social issues through individual destinies. Her female protagonists experience violence, abuse, homelessness, love, escape, and failure, yet Vera's plots often serve only as the framework for her attempt to create an individual female voice. Her characters are distinguished by their longing for something they can neither describe nor achieve. (2009, 129)

### Urban Life

Harare is no exception, like other big cities of the world it is also gathering up on technological and industrial innovations. The city's attitude of all-embracing changes are tangibly felt here than elsewhere because of condensation of time and space. For those living in the country-side, the city appears to be a seat of culture and learning. The flashy life-style adopted by the dwellers and sky-scrappers appear very attractive plus inviting from distance. It appears to be a place of money and leisure. Those who hope to become somebody, like Mazvita, think that it is a place where the wheels of production-consumption are turning at a faster rate, so this world will easily accommodate them not realizing that it is a highly competitive world where excessive consumerism is substituted for culture, where religion is replaced by idols of latest status symbols tempting a man to attend mindless slogans of style and gratify his material needs instantly. It is only when these people step into the city-life; they realize that people here are wretched caricatures of human beings who are living lives in modified versions of concentration camps, where life is driven by an overpowering sense of materialistic frenzy in which commodities after which they are running remain up-to-date just for few weeks. They experience a threatening sense of essential instability by living under incomprehensible system which is running at a very fast speed.

### Discussion

Mazvita, longing to leave rural Mubaira, has convinced herself that "there is no war there [in Harare]. Freedom has already arrived. . . . It is the perfect place to begin" (Vera, 1996, 30). The process of urbanization is bringing rapid social and cultural changes. Women living in the city think that the empty cases of *Ambi* are the signs of freedom as they think that "the use of skin-bleaching creams" (Hemmings, 2005, 173) have brought them closer to freedom not realizing that it is just a skin deep mask which they have artificially worn to cover the darkness of their faces with black-skinned ears. Vera criticizes that people in Harare are happy on achieving this fake freedom and dance "in an enviable kind of self-mutilation" (Vera, 1996, 33). Their original skins are removed like sacrificial goats and now they walk in "streets without any faces, invisible, like ghosts" (Vera, 1996, 33). The writer satirizes the concept of freedom which these people by wearing wide bottomed trousers with a tag of "REVOLUTION" (Vera, 1996, 55) along the waist, think that they are enjoying freedom. Vera says "[f]reedom came in circles. Endless and dizzying. What was freedom if it could be curtailed and curtailed and passed around?" (Vera, 1996, 55). The city is a world of illusions with slanted moral values. When people come to cities, they have to sell their souls for material gains. They sell their souls like Dr. Faustus to the contemporary Mephistopheles — Capitalism. It is a world dominated and controlled by economic measures, a world whose material side overwhelms the spiritual side. Urban existence is shaped by supply-and-demand tactics and people are caught up in a brutal circle of consumer society which instills

desires in them, driving these unfortunate consumers to seek further. This results in fragmentation of life causing an inevitable de-centering of the self. To survive in the city with a soul in the body is impossible; one has to make many compromises and Mazvita is realizing this after coming to the city. This world with attractive billboards and eye-catching advertisements offers hopeful vision of economic advancement, affluence and wealth but for the majority there is poverty, crime and unemployment in industrial cities. For the masses, city-streets are filled with sinister feelings of hatred and despair.

The working class which runs the engine of big cities mostly lives in suburbs of the big cities. Their significance in the engine is like a small cog; on one hand very important without which a machine fails to run efficiently but on the other hand easily disposable and replaceable by a new cog. Suburbs reflect the dark side of the picture of cities whose streets are “narrow and cramped” (Vera, 1996, 21) where smoke is emitted from the factories converting the red bricks of the buildings into black brown. On coming to the city and walking on the road, Mazvita realizes that “[p]overty [is] not a secret” (Vera, 1996, 22) here. She is frightened to see that people walking on the roads are taking hurried steps and then they disappear. They briefly meet each other out of necessity and then become “rapid dots” (Vera, 1996, 23) as they get lost in the world full of chaos. Enormous gap exists between various social classes of the city. On one hand, there is wealth reflected in high-rise buildings and imperial factories but on the other hand there are dark, dirty and narrow houses where working class lives. There is “ambivalence about the city, its alleys, its shacks, and the pervasive smell of paraffin accompanying the whiff of freedom marks Vera’s *Without a Name*” (Gunner, 2007, 4-5).

