

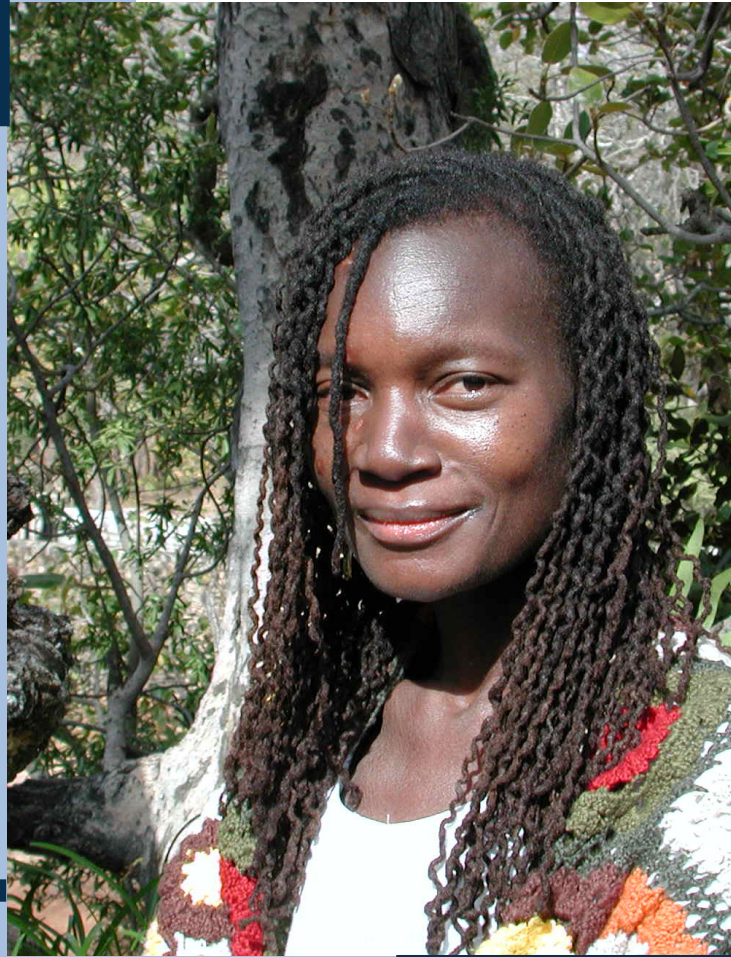


FICTIONS OF THE PAST:

Using Historical Fiction to
Understand the Effects of Colonial
Gender Roles on 1940s Zimbabwe

by Christopher Morris

Figure 24: Image of Yonne Vera taken in her garden in Bulawayo, Photo taken by Eric Beauchemin, 2004.



Throughout history there have been numerous influences that have affected and shaped African society and culture, few of which have been as impactful as the colonization from European settlers. The impacts from the colonization of Africa reach beyond political, economic, and historic changes and affected African societies down to a personal level. As Europeans left their home continent and began to colonize and establish settlements in Africa, their ideas regarding gender, sexuality, and bodily autonomy followed. These “western” ideas would eventually spread throughout the continent of Africa, ultimately changing and influencing Native Africans cultural practices, identities, and

beliefs about gender and sexuality. The impacts from colonization regarding these topics of personal identity have influenced countless forms of artistic expression ranging from music, artwork, and written stories and novels. Zimbabwean author Yvonne Vera is well known for her novels rooted in issues plaguing colonial Zimbabwe, addressing harsh subject matters such rape, abortion, gender inequality and other sensitive topics. While most of her work is historical fiction, Yvonne Vera’s writings are an example of how historical fiction can bridge the gap between personal memory and collective trauma.

