

ARCHIVING AND REMEMBERING THE MELANCHOLIC MEMORY: A READING OF TRAUMA HEALING IN YVONNE VERA'S *THE STONE VIRGINS*

Koffi Noël BRINDOU

Université Alassane Ouattara, Côte d'Ivoire

brindouchristmas@yahoo.fr

Abstract : Trauma theorists such as J. Boulter (2011, p. 3) perceive places such as museums as archives. They perceive the “location of knowledge, a place where history itself is housed, where the past is accommodated as memories”. Other trauma theorists reflect on the individual's psyche as “the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time” (D. Laub, 1992, p. 57). These two categories of trauma thinkers come to the point for which the archives are “memorials to loss, to trauma; the subject remembers and, melancholically, becomes that loss” (J. Boulter, 2011, p. 7). Using Y. Vera's *The Stone Virgins* published in 2002, this study argues that due to the archives, the witness transvaluates the atrocious event into a new story which brings the victim to be healed from trauma.

Keywords: Archive, melancholia, remembering, transvaluation, forgetting.

Résumé : Certains penseurs du traumatisme perçoivent les endroits tels que les musées come des archives. Pour eux, “lieu de connaissance, un endroit où l'histoire même est emmagasinée, où le passé est accommodé sont des mémoires”¹. D'autres théoriciens du traumatisme ont porté leur réflexion sur la psyché de l'être humain comme “l'écran vierge sur lequel les évènements s'écrivent pour la première fois”². Les deux catégories de théoriciens du traumatisme s'accordent sur le point selon lequel les archives sont “des mémoires de pertes et du traumatisme, l'individu s'en souvient et devient mélancolique”³. Ayant pour roman *The Stone Virgins* (2002) de Y. Vera, cet article démontre qu'avec l'aide de la mémoire, le témoin transvalue l'évènement atroce en une nouvelle histoire qui emmène la victime à être guéri du traumatisme.

Mots clés : Archive, mélancolie, oubli, souvenir, transvaluation

¹ “Location of knowledge, a place where history itself is housed, where the past is accommodated are memories” (J. Boulter, 2011, p. 3).

² The psyche is “the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time” (D. Laub, 1992, p. 57).

³ The archives “build memorials to loss, to trauma; the subject remembers and, melancholically, becomes that loss” (J. Boulter, 2011, p. 7).

Introduction

The Stone Virgins is a novel written by the Zimbabwean famous writer Y. Vera in the year of 2002. She is awarded the "2002 Macmillan (UK) Writer's prize for Africa (adult fiction) for *The Stone Virgins*"⁴. *The Stone Virgins* is the story of Nonceba Gumede who bears melancholic survival by witnessing the atrocious death of her sister Thenjiwe during Zimbabwean war of liberation. The archiving of this melancholic event by the National Museum helps the archivist Cepha Dube to retell the event by transvaluating it. As the archivist recounts the story by giving a new value to it, Nonceba Gumede's psyche leaves its state of melancholic survival to become conscious. She then remembers the event as a simple past without any pain. The archivist's act of giving a new value to the event brings Nonceba Gumede to remember the atrocious event as a simple past without any trauma.

Contrary to Tambu's cultural hybridity which brings postcolonial critics to consider T. Dangarembga as a feminist who challenges "Shona traditional and Western cultural hierarchies (K. N. Brindou, 2021, p. 110), Nonceba Gumede's psychic trauma healed by the archives brings Y. Vera to be seen as a feminist novelist who makes use of the archives to bring a remembering that heals trauma. Hence, the topic: "Archiving and Remembering the Melancholic Memory: A Reading of Trauma Healing in Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins*".