Mazvita “wanted to discover something new in her world” (Vera, 1996, 41) in the city-life. Before coming to the city she used to think that the city will help her to the conquer reality. She was full of enthusiasm and passion as “[s]he felt a strong sense of her own power and authority, of her ability to influence and change definitions of her own reality, adjust boundaries to her vision, banish limits to her progress” (Vera, 1996, 40). But after staying in the city for about seven months she realized “Harare was busy and indifferent ... There was a uniformity about suffering, a wisdom about securing your own kind of suffering, your own version of going forward” (Vera, 1996, 42-43). She feels lonely because “her fingers were empty, and so no one offered to help” (Vera, 1996, 78). The towering buildings betray the viewer by promising easy wealth, easy love, and easy life (Vera, 1996, 21) but actually it is a place of filth, smell and pain which promises early death. With time she started hating the city for “its commitment to a wild and stultifying indifference” (Vera, 1996, 22). She does not want to look at the people whose faces are turned into *silhouettes* due to thick smoke and continuous hard work. It is a disorderly, chaotic place inhabited by confused people because life here is very demanding.

The city, Mazvita thinks, is a land of unknown people. It is a place of anonymity with distorted or hidden identities so she will also hide her identity by not telling her real name. Mazvita, like other city-dwellers, plans to hide her identity “she called herself Rosie while she sat there, and laughed inwardly. She called herself Mildred ... then Margaret ... then Angelina ... then Constance ... Juliet” (Vera, 1996, 54). Here no one wants to know the other person because they believe that *knowing* is a *hindrance* since after you know the person, one starts recognizing the other person and then one has to

recognize oneself also which no one in the city wants to do. Everyone wants to remain anonymous; no one wants to become known to others. It is a world of desperate loneliness where one's presence is not fulfilling. Absence is one of the distinct characteristics of the city:

It was best to remain anonymous. Some things you just can't figure out. Harare was like that. To be here was not to be here at all, that's what made being here. It was special. The absence filled you up. It didn't creep up on you, try to surprise you, gently and anonymously. You walked right into it, hard like a wall. Hard hitting hardness. Concrete and rock hit you on the forehead and if you were lucky it broke your skull, then there was nothing to remember, the absence was total. (Vera, 1996, 53)

Like a typical urban society, Harare is also a place of anonymity where people move about with distorted identities, perpetually encountering otherness and loneliness. It is a mysterious place full of unpredictable dangers. The city accurately mirrors confusions and anxieties with which the citizens have to move on with forced individualism. The inhabitants live in cycles, busy in monotonous routines in which exercising one's moral choice is next to impossible. Joel stays outside the city in a dehumanized suburb where he comes back to sleep after a day's hard work. It is a place where there is emotional emptiness, absence of morality and shattered values, surrounded by technological advancement and evidences of material progress.