Understanding the impacts

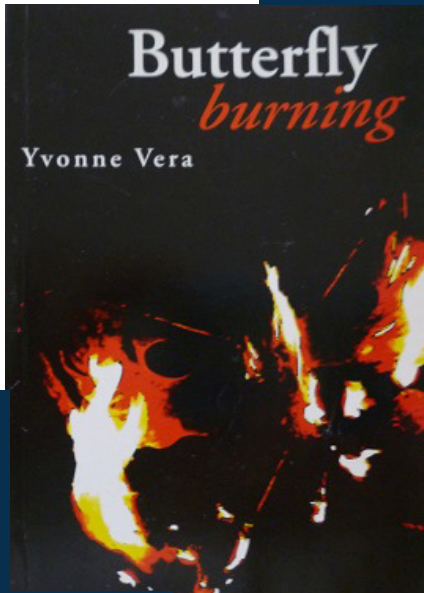


Figure 25: Front cover of first edition of *Butterfly Burning* by Yvonne Vera, 1998.

from colonial rule in Zimbabwe is significant because it can be used to understand how the rigid patriarchal culture developed, as well the increase in violence, abuse, and lack of autonomy that plagued the women of twentieth century Zimbabwe. As the British South African Company began to establish a settler colony in the region, they would create the white minority ruled colony of Southern Rhodesia in 1923.⁷⁸ With European settlers in control of political power in Southern Rhodesia they were able to control and manipulate the economic distribution as well. These new policymakers of the region, influenced by their European customs and cultural practices regarding gender, often passed laws that increased the women's economic dependence on men.⁷⁹ Women were forced to shift away from

their agricultural and spiritual leadership roles into new colonial shaped roles that revolved around family producing and caretaking.⁸⁰

This idea of colonization forcing the native African women into more man dependent roles is reinforced by the access and type of education available to black men and women. While black men had earlier access to a "western education" and a focus on agricultural practices, black women were taught more domesticated, caretaking, and religious values with an emphasis on educating them in the style of European housewives.⁸¹ Forcefully shifting the native women of Zimbabwe away from their historical agricultural ties also removes them from chances at economic opportunity. Black women were often subjected to unpaid labor and faced ine-

qualities when it came to access of paying jobs in comparison of black men.⁸² These discrepancies between the economic and educational access for black women and men are later echoed throughout published writings.

Black men had earlier access to western education and more chances at economic development, they were the first to write and publish their own narratives.⁸³ As men dominated the early scenes of African publications the patriarchal system that made women dependent on their male counterparts became normalized through these publications. The lack of black women voices in Zimbabwe publications also suppressed the visibility of the inequality, abuse, and violence women faced under the same system. As black women gained access to the western education the men of their commu-



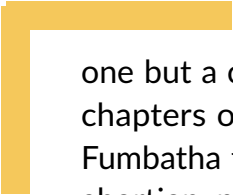
Figure 26: Map of Zimbabwe

" YVONNE VERA'S WRITINGS ARE AN EXAMPLE OF HOW HISTORICAL FICTION CAN BRIDGE THE GAP BETWEEN PERSONAL MEMORY AND COLLECTIVE TRAUMA. "

nity already received, there has been an increase in the efforts in painting a fuller, more inclusive history of the era of colonial rule.⁸⁴ Authors like Yvonne Vera, Ama Ata Aidoo, and Tsitsi Dangarembga are great examples of women who have retold the colonial past of Zimbabwe through their works in historical fiction that features strong women characters and genuine hardships and struggles of black women in Zimbabwe.⁸⁵

Analyzing works of historical fiction allows readers to be immersed in the memory and personal recollections of past events dictated by the author. In the case of Yvonne Vera her novels often address the hardships and struggles of women in the "era of decolonization". Vera's 1998 novel *Butterfly Burning* is no exception to the levels of insight on the negative and horrific experiences endured by the women of Zimbabwe during the late 1940s. *Butterfly Burning* follows the story of a young woman, Phephelaphi, who meets an older man, Fumbatha, in the Makokoba region of Zimbabwe. Despite Fumbatha's lack of economic stability and his poor living conditions, Phephelaphi falls in love with Fumbatha and agrees to move in