Archiving denotes the process by which the National Museum and the individual's psyche in *The Stone Virgins* record the different events which occur during Zimbabwean war of liberation. Remembering consists for the individual in the novel to recall the recorded events. Memory refers to the recorded events. Melancholic memory is thus the recorded atrocities of the war of liberation. To heal the individual in the novel is nothing but to relieve the traumatic pain of this individual. Being in this context, the study argues that in *The Stone Virgins* archives bring a transvaluation which heals the traumatized individual. The work sustains that both physical and psychic archives help to transform the atrocious event into new story which brings the victim to remember the past without its pain.

⁴ See the biography of Vera in *The Stone Virgins*.

Mostly, Y. Vera's critics perceive her as a feminist who is concerned with defending women's concerns in a Zimbabwean society governed by both colonial and patriarchal systems. As M. Vambe (2003, p. 763) mentions: "It is precisely because of the feminist dimension in her works that Yvonne Vera has evolved to be the most well-known Zimbabwean writer". To consider Y. Vera as a feminist novelist whose conception of colonial cultural system and African patriarchal system is negative is to fail to consider that she has been in "Zimbabwe where she has worked as the director of the National Gallery in Bulawayo while writing fiction" (M. Vambe, 2003, p. 761). Though culture is "a product of a peoples' history. But it also reflects that history and embodies a whole set of values by which a people view themselves and their place in time and space" (N. wa Thiong'o, 1993, p. 42), it cannot be neglected that "culture is whatever people do" (B. Ashcroft *et al.*, 2004, p. 210).

What is being brought forth is that the professional knowledge in Zimbabwean National Gallery acquired by Y. Vera cannot escape her literary creativity. Though, as a creative writer, Y. Vera denounces colonial and African cultures as oppressive systems, she also shows that these cultural systems together with individual's psyche play important role in healing the individual's trauma. Thus, what is the representation that Y. Vera gives to physical and psychic archives during the Zimbabwean war of liberation in *The Stone Virgins*? In other words, how does Y. Vera connect Zimbabwean National Museum and individual's psyche to the healing of trauma in her novel?

The study is conducted through the theory of trauma. C. Caruth defines that trauma is "much more than just a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the history of a wound that cries out that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (C. Caruth, 1996, p. 4). Through the lens of trauma theory, the study analyses the National Museum and individual's psyche as archives which not only record Zimbabwean atrocious war of liberation but also bring healing to the melancholia of the individual.

The work is organized in three sections. The first section is entitled "Archiving Melancholic Memory". It analyses the National Museum and the individual's psyche

as archives which record the atrocities of Zimbabwean war of liberation. For the second section, the title is "Melancholic Memory and Survival". It consists in showing that the atrocities of the war of liberation recorded by both the National Museum and individual's psyche awaken melancholic survival in the individual. The third section is "Remembering the Melancholic Memory and Forgetting". It argues that the fact of recording the atrocities of the war of liberation makes have access to these events and retell them in a positive way that relieve the melancholia of the victim.

1. Archiving Melancholic Memory

With M. Herr's *Dispatches*, C. Caruth's epigraph (1996, p. 10) reads: "It took the war to teach it, that you were as responsible for everything you saw as you were for everything you did. The problem was that you didn't always know what you were seeing until later ... that a lot of it never made it in at all, it just stayed stored there in your eyes". From this stance of C. Caruth, memory appears as twofold: the physical place or material where historic events are recorded, and human's psyche. The physical place is referred to as historical memory. When the present event occasions - "disorder of the moral conscience which is always accompanied by self-accusation and suicidal tendencies" (F. Fanon, 2004, p. 224) -, that atrocity is referred to as a melancholic memory. The cutting off of Thenjiwe's head, a case among the atrocities of Zimbabwean war of liberation is a case at stake. It is the recording of such atrocious event in the Zimbabwean National Museum and by Nonceba Gumede's psyche that I comply with C. Caruth's epigraph to refer to as archiving melancholic memory.