When Mazvita arrives to Harare, Joel sees her sitting in the street like a homeless person. He comes to her and offers her shelter. She is so naïve that she cannot understand his intentions and thinks him to be a helpful person. She associates the gesture of the young man to the freedom of the city which lets people offer shelter to those whom one does not know at all. Sitting at the back of the bicycle she enjoys a new kind of freedom for which she has always aspired. For few moments she feels as if all her dreams of coming to city and enjoying freedom of life are not far off. Being ambitious, she always "wanted to discover something new in her world" (Vera, 1996, 41). But on reaching the house of Joel, she finds him an extremely indifferent man who is quick in his actions and uninterested in the person whom he brought home. They start living together with "no discussion, no agreement, no proposal" (Vera, 1996, 58). This reminds one of T.S Eliot's *The Wasteland* where moral bankruptcy is discussed by the poet when a girl meets and leaves her lover but both remain unmoved and indifferent to each other. The city people have stopped following the rituals as they do not believe in them anymore thus creating "empty spaces in which they wandered aimlessly. It was a torture sometimes, to have so little to care for, but the emptiness was theirs, and it was authentic" (Vera, 1996, 59). Both Joel and Mazvita start living together but "[t]hey lived as though they had no pasts or futures" (Vera, 1996, 59). It is very degrading as it has reduced Mazvita into a helpless sexual slave without any hint of human dignity. She has fallen into a purgatory where there is no hope of expiation as she incessantly commits sins and continues to suffer for her evil deeds. At the moment, Joel is the only possible solution to her problems of food and shelter. The way, in which he has shown no interest in Mazvita's background, is both likable but at the same time torturous for her too. Their relationship is just a temporary settlement to spend time together with "no resolutions or recollections" (Vera, 1996, 59). Mazvita has learnt that the more one keeps oneself alienated, the greater are the chances

of survival in the urban landscape. She is ambitious so “looks towards visions of urban upward mobility, visions which alienate her from her rural lover and turn motherhood into an impossible, even lethal burden” (Palmer, 2006, 43). She has started adjusting herself to the rhythms of city life where no more bothers the other with unnecessary detail because

Details were cumbersome. So they stumbled over them, and moved on. They shoved them aside, hid them, burned them, anything but disclosed them. It was better to maintain the strangeness, it kept everything fresh and exciting. Details meant communicating and intimacy. The main point of freedom was maintaining boundaries, though such boundaries were questionable. (Vera, 1996, 59)

Inside the house of Joel where she has been living for the last few months, she finds herself alone as there are “no words spoken between them” (Vera, 1996, 68). She feels extreme hollowness which is killing because such existence does not require values of permanent character. On looking at the women who are already living in the city, she finds that they have “conjured freedom from chaos” (Vera, 1996, 71). By wearing loud lipsticks and adopting ultra-modern fashions they reveal their absurdities and hide their identities. These disguised identities do not let them think clearly as most of the time they are thinking between choosing “speech or silence, peace or war” (Vera, 1996, 71). Mazvita is trying her best to adjust with the enormity of Harare where everyone wears “such masks” (Vera, 1996, 71). She has a strong desire to grow, to move ahead as she has strong faith in untried realities of life. She welcomes each day with a strong sense of “her desire, of her ability to begin, of her belonging” with a passion to forget her past which is rather harrowing. Commenting on the strength of Mazvita, Murray writes, “In *Without a Name*, Mazvita refuses to give up on life even after a series of victimisations that has been so comprehensive that she is suffering from a kind of psychic disintegration” (“short stories”, 2011, 148). She wants to wash away all the memories of the past and to explore new geographies of Harare which are strange and encouraging simultaneously. Harare offers limitless space where one can both dream and escape but here one has to make unavoidable compromises which are inevitable for the survival. Analyzing the painful existence of Mazvita, Kotelac says that “[i]n her autonomous attitude, she embodies a form of female agency and self-knowledge that is painfully desired, but never fully realized...” (2010).

Life is so fast here that “she had to keep her world in focus, or else it would change shape” (Vera, 1996, 77). The demarcations that exist between day and night are obliterated. One has to forget the boundaries of time to meet the challenges of futures:

The discoveries offered by the city were tempting and endless ... The city was contemptuous, it asked, did you only arrive yesterday? Sleep and slowness were denied to those who were of the city. There was no room for sleep because one day led into another without pause, and when you had been in it long enough, you did not make the kind of mistakes that exposed your failure to flow with its time. However, what was it to be here long enough when truly there was no clear measure of time? (Vera, 1996, 65)