with him. Despite the treacherous living conditions, the two seem to be living happily with one another making the best out of what they have. The honeymoon phase of the relationship doesn't last forever as Fumbatha has to travel for work, leaving Phephelaphi alone sometimes for days at a time. In these moments of Fumbatha's absence Phephelaphi was given time to explore moments of independence, traveling into Makokoba, staying with friends, visiting social spots late at night, and even finding motivation to get back into the nursing program in Zimbabwe. However, as Fumbatha learns of Phephelaphi's desire to become more independent he grows angry, demanding she drop out of the nursing program and forbids her from traveling back to the downtown area while he's away. Fumbatha's reaction makes it clear to Phephelaphi that she cannot live the life she dreams of with Fumbatha. As tensions begin to rise between the two Phephelaphi discovers that she has become pregnant, and with that her future as a nurse is in jeopardy. In an effort to save her dreams of independence she performs a self-induced abortion without telling any-

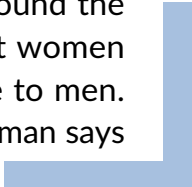


one but a close friend. The final chapters of the novel end with Fumbatha finding out about the abortion, physically and sexually abusing Phephelaphi, and condemns her for lying before ending their relationship. This violence and abuse against Phephelaphi eventually break her, driving her to commit suicide.

Using *Butterfly Burning* as a source for analysis we can develop an understanding of how black women from post-colonial Zimbabwe chose to remember their past and highlight the variety of injustices that black women faced during the colonial era. Author Yvonne Vera creates a strong female character to centralize our analysis around in Phephelaphi. Phephelaphi being a young woman craving independence in 1940s Zimbabwe creates an interesting dynamic to follow throughout the novel. One of the prevalent examples of the patriarchal society that has developed in Zimbabwe is the dynamic Phephelaphi has between Fumbatha and other men she encounters in Makokoba. The male characters throughout the novel create a sense that women are supposed to be dependent on men. Fumbatha claims he is obsessed with Phephelaphi, and despite what she may want Fumbatha constantly insists that she must just stay at home and let him take care of her. This is well displayed in the tenth chapter in the novel during an argu-

ment regarding Phephelaphi returning to school to become a nurse. "He must keep her close. Somehow. All the time. He must make her belong... 'We are happy together. I work. I take care of you. It is not necessary for you to find something else.'"⁸⁶ This passage from the novel shows that Fumbatha wants Phephelaphi to be dependent on him, despite his struggling financial and living situations. Phephelaphi becoming a nurse would provide extra income and allow the two of them to move away from their one room house that is actively falling apart, but instead Fumbatha continues to insist that she does not need to work as he can take care of the both of them.

Fumbatha has become normalized to the colonially established patriarchy, and he is not the only one Phephelaphi will encounter. In the eleventh chapter of the novel Phephelaphi travels into the downtown part of Makokoba while Fumbatha is away. She ends up visiting a friend named Deliwe, a woman whose house is a "club" for black men and women to smoke and drink. While Phephelaphi is visiting she begins talking to a group of men who are arguing with her about a woman's role in society. The center point of this argument revolves around the patriarchal belief that women are to be subordinate to men. She remarks that one man says



“A women is for loving. If you love a woman enough she will unburden herself. That is the sweetest women there is, a woman who has been loved enough. This was the truest woman there was, and a man could

ity as a spiritual medium. The colonization of Zimbabwe dramatically changes the roles of black women in the region, forcing them out of roles of independence and political power. These changes established by the Europeans put black women at the

"A WOMEN IS FOR LOVING. IF YOU LOVE A WOMAN ENOUGH SHE WILL UNBURDEN HERSELF. THAT IS THE SWEETEST WOMEN THERE IS, A WOMAN WHO HAS BEEN LOVED ENOUGH. THIS WAS THE TRUEST WOMAN THERE WAS, AND A MAN COULD LIVE A HAPPY LIFE."

live a happy life.”⁸⁷ Once again we see that the men of Makokoba believe that “loving” a woman is enough for them, and that enough love will make them “unburdened” and obedient to men.