Sibaso's cutting off of Thenjiwe's head is an atrocious event. It is a trope for the melancholic memory. This melancholic memory complies with J. Boulter's stance (2011, p. 10): "A traumatized space ... is always already a space of melancholy". It is the archiving of such a melancholic memory that Y. Vera portrays when I consider the recording roles played by the National Museum as well as by Nonceba Gumede's and Cepha Dube's psyches vis-à-vis the cutting off of Thenjiwe's head. In such a standpoint, to archive is to record; and the National Museum as well as the psyche of Nonceba Gumede echo "memory [whose] vocation is to record" (J. Boulter, 2011, p. 13). Being in this vein, the Museum and the psyches of Nonceba Gumede's and Cepha

Dube's refer to what J. Boulter calls institutions and individuals which are material and mental memories that archive present event to make them historical memories.

During Zimbabwean war of liberation, the archives record the atrocities in three ways: witnessing, reading and writing. In other words, the psyches and the National Museum archive the atrocious events through witnessing, writing and reading. When the cutting off of "Thenjiwe's head" (Y. Vera 74) by Sibaso happened, the first archive to record this atrocity is Nonceba Gumede's psyche. Witnessing the cutting off of her sister Thenjiwe's head, Nonceba Gumede's psyche becomes "the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time", to recall D. Laub (1992, p. 57). Witnessing the event, Nonceba Gumede's psyche records this atrocity.

If Nonceba Gumede's act of witnessing the atrocities can be read as archiving this melancholic event, the archivist Cepha Dube's act of reading the atrocious event in the newspaper can also be decoded as archiving the melancholic event in his psyche. As Cepha Dube "reads what happened to ... Thenjiwe ... in Kezi" (Y. Vera, 2002, p. 154), his psyche records its melancholia. Through reading Cepha Dube brings the melancholic "memory ... shed... its signs upon depositing them [in his psyche], as a snake sheds its skin" (J. Boulter 2011, p. 13). Reading has brought Cepha Dube's psyche to record the melancholia of the event. This is only half of the matter, for the National Museum archives the melancholia of the atrocious event as well.

I have considered individuals' psyches as archives which help record melancholic events. Alternatively, I must consider The National Museum as an archive which records the atrocious events. Through the act of writing or printing, the National Museum records the atrocious events of Zimbabwean war of liberation. J. Boulter (2011, p. 3) is rich in giving details: "Location of knowledge, a place where history itself is housed, where the past is accommodated are memories". From this stance of J. Boulter, the National Museum is an archive through which the atrocities of the war are recorded.

The National Museum's role of archiving the melancholic event discloses when the archivist Cepha Dube voices: "I work in an office in the city. I file documents in an archive. One morning, I was clipping items from the newspaper. I saw a picture of

Kezi in it. I read what happened to ... Thenjiwe here in Kezi" (Y. Vera, 2002, p. 154). It is because The National Museum has recorded the cutting off of Thenjiwe's head in printed newspaper that Cepha Dube has discovered and read this atrocious event.

2. Melancholic memory and Survival

The melancholic memory archived by the psyche sinks the individual into survival. J. Boulter (2011, p. 4) gets the point very well when he mentions: "The archive ... marks a space of anxiety, precisely, an anxiety about the possibility of loss". By archiving the melancholic events, the psyche becomes a space marked by melancholia. This melancholic space sinks Nonceba Gumede into a melancholic survival.

Defending survival, C. Caruth (1996, pp. 62-63) writes: "The survival of trauma is not the fortunate passage beyond a violent event ... but rather the endless inherent necessity of repletion, which ultimately may lead to destruction". She goes on to write: "The traumatized individual, is nothing other than the determined repetition of the event of destruction" (C. Caruth, 1996, p. 63). Plainly put, to survive consists for the individual's psyche to relive the painful past event. Nonceba Gumede's psyche relives the past event and its pains. Having archived the melancholic events, Nonceba Gumede's psyche finds itself busy reliving this atrocious event. Her psychical survival occurs as answerlessness, phobia and hypochondria.