Mazvita finds that the city, with its shining lights, motivates the people to go ahead. Though for the newcomers there is fear on every step but there is excitement also which

offers release. In search of employment, Mazvita realizes that she is someone *new* with whom she has not been familiar. She finds herself caught up in the labyrinth of city-life, struggling hard to get suitable employment to get rid of the bindings of Joel. It is like fighting against a strong current of water which is highly intimidating. She is fighting with the future which is threatening her at every moment, because she finds “scorpion beneath every rock” (Vera, 1996, 62). Many people who come to the city, the destructive and dehumanizing forces banish their dreams which they bring along from the rural side of the country. They find the city too enormous in comparison to their dreams so they have to banish them but Mazvita is struggling to keep her dreams alive which are, making her “frantic and restless” (Vera, 1996, 65). She wishes to pass such a life that when she may look back at her past, she may feel satisfaction and contentment. She wishes to pass her present very cautiously and calculatedly. She is new to the urban culture so she “weighed carefully the city’s offerings and denials, its testimonies and silences” (Vera, 1996, 66).

Before coming to the city she has not anticipated hollow feelings full of emptiness, offering a mournful landscape of futile nonexistence, which she has experienced after coming here. Instinctively she is born to see dreams and to embrace the future full of freedom, but the unfortunate past has made her arms so heavy that she has to move back into her past because the fast life of the city has refused to accept her with a baby. The urban world of otherness has ruined her identity as she is unable to cope with complexities of the existence. She experienced a sense of despair to resignation and defeated indolence because “Harare was cramped and relentless” (Vera, 1996, 74). The reality is that she “lives in a world that has literally been man-made and, even if she does manage to speak, her words will be interpreted according to man-made models of making meaning” (“Africa has erred”, Murray 2011, 161).

The city-life is disconnected and lost. Mazvita realizes what it means to be at the bottom, how extreme poverty is associated with disgrace and how it embarrasses human dignity. The city people indulge in momentary pleasures but they do not go for permanent bonding or relationship. She is not used to the anonymity of the city. She wishes “to be discovered, to be punished...” (Vera, 1996, 104)

Some kinds of truths long for the indifferent face of a stranger, such truths love that face from the neck up, from the forehead down. There is little to remember in a face with which no intimacy has been shared, to which there is no kinship. There is nothing to lose between strangers, absolutely no risk of being contaminated by another’s emotion; there are no histories shared, no promises made, no hopes conjured and affirmed. Only faces offered, in improbable disguises, promising freedom. (Vera, 1996, 16)

The city is so busy and life here has to be so focused that Mazvita wonders how old people survive here. Probably the pressures of the city life are so intense that no one lives here long enough to be old. The harrowing reality of the city is that here one has to have teeth. Life is so cruel here that the people having tooth can only survive because “if you ha[ve] no teeth here, you ha[ve] no life” (Vera, 1996, 54). The city is a place where one feels permanently endangered, a world full of self-centered wretched individuals suffering from various anxieties and worries which make urban existence all the more

fragile so the society's ultimate device to success is to acquire power. Power promotes hunger for more power; the laws of truth, and reality are devised which are nothing but a construct of this power. Human existence becomes a temporal suspension in the incessant flow of meaninglessness and artificially made up language, so to understand the meaning is condemned. Here, there is no need to understand the philosophy of life.

### Conclusion

Using flexible aesthetic style which knits traces of the past into the present, Vera presents the diseased urban life of Harare which oppresses its dwellers. However a new-comer feels an unbearable stress with every changing moment which transforms dreams of becoming affluent and successful into nightmares. The flashy city-life gives the impression of enormous freedom but the real situation is pathetic as the life in city is "better to begin in sections, not with everything completed and whole" (Vera, 1996, 92). The agency of the city has to be recognized as it owes power to influence its inhabitants. Relationships developed here are choppy and temporary accompanied by isolated and episodic events. Urban geography has lost its traditional charm. It used to be the harbinger of culture and learning but now it is a collection of fickle minded people bereft of moral conviction. Those who manipulate and exploit others climb higher while the less clever ones remain at the bottom aspiring to reach at the top. The rapidly worsening socioeconomic condition of the working class has resulted in increased rate of criminality making the life all the more unpredictable for those that are otherwise passing comfortable lives. People, rich or poor, young or old, find themselves trapped in high-speed life of the urban world.

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