This idea that women are not supposed to work but instead let men provide for them is not native to historical cultural practices in Zimbabwe. Before colonial rule women often had complex and multiple roles as farm laborers, livestock investors, and spiritual mediums and figures.⁸⁸ These precolonial societies in Zimbabwe did not feature the strong patriarchy that European settlers establish, instead women could live somewhat independent lifestyles but could also hold certain kinds of political author-

bottom of a newly established hierarchy, using race to keep the white minority in control and introducing their European ideas of gender roles that promotes patriarchal societies.⁸⁹

The effects of colonization on black women also affected their bodily autonomy and the harsh reality black women face in terms of making choices for themselves. One of the darkest moment of *Burning Butterfly* occurs when Phephelaphi makes the choice to perform a self-abortion. Phephelaphi comes to this difficult decision after realizing that she cannot continue to be a nurse while pregnant and giving birth to this child would make it almost impossible to leave Fumbatha. Fearful of Fumbatha’s response she keeps her pregnancy hidden, and

when it comes time to perform the abortion, she does it alone without telling anyone.⁹⁰ At this point in the novel we are aware of how controlling Fumbatha is over Phephelaphi's life, and if he knew of her pregnancy he would force her to birth the child and she'd be forever dependent on him. Phephelaphi's abortion and fear of Fumbatha's overreaching control exemplifies the lack of bodily autonomy black women faced in 1940s Zimbabwe.

This lack of bodily autonomy is only more apparent after Fumbatha finds out Phephelaphi has aborted her pregnancy.⁹¹ When Fumbatha learns the news of Phephelaphi's abortion he cheats on her with Deliwe, the same woman Phephelaphi went to stay with when Fumbatha is away. Once he confronts Phephelaphi about her abortion he also verbally berates her, revealing that he was aware that she aborted their child and buried it. After this incident we learn in the next chapter that Fumbatha has managed to impregnate Phephelaphi again assumably by force.⁹² Phephelaphi seemingly has no control over her own pregnancy. She was unable to find access to a safe abortion and forced to do it herself, the man who impregnated her becomes enraged when finding out about the abortion and forcibly impregnates her again. While this may be an extreme and

dramatized example of the lack of bodily autonomy in Zimbabwe, the story of Phephelaphi can be used to understand how black women like Yvonne Vera look back on the lack of fundamental rights the women in colonial Zimbabwe endured.

Historical fiction offers a powerful lens in recreating the narrative of black women in Zimbabwe but it also allows for the authors within this genre of writing to portray history through their own understanding. Authors like Yvonne Vera chose to highlight and emphasize the struggle and abuse that black women were subjected to. They are important in ensuring that the dark history of colonization in Zimbabwe is not male centric as well as the dominating effect a patriarchal society has on black women. The impacts of colonization were devastating on the black communities in Zimbabwe and long lasting. Historical fiction aims to bring these historical issues to a modern audience. While they often rely on dramatic stories set in the hardships of colonization to maintain interest with a popular audience, the dramatization is not purely for entertainment as it offers multiple historic and symbolic purposes. Works of historical fiction provides a great means of getting readers interested in historical discussions that otherwise would be overlooked by historians.

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A gay pride event held in Cape Town, South Africa https://cdn.aaihs.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/shutterstock_1385514719-scaled.jpg

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Image of Yonne Vera taken in her garden in Bulawayo, Photo taken by Eric Beauchemin, 2004. Eric Beauchemin, CC BY-SA 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>>, via Wikimedia Commons

Front cover of first edition of Butterfly Burning by Yvonne Vera, 1998.

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Achebe at home in Annandale-on-Hudson. Photograph by Steve Pyke, 2008. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/05/26/after-empire>

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