Nonceba Gumede's psychic survival is nothing but what S. Felman calls answerlessness. This answerlessness occurs as a result of a painful witness. When writing "Education and Crisis, Or the Vicissitude of Teaching", S. Felman (1992, p. 51) argues that answerlessness is "expressed by survivor as a radical and irretrievable loss, one of the most devastating losses - dispossessions inflicted by the holocaust". Furthermore, in "The Return of the Voice: Claude Lanzmann's Shoah", S. Felman (1992, p. 236) contends: "in observing and recording [atrocities,] the Other ... experiences what it means to be *inside the Holocaust*". Nonceba Gumede experiences what it means to be inside the holocaust.

The atrocious event that Nonceba Gumede's psyche archives sets her in "mute" (Y. Vera, 2002, p. 90). She is busy living the holocaust in her psyche instead of living the external world. Her conscience fails her vis-à-vis the recognition of people who

surround her. She lives the irretrievable loss. She “carries this moment now like a blindness” (Y. Vera, 2002, p. 110). Nonceba Gumede’s psychic trauma echoes S. Freud’s melancholia revealed by R. O. Kamada (2010, p. 140): “The distinguishing mental features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activities”. The atrocities of the war have given rise to Nonceba Gumede’s cessation of interest in the outside world. Answerlessness is not the only melancholic survival into which the memory of the atrocious war sinks Nonceba Gumede’s psyche. The memory of the war awakens Nonceba Gumede’s psyche to phobia as well.

Referring to F. Fanon (1967, p. 154), phobia “‘is a neurosis characterized by the anxious fear of an object (in the broadest sense of anything outside the individual) or, by extension, of a situation.’ Naturally that object must have certain aspects. It must arouse, Hesnard says, both fear and revulsion”. The atrocities of the war archived by Nonceba Gumede is featured with blood; and this act is committed by Sibaso, a man. As Sibaso cut off Thenjiwe’s head, Nonceba Gumede witnesses “everything The sliding mud, red with blood. The man, Sibaso” (Y. Vera, 2002, p. 114). The cutting off of Thenjiwe’s head is phobogenic. It is an event which is frightful and horrific. It arouses phobia in Nonceba Gumede’s psyche. She becomes phobic to any red object: “She is afraid to look away from the red flowers” (Y. Vera, 2002, p. 91). Nonceba Gumeda sees the red flowers as objects endowed with evil action and violent action that once in contact with costs her head off.

Besides, the fact that the atrocity is committed by a man brings Nonceba Gumede to experience hypochondria. Hypochondria, as A. A. Cheng (2001, p. 77) writes, “imposes a logic whereby that which is (or might be) broken, disordered, or incompatible gets continually exposed”. Since Sibaso who committed this atrocity is a man, Nonceba Gumede’s contact with any man rises her psyche into hypochondria. As a man is approaching, “she turns away, staining hard, needing to say something that will send him away. Nonceba shakes her head sideways. Faster and faster. She closes her eyes tightly and shakes her head again. Vigorously. His touch. He must not touch her” (Y. Vera, 2002, p. 92). In this vein, C. Caruth (1995, p. 85) asserts: “One of

the most devastating aftereffects of trauma is that it causes widespread use of repression”

Nonceba Gumede's psyche bears a hypochondriacal response: “a symptom ... of an ‘original, real’ pain. [It] is the memory-trace of a missing original trauma ... the very manifestation of the absence of origin” (A. A. Cheng, 2001, p. 89). Nonceba Gumede feels to be armed by the man who is coming to her. She sees him as the evil-doer. Though the evil-doer Sibaso is missing, Nonceba Gumede assimilates him to any man that she sees. In this vein, C. Caruth (1995, p. 81) contends that “aftereffects ... represent a continuation of the traumatic process”. Because of the melancholic event archived in her psyche, Nonceba Gumede arouses hypochondriac.

3. Remembering the Melancholic Memory and Forgetting

The archives that takes the victim to a healing remembering is what Y. Vera can be said to bring to the fore when painting Nonceba Gumede's encounter with the National Museum. The fact of archiving the atrocious event of the war brings The National Museum to stand as a melancholic memory. Yet, as Cepha Dube is the archivist of the Museum, he therefore exists as the placeholder of this Museum. Cepha Dube is thus an archive for the melancholic war par excellence.

As an archive of the atrocious war, when Cepha Dube says to Nonceba Gumede: “I read what happened to you and Thenjiwe” (Y. Vera, 2002, p. 154), he awakens remembering in Nonceba Gumede's psyche. He brings her to remember the melancholic event. Remembering in such a context is defended by P. Ricoeur (2004, p. 7) as “the present representation of an absent thing.” “That something has taken place before we call to mind a memory of it”.

As Cepha Dube re-tells the melancholic event, Nonceba Gumede recovers from the melancholic survival. In this standpoint, what does it consist to re-tell the melancholic event? Standing on H. K. Bhabha's cultural translation, as well as on P. Connerton's stance of remembering, I assert that to re-tell the historical trauma consists in remembering this past event by transvaluating it. In other words, it consists in remembering the past event by living out the atrocious aspect. It is a transvaluation which consists in translating the past event to make it lose its pains. As the past event

is re-told in a positive form, the victim recovers from survival. Cepha Dube makes such a case happen to Nonceba Gumede. As archivist, Cepha Dube remembers the past event to Nonceba Gumede by leaving out the atrocious aspect. As the archivist does so, the victim Nonceba Gumede heals from the melancholic survival.

When remembering Zimbabwean war of liberation, Cepha Dube does not mention the atrocities. Such an act of him is perceived through his avoiding to mention the name of any object or place or atrocity in any of his conversation with Nonceba Gumede. He does not mention the cutting off of Thenjiwe's head throughout his conversation with her. Next to that, he uses "here" (Y. Vera, 2002, p. 153) to refer to Kezi, the place where the atrocity took place. Nonceba Gumede even complains about Cepha Dube's "talking about Thenjiwe and saying all he has to say about his own version of the event" (Y. Vera, p. 156). As Cepha Dube keeps on remembering the past event without alluding to the atrocious aspects, Nonceba Gumede starts forgetting the atrocity. She recalls the event in her psyche as a simple past. This allows her to live better. The narrative perspective puts her healing from the melancholic survival as follows: now, Nonceba Gumede "does not talk about Thenjiwe. Not once" (Y. Vera, 2002, p. 181). The narrative perspective goes further to mention that Nonceba Gumede has got back "her strength" to live (Y. Vera, 2002, p. 182). The fact of forgetting about the atrocities of the Zimbabwean war of liberation brings Nonceba Gumede to be healed of any trauma.

Conclusion

The probe of *The Stone Virgins* reveals that Y. Vera makes use of archives, remembering and forgetting to heal the melancholic survival engendered by Zimbabwean war of liberation. Y. Vera is revealed to voicing a melancholic memory engendered by Zimbabwean war of liberation when reference is made to the cutting off of Thenjiwe's head. Her portrayal of Nonceba Gumede to witness the war atrocities; the National Museum to print the atrocious war in newspapers; and the archivist Cepha Dube to read the same melancholic war is her clear-cut presentation of memorials and individuals' psyches as melancholic archives. The novelist's move to represent the archives as phobogenic objects which sink Nonceba Gumede into answerlessness, phobic and hypochondriac are illustrated as her portrayal of archives which give rise to melancholic survival. The archivist Cepha Dube's act of remembering the past event in such a way that it brings Nonceba Gumede to forget about the atrocities is the novelist's portrayal of a remembering which brings healing to trauma. Y. Vera's *The Stone Virgins*, it must be said, is about archives which bring healing to psychic trauma.

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